

# THE FALLEN KING'S PENITENT SOLDIER



MEGAN DERR





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The youngest son of a despised king, thrust upon a throne he never wanted, Desmond nevertheless tried to be a good monarch to Benta. Despite his efforts, 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. On the verge of being executed, Desmond gets an unexpected rescue 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.

## TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains mentions of abuse and rape. None of these things are depicted on page, but they are mentioned throughout the story.

As ever, if you would like explicit details, please feel free to contact me via email ([meganaderr@gmail.com](mailto:meganaderr@gmail.com))

~Meg

The Fallen King's Penitent Soldier  
Tales of the High Court 5  
By Megan Derr

Published by Megan Derr

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The  
Fallen King's  
Penitent Soldier  
Tales of the High Court 5

Megan Derr

*To A.M. Valenza and Archer Kay Leah, who write redemption stories  
better than I ever will*



# Chapter One

Desmond would have liked to say he faced his death with dignity, that when they came for him he was cool and contained, had the grace and poise of a defeated king.

He didn't. When they broke into the room where he'd managed to hide himself, he was already crying. He screamed and kicked and bit and raised all the ruckus he could. Fuck dying with dignity; he'd be as ugly and noisy as necessary in order to *live*.

All for nothing, of course. He was a scholar, banished to and raised in Highmont Monastery. However much he'd learned there, Highmont had been a glorified prison. Later, when it was clear that Benta was losing the war with Harken, his father had ordered him sent to an actual prison. He'd been a prisoner of some sort all his life, never trained to be a king, or even a soldier.

So he'd lost the battle swiftly, beaten, bruised, and broken into submission. One soldier held fast to his arm as they dragged him through the halls, another dug fingers painfully tight into his hair and pulled him along like an angry child with their least favorite toy.

There was too much blood and sweat in his eyes to see where they were going, too much smoke and noise in the air to even try to get a question out—not that he thought anyone would answer.

The heavy smell of incense reached his nose a few minutes later, followed by a familiar thick, soft rug beneath his knees. They were in the grand throne room. Well, wasn't hard to figure out why he was still alive now. One of Benta's favorite stories was of how his many-times great-grandfather, the first of his family to rule as monarch, had taken his throne by beheading his predecessor in that very room. The supposed sword that had done the deed hung on the wall immediately behind the throne. *By blood, by might, by right do we rule.*

Ah, it would be a good one for the history books and many generations to rule on. The kings who took by the sword eventually died by the same sword, having fallen from heroes to villains. Poetic, if trite, the perfect story by which the rebels would win the hearts of the masses.

If he wasn't about to be the executed king in the tale, if the rebels weren't far greater a problem than he could ever be, he might almost approve the ridiculous story being spun at his expense.

Familiar voices spoke around them, including the backstabbing bastard who had been second in command of his private guard. She and half of Bitter Frost had made swift work of killing the rest of them, including Captain Matthias, who had died trying to get Desmond to safety.

So much for their long history of honor and loyalty.

Desmond's head was yanked up and his face crudely wiped. He blinked away remaining flecks of crusted blood and stared into the dark green eyes of Bryan Kettermane, Royal Seneschal and someone Desmond had stupidly thought was his *friend*. Someone else who'd sworn loyalty, made promises to speak for the good and the just. Countless people had attested he was an honorable man.

Lies, lies, and more lies. The Goddess preached not to stew in bitterness, for that only poisoned they who stewed, but Desmond was going to die soon anyway, so he'd be as bitter as he liked.

"How are you feeling, Your Majesty?" Kettermane asked.

Blood had filled Desmond's mouth from where his teeth had cut his cheek after one backhand or another. He spat it in Kettermane's face.

Chuckling, idly cleaning the blood from his face, Kettermane replied, "Don't be childish, Majesty. You've lost the war, face it with dignity."

"Dignity is the purview of honorable men, and I have no desire to resemble the likes of you," Desmond said, and spat again. Kettermane snarled and backhanded him, but Desmond only laughed. That seemed to infuriate Kettermane more, but before he could hit Desmond again, Bethany, the backstabbing First Lieutenant of Bitter Frost, grabbed his arm.

"Unhand me, Lieutenant," Kettermane snapped.

"He's had about all he can take. If you want to make a spectacle of his death, leave off."

Kettermane snarled several colorful words, but jerked his hand free and stood back. "Where are we with matters?"

"The city has been taken, and the castle is nearly secure," Bethany said. "I've had reports of trouble, possibly new armed forces, fighting their way into the castle, but no details yet. Runners should be bringing me information shortly."

"Probably just a last few stragglers from the royal guard," Kettermane said. "Or misguided fools who think their pathetic king is worth dying for."

Desmond hoped not. He *wasn't* worth dying for, though he doubted he and Kettermane agreed on the reasons. There'd been enough death. If he had to die, let it at least mean he'd be the last.

"Hopefully that's all it is," Bethany replied. "I've given the order to start having all relevant persons brought here for the ceremony." She dropped her gaze briefly to Desmond, something almost like regret filling her face for a fleeting moment. "Who would you like to do it? I'd recommend they go masked, otherwise—"

"I'll do it."

Bethany eyed him. "Are you sure? You do realize—"

"Be quiet," Kettermane snapped. "When I want a condescending lecture from you, I'll ask for it."

"Sir." Bethany turned away, sharing a look with some of her people.

Curiosity fluttered briefly through Desmond, then snuffed out. He didn't care about discontent in the ranks. Not when those ranks had betrayed him. Killed some of their own. Were discussing who would kill him as though working out how best to assign chores. He was vastly more concerned with Kettermane "doing it" himself. Kettermane wasn't a soldier any more than Desmond; there was no way he'd be able to cut Desmond's head off. So not only was Desmond going to die, it was going to be an agonizing death. Hopefully someone else would step in and finish the job after Kettermane failed miserably.

Kettermane shifted restlessly. "I want—"

The words were drowned out by the booming thunder of an explosion, followed by the crashing sound of a wall or something collapsing. That was followed by screams, cries—and then the unmistakable sound of battle. So it would seem the fighting was far from over. How many more people would die before everyone was content? Goddess damn them all to the Pits.

"Find out what's wrong!" Kettermane snarled, even as Bethany surged forward, gesturing sharply for soldiers to flank her.

They hadn't made it more than a handful of steps when the enormous iron and wood doors of the grand throne room were blown in and soldiers surged into the room.

"Oh, merciful gods," Bethany said, voice quavering. She whipped around and returned to Kettermane. "We need to get you out of here. Bitter Frost, soldiers! Protect Kettermane's retreat at all costs." She glanced to the men still holding fast to Desmond. "If they reach the throne, use him to delay them." Once the soldiers had acknowledged the order, Bethany and Kettermane vanished through the door behind the throne.

The soldiers he'd only glimpsed before were now clear as day and even more terrifying in reality than he'd always heard: blood red tunics emblazoned with slash marks that seemed to open up their chests to reveal only a dark void and dark steel armor riddled with sharp spikes.

Penance Gate, the most feared mercenary band in Harken and one of the most infamous in the world. Named after an important part of Harken religion, entailing brutal combat and second chances.

Why in the world was Penance Gate here?

Of the Bitter Frost and royal guards who'd been ordered to cover Kettermane's escape, at least a third ran away. The remaining were being destroyed like paper put to a torch. Desmond swallowed, horrified and awed all at once as he watched Penance Gate fight their way through the grand throne room. Even with a third of the soldiers having fled, there was hundreds to go through, and Penance Gate seemed only to have a small force—honor guard numbers, not more than fifty—rather than a full fighting force.

One of the men holding Desmond yanked him to his feet and pressed a knife to his throat, right as the other one dropped with a crossbow bolt in his forehead. Desmond stared at the man bearing the mark of captain, a faceless soldier in a spiked helmet with the faceplate of a snarling beast. But those eyes. The very color of a summer sky. Even if he hadn't known already that Allen's brother headed Penance Gate, he would know those eyes anywhere. Prince Chass. Crown Prince Chass, now. Why was he here? He was the very last person who should be in Benta right now.

"Don't come closer!" the guard said.

Chass laughed, low and derisive. "Next time, make certain to secure your rear."

The man drew breath to reply, but in the next moment he jerked against Desmond, and there was a wet, sucking sound. Then Desmond was free. He turned around, saw the man bleeding out from a wound in his neck, a tall Penance mercenary sheathing a long, thin digger.



"Your Majesty, are you all right?"

Desmond turned back and watched as Chass climbed the stairs to the throne dais. "Yes, thanks to you and your people, Captain. What is Penance—"

"Questions later," Chass replied. "Can you walk?"

"Yes, I'm fine." Desmond walked toward him—and everything went black.

When he stirred, he was lying on the floor. No, he was lying on someone on the floor. He turned his head and looked up into familiar blue eyes. "Perhaps I was mistaken."

A husky laugh rolled over him. "Perhaps."

"I'm sorry. Let me—"

"Stay where you are," Chass said, the words snapping out in a way that brooked no disobedience. Not that Desmond wanted to disobey. Goddess be merciful, so much pain. Chass shifted, and Desmond bit back a whimper, determined not to appear even more pathetically weak than he already had. Then he was being lifted like he weighed no more than a sack of air.

"Captain, royal soldiers coming, and it looks like more Bentan mercenaries have joined them. About what we expected, perhaps a hundred over at worst."

Desmond stared at the speaker, who was also the one who'd stabbed the guard holding him. A woman if he had to guess, though with Harkens that was difficult to say, since they didn't have the rigid definitions of man and woman that Benta lived by. Her faceplate was of a roaring dragon.

Chass grunted an acknowledgement. "Aria, head Team One. Riker, head Team Two." He turned and spoke to a figure that Desmond hadn't even noticed until then. "I assume you'll be sticking close to me as always, *Captain?*"

Another Captain? Desmond's head ached too much to attempt making sense.

"You assume correctly," the second captain said. The faceplate of his spiked helm portrayed an owl. "Especially since you didn't have the sense to stay on the damn ship."

Chass said something Desmond didn't catch and then turned back to Aria and Riker, who acknowledged they were ready by raising their right

fists to be parallel with their chins. Chass then shouted, "Soldiers assemble!"

Aria moved to the right side of the hall, where three fourths of the now much more massive Penance Gate force had gathered. The remaining went to the left side of the hall.

"Team One, your only duty is to clear a path. You don't stop until King Desmond is on the ship. Team Two, make a wall. Guard His Majesty with your life."

The mercenaries saluted and bellowed out confirmation.

Chass roared out, "Darkness is dull!"

"Pleasure in pain!" Penance Gate roared back.

"Show these craven bastards why we devoured our own. Penance Gate, move out!" As Riker's team closed in around them, Chass bent his head and said in that low, husky voice, "Hold fast, Your Majesty. This will hurt, but you'll make it to safety alive, you have my vow."

"Thank you," Desmond whispered, and buried his face in the hollow of Chass's throat as they moved and the promised pain ripped through him. There was not a single stitch of him that was not battered, bruised, or broken. Had it really been necessary to beat him half to death? How many other people had suffered so, just because Kettermane's people had known they could get away with it? This was why Desmond had fought so hard to establish peace. The Goddess herself wept at the amount of blood spilled, the number of Her children who gathered in her arms tonight.

The journey to the ship lasted forever, filled with screams and shouts and vastly more unpleasant sounds, the stench of blood and smoke thick in the air. He blocked it out as best he could by focusing on other things. Chass's strong grip, how gentle he was, even in the midst of a horrific battle. How it should be Bitter Frost helping him this way. How many friends and allies were dead. Hopefully some of them had succeeded in fleeing.

He tried to think of something else, biting back sobs at the senseless loss of life, of all that he'd lost tonight, and of all he'd likely still lose before this nightmare truly ended.

His desperate thoughts landed on Penance Gate's battle cry, which came from the Penance Gate mythos from which the mercenaries took their name. He remembered it because it was so drastically different from Benta beliefs. In Benta's primary religion, Kestoran, when one died, their deeds

were judged by the Goddess. Those who were judged worthy moved on to Life Eternal in Paradise. Those who were judged unworthy were banished to the Pits of Darkness forever, where their own foul natures turned them into imps, goblins, and gremlins that preyed upon vulnerable mortals, forever hoping to turn them to the darkness so others would share in their misery.

Harken's Pantheon had a similar end for the unworthy, but they also believed in forgiveness and second chances for those who sincerely sought it and worked for it. Kestoran had similar beliefs only up to death. If you died unworthy, you were damned for all eternity. Not so for Harken. If you cared enough and fought hard enough, you'd be granted a second chance to redeem the mistakes you made, the life you wasted. *Penance must be paid in blood and pain.* He'd read that so many times in his studies.

Chass moved sharply, shouting something incomprehensible, and it took everything Desmond had left not to scream. Right then, it felt like he had been murdered by Kettermane after all and thrown into the Pits to be forever caught in the chaos of a brutal war, always in pain, always in danger, waiting for relief that would never come. The sharp, iron smell of blood filled his nostrils, mingling with sweat and leather and steel.

Screams of rage, moans of pains, filled his ears. But nothing was worse than the moment a scream abruptly stopped or a moan faded off. So much death. So much anguish. All for the 'right' to rule a country. So many dead because people wanted to dictate how they should have lived. For *nothing*. Desmond had never wanted the damned throne. He'd offered countless times to work for solutions that would satisfy all parties.

All this because he preferred to make peace with Harken, and do right by Soldonir, and be harsher with an empire that relied heavily on slavery. It was all so *stupid*. Her Most Holy Grace wept at the needless loss of life, all the people who did not heed Her Words and work always for peace and harmony. This was not the way to live a kind, humble, and giving life.

"Almost there," Chass said in his ear.

Desmond nodded as best he could to acknowledge the words—and then felt it as they walked up a gangway and onto a ship. "Healer!" Chass called out, but instead of setting Desmond down as expected, he kept walking.

A door slammed open, and a moment later they finally came to a stop, and Chass set Desmond down upon a bed with surprising tenderness.

Then he was gone, and Desmond was briefly panicked and bereft as he forced his eyes open—just in time to see Chass vanish through the cabin door as a person in spectacles with a healer's band around their upper arm knelt beside the low bed.

It was only as he lay there while the healer worked that a realization struck Desmond: Chass had said 'healer' in Harken. He'd spoken to his men in Harken. But every time he'd spoken to Desmond, it had been in Bentan.

On that thought, Desmond passed out.

\*~\*~\*

He woke to the cry of a shift change, the rocking of the ship, and at least two people engaged in quiet conversation. Desmond turned his head and stared at two figures sitting at a table across the room. One had their back to Desmond, but the other faced him, wearing a shirt cut low enough to show a tantalizing glimpse of beautiful breasts, the glittering charm of a necklace just barely hanging in the valley between them. The person's face was framed by long, heavy locs decorated with charms and beads, and they loosely held a porcelain cup, likely filled with one of the sweet, spicy wines so many Harkens loved.

They laughed at whatever the other person said, displaying a beautiful smile, their reply only just audible. It was hard to tell for certain, because their voices were so faint, but it sounded like they were conversing in Outlander, which was fairly typical of Harken sailors.

Desmond shifted slightly, tried to sit up, and groaned as pain shot through his entire body, and for a brief, terrifying moment, took away his ability to breathe. He heard the rustle of clothes and the heavy tread of boots—and then a familiar, yet unfamiliar face loomed over him. Despite everything, Desmond's heart lurched and flipped for no good reason at all.

When Desmond had first met Allen, he had noted his remarkable beauty. He paled in comparison to his brother Chass, who was achingly, heart-stoppingly stunning. Desmond's chest gave an unwelcome lurch as he met those summer-sky eyes, took in the long, terrible scars that raked his right cheek and continued all the way down his neck. Another scar cut his left cheek neatly in half, and he was missing part of his right eyebrow. It



also looked like his nose has been broken more than once, and his gold-blond hair was damp and messy, like he'd bathed but not bothered to comb it. The fastenings of his shirt were loose far enough down to tease at some tattoo and display a glittering teardrop sapphire hanging on a fine gold chain. A matching sapphire hung from one ear, exactly the color of his eyes in the dim light of the cabin.

He didn't look like a crown prince, but more like a man who'd forsaken his royal heritage to take up a life of adventure on the high seas. Desmond had read countless stories, serious and frivolous, that Chass could have stepped out of. Goddess, he hoped it was the drugs making him this insipid, because otherwise he had no excuse.

"How are you feeling, Your Majesty?" Chass asked, voice still rough and husky. He sounded the way good, strong coffee tasted.

"Like I was thrown under a cart, and after it was done running over me, it backed up and did it all again," Desmond said, "but I'm alive to complain, for which I'm immensely grateful, Captain. Or should it be 'Your Highness' now? I'm sorry, I am not entirely clear on that protocol."

Chass lifted one shoulder. "Captain, as I am still on duty, but I don't give a damn about protocol. You can use my name for all I care. The healer left a pain tonic, but I can also call for them."

"I'll try the tonic first, thank you," Desmond replied, and dragged his eyes elsewhere to avoid admiring Chass's backside as he went to fetch the tonic. His gaze landed on the other person, who was watching him with idle pensiveness. "I assume you also helped in my rescue, so thank you."

"First Lieutenant Aria Natahari. Also Lady Aria, but I prefer Lieutenant." She dipped into a brief bow and winked as she rose. "You're welcome, Your Majesty. We're always happy to serve the High Throne, especially when the request comes directly from the High Consort."

Desmond blinked slowly. "Allen requested you come for me?"

Aria bowed her head, but before she could reply, Chass gestured sharply. Huffing slightly, Aria bowed again and departed, the door not quite slamming shut behind her.

It was only then, as movement caught his eye, that Desmond realized there'd been a third person in the room the whole time. The man was broad-shouldered and not small, but not a towering wall of muscle either. Like the other two, he wore the sort of casual clothes favored by merchants and others of the wealthy class who were not noble. He was

handsome, and moved with the same deadly grace as Chass and Aria. His left eye was milky white, and a jagged scar across that side of his face told a bit of the story of how it had come to be that way.

He exchanged a look with Chass, then followed Aria out of the room.

"Is something wrong?" Desmond asked. "Am I not supposed to know Allen is the reason you came?"

Chass offered a glass filled with some cinnamon-colored liquid that smelled like scorched herbs and wet dirt. Wrinkling his nose, Desmond drank it quickly. "Thank you."

The barest hint of a commiserating smile teased as the corners of Chass's mouth as he took the glass back. "Be grateful you're not ill. Those concoctions are even worse. And no, nothing is wrong, except she likes to talk, and you need your rest, not three hours of gossip."

Desmond laughed. "I wouldn't mind conversation. It will keep my thoughts from overwhelming me." His hand tightened as they did anyway. "Who was the other person?"

"The cagey one good at going unnoticed?" Chass's smile was dry and brief. "That is Captain Charlaine. He is part of the Shattered Wind mercenaries, but has been temporarily assigned to Penance Gate to serve as my...bodyguard."

"I see." And Desmond did. Likely Captain Charlaine had been assigned to make sure Chass didn't do something stupid or reckless, given that he'd recently lost his elder brother and Bentan rebels were responsible for it. If he were Bentan, he would have been forbidden any involvement, and even put under house arrest if that was what it took.

Desmond reached out tentatively, ignoring the pain, and rested a hand on Chass's. "I'm sorry for what my people have done to you. That they murdered your brother all because of a stupid vendetta we all need to leave behind us. Words are not enough, but I am sorry for the tragedy and pain we've caused you."

Chass's breath hitched, like he'd been slapped or startled. "That's not your apology to make, Your Majesty, but I appreciate your caring." He covered Desmond's hand with his free one, pressing firmly, then withdrew both his hands.

Desmond curled his fingers into a loose fist. "I'm also sorry you've been dragged into my mess, especially in light of what my people did to

you and yours."

"My understanding is that you were trying to fix the mess, Your Majesty. As I said, it's not your apology to make. You've been betrayed and hurt by your own."

Desmond laughed bitterly. "Trying doesn't matter much when it ends in failure." Benta had been overtaken. He'd nearly been killed. *Beheaded*. People he'd called friends were either dead or had turned on him.

He'd stupidly thought he'd finally started grasping being king. They should have left him in his monastery or in the prison cell his father had moved him to right as the war started to turn against Benta. Goddess, please have mercy on his people and let them not come to harm.

If only he were somewhere he could properly pray and make offerings.

A rough, scarred and calloused hand covered his again, and Desmond dragged his eyes up, breath catching in his chest as he was once more drawn in by Chass's beauty and intensity. How had he never known Allen's brother was so... so very, very *much*. "Sorry."

Chass made an indecipherable noise. "Your Majesty, I would be astonished if you were *not* upset about all that has recently transpired." His hand tightened briefly and then slid away. Desmond missed the warmth and strength of it. "I am frankly impressed at how well you are coping."

"Oh, don't worry, I'm certain I'll have quite the royal meltdown eventually," Desmond said with a sour laugh, his eyes falling briefly shut. "Thank you again for saving me. I was not looking forward to my beheading, or those sons of bitches using me in some macabre story as false as the one my family has used all these years."

"It would have been rather trite," Chass said. "You're safe now, and we'll reach Harken in a couple of months."

Desmond's brows rose. "We're not going south?" It would put them on the completely opposite side of the continent from Harkenesten, but it would put them in Harken, which was vastly more important. So why the longer, more dangerous route?

"No," Chass said, mouth tightening. "South isn't safe right now. Going North around the continent isn't much safer, but at least we'll be harder to pin down—especially as we are four ships strong and no one knows which one you're on." He did smile then, a tiny grin full of plot and mischief. "*Especially* since two imperial vessels did go south, and we are

four merchant vessels flying Outlander colors making one of our regular trips around the continent with side ventures to Kin del Kaar and the Triumvirate."

Desmond laughed. "Well-played, Captain. I am truly honored and humbled you would go to so much trouble for me, even if it was an imperial order."

"The honor is mine, Your Majesty."

"You can use my name. I'm not really a king anymore, anyway."

Chass bowed his head slightly. "Call me whatever you wish; I do not stand on formality with family and friends." His mouth turned down, but he only turned away and strode back to the cabinets from which he'd fetched the tonic.

Desmond left him in peace, though his mind roiled with curiosity over what dark matter was between Allen and Chass. It had always been clear Allen wasn't comfortable around Chass, but he'd never elaborated on why.

It was difficult to picture Chass as someone to be afraid of, for all that he could vividly recall how Penance Gate had battered and blazed their way into the throne room. He'd seen how terrifying everyone else found them.

More than anything, he remembered the strong but gentle way Chass had carried him, how it felt to be held close and comforted in that brusque but rock-steady way Chass had about him.

Or maybe he'd be overcome this way about anyone who had rescued him. Not hard to get fairy-flushed over a savior. It could also just be the pain tonic, or a combination of the two. Whatever was making him such a soppy idiot, it was also fastening his eyes to Chass's backside, well-displayed in the fitted breeches and over-the-knee boots he wore.

Desmond settled back down in the bunk as woozy exhaustion started to creep over him. His eyes were heavy, but he managed to keep them open as Chass returned and crouched down beside the bunk.

"All right there?" Chass asked.

"The tonic is making me sleepy," Desmond whispered, struggling in earnest now to keep his eyes open. "Thank you again. I've never been rescued before. You make quite the hero...."

Sadness and regret and longing flickered across Chass's face, there and gone so quickly Desmond suspected it might just be a combination of



the tonic and his fanciful thoughts of Chass and storybook heroes. A heavy hand came up to brush away a strand of Desmond's hair and rested briefly on his forehead, warm and comforting. "I'm no hero, Your Majesty, but it's my honor to serve. Get some rest."

Unable to resist the medicine or that rich coffee voice, Desmond slipped back into sleep.

## Chapter Two

Chass regarded his charge pensively, a thousand thoughts and memories churning through his mind and promising yet another sleepless night was in front of him. Desmond had slept all through the day, woken long enough to get some broth and more tonic down him, and gone right back to sleep.

At least he was alive. Chass was furious they'd gotten there too late to spare him suffering—had nearly gotten there too late to save him, period—but at least he *was* alive and would be fully healed by the time they reached Harken.

It wasn't nearly enough to earn Allen's forgiveness, but Chass would treasure always that Allen had personally requested Penance Gate see to the matter, over his Three-headed Fools and Fathoms Dense. Chass wasn't good for much, but he could mete out pain and extract vengeance in blood.

And oh, he would be extracting it. Not even the High King was going to stop him. Chass tried his damndest to stay upon the path he'd chosen, but he'd leave it to get revenge for Larren's death.

Chass didn't dare linger too long on thoughts of Larren; the wound was still too raw and painful. Larren was crown prince. Was destined to be king. He'd been good at it, and everyone had been looking forward to it—even their mother, who never tolerated anyone taking away her precious damned control.

Chass sighed, fingers reaching up to curl around the sapphire Tear resting against his chest. Larren should be crown prince, not Chass. But he had no choice, unless he wanted to hunt down Manda or force Allen to terminate his marriage and return to Gaulden. Neither was a viable option. Allen was too magnificent a High Consort to ever force him to step away from that—and more importantly, he was so obviously in love with Sarrica, and Chass would never be the one to take that from him.

And Manda... Manda had departed on a mission to Treya Mencee, mailed their mother a report, and... simply never come home. The last Chass's spies had been able to tell him, Manda was buried happily in the heart of Treya Mencee doing the bidding of bloodthirsty lords who did not 'hold him back' the way their mother always had.

To this day, Chass did not know why Manda had turned out so differently. He'd had the same rigid upbringing as the rest of them, a piece on their mother's gameboard. Perhaps it was simply that he'd been trained to take on darker work than the rest of them, his mother's slinking shadow collecting secrets.

The problem had always seemed greater than that to Chass though. As though all the things he hated about his mother were sharper, uglier, and far more twisted in Manda. He could be as charming as anyone when he wanted and was easily as beautiful as Allen... but like a snake, his fangs had venom, and he'd never had any qualms or hesitations about using them.

Chass had known that. Had been the victim of Manda's maliciousness more than once. Still he'd given in. Still he'd nearly gotten Allen killed. On the long list of things Chass would regret until the day he died, letting Manda help him beat Allen was right at the top. He shouldn't have been taken in by Manda, shouldn't have done it. He'd known he shouldn't have done it, but he had anyway. One more fucking weakness, one more damned mistake. Chass's fingers dipped to briefly touch the tattoo that rode low on his abdomen.

It figured that of the four of them, one of the good ones was dead, the worst of them had vanished entirely without ever paying for his wrongs... leaving behind the best of them, thankfully, but also Chass, whom everyone would gladly have preferred trade places with Darren.

At least Manda wasn't his problem, at least for now, if he'd fled Harken entirely to do things Chass never wanted to know about. Good riddance, so far as Chass was concerned. He would have to deal with Manda eventually, one way or another. For now, though, that problem could wait.

Curling his fingers into a fist, he then reached for the glass on the table, the amber liquid gleaming in the light of the flickering lanterns. It was bitter and sweet on his tongue, a liquor made from almonds that Harken imported from Nemrith that Chass had long been fond of.

A soft sigh came from the bed as Desmond shifted in his sleep, causing his long blue-black hair to fall across his face. He was shockingly waifish for a king, so slight of frame Chass had barely felt the weight carrying him. Even now he could still feel that tiny body trembling in his arms, curled against him like Chass would save him from the world burning down around them.

*Hero.*

Chass finished the contents of his glass and refilled it. Alcohol wasn't something he indulged in often, given how easily it went to his head, but right now, if he did not fuzz his thoughts out, they would drive him to madness. Or worse, drive him to doing something stupid—like trying to pretend he was anything other than a monster.

Penance Gate. The reviled son and brother. The ugly one. The heartless one. The brutal one.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

He gulped down the second glass but didn't pour a third, instead shoving to his feet and leaving the suddenly oppressive cabin.

Thankfully, Charlaine was nowhere to be found when he stepped outside. Chass didn't begrudge the man following orders, but he was still damned tired of having a babysitter. As if some former Fathomless Fool would actually be capable of stopping him when he was dead set on doing something. Only one person had ever broken him, and that bastard was scattered across the bottom of a river.

*Has anyone ever told you how lovely you are?*

The sea air was bracingly cold, ruffling his hair and clothes as he walked across the deck to the portside, bracing himself against the side as he stared out at the dark sea, moonlight rippling across its surface. They'd be cutting east soon, out of sight of the coast but following its line, roughly, as they looped around the top of the continent and then headed south to Harken. Normally the trip took about a month, but that was only without stopping. In order to keep up the ruse of merchants, they'd have to double the length, else all the false papers they had to prove themselves wouldn't hold muster.

If they were to continue on north instead, they'd run into ice—enormous, towering islands of ice, what seemed like *continents* of ice, though so far as he knew the expeditions that were determined to find out had not yet returned. They were meant to go on a five year journey, but the last three attempts had all been forced to quit well before the three year mark.

He'd dreamed of such things as a boy. Being a great explorer, learning countless languages, collecting thousands of stories no one else in Harken had ever heard. Giving talks about his journeys, lectures on what

he'd learned, being a great silver tongue who helped bridge divides between people.

His parents—his mother—had quickly put those dreams down. She had plans regarding what was best for her children, and more importantly her kingdom, and those plans did not include her middle child being some frivolous scholar talking about ancient nonsense that no longer mattered or piles of ice where nobody would ever be able to live.

No, his duty was to join the military and be the sword arm for his elder brother someday.

Larren... dead nearly two months now, killed where he should have been safe, where so many people had worked to ensure he *would* be safe. Chass included, but the bastards that had come over the wall had come straight at him, and even he could not take on six men at once while also protecting two others. He'd done his best, but that hadn't been enough, and Larren had paid the price of his failure.

Chass hadn't thought people could hate him more than they already did, but he'd been mistaken. People who'd never talked to him had plenty to say about him becoming crown prince. Had they started in with suggesting he was behind the murders? Probably. Thank Holy Prima he was not home to endure that.

Instead of offering him condolences, they acted like he was *happy* Larren was dead. Chass would give *anything* for Larren to still be alive.

The same way he'd do anything for Allen, up to and including dying. He would suffer a thousand times if it repaid even slightly the terrible things he'd inflicted on the one person who'd never deserved it.

Something flickered on the sea, jerking him from his thoughts—but it was only a fish that dove back into the water.

"You're being dull," said a singsong voice.

Chass gave Aria a look as she joined him, leaning back against the side of the ship, hands on either side, watching him with too much knowing. "What do you want?"

"To be amused," Aria said. "I know you love all this sailing, but I detest it. Smelly, cold, and not a single good beer to be had. After our magnificent rescue, I deserve good beer."

Chass huffed a soft laugh despite himself. "You'll manage for a couple of months. Just think how much your wife is enjoying the peace and quiet right now."

"Ugh, you two and your insistence on quiet. How did I in all my glorious loudness and chaos, wind up with a wife and a lover who enjoy absolute silence?" Aria replied, nose wrinkling. "Amuse me."

"Amuse yourself," Chass retorted, but went easily when she lightly gripped his shirt and dragged him slowly down for a long, heated kiss.

They had met just two years after Chass had joined Penance Gate, not long after he'd become Bateker's latest victim, his newest pet. He'd been part of the team sent to fetch new recruits, and despite the fog of misery he'd lived in, Aria had been noticeable. Friendly and willing to be his friend when everyone else gave Chass a wide berth for one reason or another.

Then they'd returned to headquarters, and he'd seen the look on Bateker's face when he'd noticed Aria. Chass hadn't been willing to let that happen. Not to Aria. Not the only bright spot in his life then.

She'd almost killed him later when she'd learned what he'd done, what he'd sacrificed, to keep Bateker's attention on him and away from her... but she'd become even more of a friend then, one of the few who understood at all what he'd been through. The only person he'd trusted when he'd felt capable of intimacy again. One of the very few persons in the world who would miss him when he died.

Chass tugged her shirt free of her breeches and slid a hand across the warm, scarred skin of her back, then rose to his full height and tugged her against him, enjoying the press of her breasts against his chest, the hands that settled firmly on his shoulders without grabbing, the slowly hardening cock rubbing against him. Drawing back, he said, "Amused yet?"

"Not nearly amused enough." Aria licked his lips before drawing him into a kiss full of filthy promise. "I want—"

A light flickered off in the distance. Chass drew back and reached for the spyglass at his waist—right as the man in the nest called out, "Ships to portside!" The cry was followed by three sharp whistles, indicating three ships.

"Damn it," Aria muttered. "That's too much amusement."

"Do not make demands if you're not prepared for Holy Kero's reply," Chass said, and kissed her quickly before slipping away back to the captain's cabin as Aria started calling out orders.

Chass strode over to the bed, lingering for the barest breath to admire Desmond, fingers twitching with an unusual, and unwanted, urge to smooth the lines of worry etched into his face even in sleep. Chass was

surprised that was the worst he was suffering; most men in Desmond's position would not be taking it so well.

Holy Tash knew Chass hadn't.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Kneeling, Chass shook Desmond awake. Eyes the gray of a winter ocean blinked blearily at him. "Hmm?"

"I am sorry to disturb you, but we have ships approaching, and you need to be hidden in case they're looking for you."

The haziness vanished abruptly from Desmond's eyes. "Of course. Where should I go?"

Chass grinned toothily. "Not far. Brace yourself." Before Desmond could react past a furrowed brow, Chass gently lifted Desmond into his arms, cradled him close, and touched the button hidden in the elaborate carvings of the bed frame. It creaked open like the lid of a trunk, and Chass shoved it up higher. Inside was another bed, along with water, food, and a few other supplies. Hefting Desmond up, Chass laid him inside. "You should only be in here a couple of hours at most; if it's going to be longer than that, I'll find a way to signal as much to you. If the confined space starts to get to you, that little green bottle contains a substance that will calm you if you breathe it in. Not too much at once, just a whiff."

"I should be all right. I appreciate all you've done for me, truly."

"We're not home yet," Chass said. "Not a sound, now." He covered one of Desmond's hands briefly with his own, then closed the compartment and fixed the bedding.

The door opened, and Chass turned to see Aria stepping into the cabin. "Do we have more information?"

She gave a sharp, jerky nod. "Bentan war rigs, three of them, flying military banners. They moved quickly. I thought we'd get further than this before we came across any of them. Must have had ships ready to go somewhere we didn't know about."

"Everyone knows their roles?"

"Don't insult us," Aria said with a scoff as she spun away to get back to work.

Chass resumed his seat at the table, refilling his glass and pulling a book from one of the cabinets behind the table. It was a collection of scientific articles and essays, including a couple pertaining to grapes, one on improving rice yields that might be useful, and one about some



discoveries made on an old shipwreck off the coast of Delfaste that would break up the tedium of the other three.

So when the cry came that ships were requesting permission to board, later they would find nothing on their inspection but that they'd interrupted the ship's captain on a quiet night spent reading.

Returning to the main deck, Chass granted permission to board. Several minutes later, a boat pulled alongside and several Bentan seamen, including the captain and first officer, climbed board. A second boat soon followed, totaling thirty Bentans in all.

"Good evening," Chass said diffidently. "How can I help you?" Beside him, Riker smoothly translated his Outlander into Bentan.

Brows furrowing, the captain replied in Bentan, "I am sorry to disturb you, Captain. I promise we'll let you be on your way soon. I am Captain Geoffrey Davidson of the *Archangel*. We are seeking some escaped prisoners and have reason to believe they are either hiding on a foreign ship or pretending to be something they're not. I'm sure you understand."

After Riker translated the words Chass had understood just fine, he smiled and said in Outlander, "Of course, of course. I trade all over the world; I am subject to inspections and searches all the time." He gestured to Aria, who stepped forward and handed over a large leather fold which contained all their manifests, licenses, and other necessary papers.

As was required by international trade law, the papers were written in Harken, Mencian, and Bentan, the three most spoken languages in the world, in addition to his "native" Outlander.

"You're from Outland, but you're traveling northeast?" Geoffrey asked.

Chass smiled blandly. "We always start out west, then head north along the continent, swing out to trade with Kin del Kaar and Soldonir, and then sail back to Harken and work our way up. We bypass Cartha, trade with Benta, then make our way through the rest of the northern countries before heading south along Harken again until we reach home. It takes about a year to make the complete trip, give or take." He laughed. "We started out a couple of months late this year because we were forced to linger after the assassination of Crown Prince Larren. Terrible business, I'm sure, though the problems of royals and nobles are of no concern to me." He winked. "Except when they impede business, but it's hard to do bad business in Harkenesten, *you* know."

Geoffrey and a few of his guards chuckled meanly. "Your paperwork does seem to be in order, Captain. I do not believe I caught your name, though?"

"Oh, yes, my apologies. I am Captain Hellra Kamallan, part of the Belaracari Merchant Company. If I hadn't signed on to a sailor's life, I probably never would have left my sad little fishing village." He laughed again, and Geoffrey laughed with him as Riker translated.

Eyes moving to Chass's face, he said, "Those scars were made by Bentan bear claws. How does a merchant come to have such soldierly wounds?"

Chass snorted, and beside him Aria snickered. He cast her a look, then turned back to Geoffrey and said, "How does any person not a soldier generally come by such scars? I was very young, very drunk, and made the wrong group of soldiers angry."

Smiling briefly, Geoffrey said, "Indeed. And the mark on your right cheek? That's a good deal less likely to be obtained in a bar brawl."

Wincing visibly, lifting a hand to his cheek as though ashamed, Chass said, "I'm afraid you're quite correct on that point, Captain. This was the result of a bad trade. I trusted the wrong person when making certain deals, and later on that poor decision made me seem like a dishonest merchant. There was an altercation, and one of the offended parties had a bow. She decided to let fly before the misunderstandings were sorted out. I'm very fortunate she was not a good shot. It was not a mistake I made twice, so I suppose it all worked out in the end, hmm?"

After his reply was translated, Geoffrey said, "You're a lucky man to have survived two such close calls."

"I don't travel half the world twice every three years to trade in cheap trinkets, Captain."

Chuckling again, Geoffrey replied, "As you say. Let us give the ship a quick inspection for the sake of formality, Captain, and we'll be on our way."

"Of course, of course," Chass said, and lazily waved a hand. Riker translated smoothly, and with a last, lingering look at Chass, Geoffrey headed off, calling to his men to search every scrap of the ship, from the hold all the way to the crow's nest.

Chass shared a look with Aria and Riker, who didn't quite smirk, but shared a gleam in the eyes.

Though he itched to return to his cabin, Chass remained where he was, chatting idly with Aria over innocuous things they made certain some of the lingering Bentan sailors could overhear.

It didn't take long for them to find the casks of Kin del Kaar black rum, nicknamed Blackout by sailors who learned the hard way not to drink too much of it at once, that had been meticulously "hidden" in a secret compartment of the hold. Geoffrey reappeared shortly after, mouth curled faintly in tolerant amusement. "We found something not on your manifest, Captain."

"Pity. Are you going to turn me in?" Chass asked.

Drawing closer than was strictly necessary, seeming unconcerned they spoke through a silver tongue, Geoffrey replied, "I'm far too busy to take issue with something so trifling, though we will in good conscience have to confiscate it."

"Of course. Are you finished searching? The wind is good enough to make up lost time, and I'd hate to lose it."

Geoffrey gave a deep nod, ever so slightly mocking, but not enough to bother taking issue. Smiling blandly, he said, "Quite finished. Thank you for being so cooperative."

"An honor to please Benta, always," Chass murmured. A few more niceties later, Geoffrey and his sailors finally departed. Chass gave the order to weigh anchor and several minutes later they were sailing away and swiftly out of sight.

"Well done," Chass said to Aria. "Convey my pleasure to the others. I'm going to see to His Majesty."

Aria bowed and strode off, calling for the officers on duty as she went.

Back in his cabin, Chass went swiftly to the bed and opened it. "All right, Your Majesty?"

Desmond gave a weak nod, and Chass gingerly lifted him out, used his foot to close the bed, and got Desmond comfortable again. "More tonic?" When Desmond hesitated, clearly warring between pride and need, Chass fetched it. He poured a measure out and offered it along with a glass of water to chase away the wretched taste.

When he'd finished, Desmond murmured a thank you and asked, "So who were our unwanted guests?"

"Bentan soldiers. A Captain Geoffrey."

"Handsome, flirty, cagey?"

Chass gave a slight nod.

"He wasn't a captain yesterday," Desmond said. "He was on the verge of being dishonorably discharged, largely for pressing unwanted advances on enlisted soldiers. All we lacked was hard proof, since everyone who could have testified always changed their minds at the last moment."

Rage poured through Chass, hot and thick, but he breathed through it and let the rage go with every exhale. There was nothing he could do. The man was long gone, and turning back would arouse suspicions and cause trouble. He would have to trust that Holy Shammari would see to the man's overdue punishment.

"Are you all right?" Desmond asked.

Chass shook himself. "I'm fine. Never mind me, Your Majesty. Be assured he left convinced we were only Outlander merchants attempting to smuggle Blackout."

"Outlander," Desmond murmured. "That's what you and Lieutenant Aria were speaking when I first woke up. You keep speaking Bentan to me. Allen always made it sound like he was the only silver tongue in his family."

"He is," Chass said, good mood fading. "I'm a soldier."

"And a crown prince."

"To nobody's pleasure, including mine. I know enough of a few languages to take to market. Nothing that would qualify as silver tongue levels," Chass replied. "Get some rest, Your Majesty. I'll be near to hand should you need anything."

Desmond frowned, but finally nodded and settled into his blankets. Chass returned to his table and retrieved his book.

"What are you reading?" Desmond asked softly.

Stifling a sigh, Chass rose and returned to the bed to offer him the book.

"This is written in Outlander," Desmond said in a quiet, pensive tone that made the back of Chass's neck itch. "I can't read it, but I know enough to... how did you say it a moment ago, take to market?"

"That's right," Chass replied, biting back a smile.

Desmond smiled like a schoolboy who'd managed to please his favorite teacher. Chass firmly snuffed the warmth that tried to spread through his chest. "So what's it about?"

Chass dragged a chair over, sat down, and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Nothing terribly interesting. Essays, reports, articles and the like on various scientific developments and other such things. It was in a chest of books that's part of the cargo. There's one about a shipwreck that might be interesting. Would you like me to read it?"

"A shipwreck? Did they find it relatively whole? What was the cargo? Where is it from? Yes, I would love to hear that one."

That damned warmth returned, sparked back to life by Desmond's excitement over a simple shipwreck. He pushed it away and focused on indifference. He was carrying out orders given to him by the High Throne. Once Desmond was safe—and with Allen—he'd no longer have anything to do with Chass. Even if he did want to continue associating with him, Chass would soon have to resign from Penance Gate and return home to take up his new duties.

"I would love that, and be eternally grateful," Desmond replied. "I'm sure I'll fall asleep again, but I'd appreciate something other than my own thoughts in the meantime. I'm forever in your debt, Your Highness."

"There is no debt," Chass said firmly, and started reading to prevent a reply. It was tricky, translating the Outlander into Bentan as he read, but for the most part he managed it, and it wouldn't have mattered if he'd botched it; Desmond was fast asleep not even ten minutes later, chest gently rising and falling, his beautiful dark hair spilling around him, bathed in flickering torchlight and tempting touch. Chass closed the book with a snap and returned his chair to the table. Stowing the book, he made a cup of tea and once it was brewed, pulled out everything he needed to write a report for the High Throne.

Unfortunately, doing so didn't take long. Reports were nearly always easy to write after having written a thousand of them, and given all the difficulties this mission had entailed, it had gone relatively well. The only mistake had been arriving nearly too late, and that wasn't something Chass could have controlled.

He called for one of his soldiers and had them take the report off to be sent by falcon to Harkenesten Palace.

Which officially left him with nothing else to do. There was only so much that could be done on a ship, which was normally what he liked best about sailing—it was a rare opportunity for him to get as close to relaxing as he was capable of managing.

Unfortunately, he was too tense over all that could still go wrong, the trust Allen had unexpectedly shown by ordering Penance Gate to take this mission—reckless, foolish, given that Chass was now crown prince, but neither of them had cared, and the High King had not put his foot down, even though everyone knew the military was the High King's domain. On the other hand, if His Majesty had a weakness, it was Allen.

Not that Chass had room to talk. From the moment he'd managed to dig himself out of the pit he'd fallen into during Bateker's abuse, the only thing he'd ever wanted was to protect the little brother he'd so abysmally failed.

Well, there were many things he wanted, but each was more impossible than the last. At least protecting and serving Allen was something he could do, even if only from a distance.

Sighing at himself, Chass rose and went to the chest secured to the foot of the bed where Desmond slept. Unlocking it, he withdrew the heavy, rolled mat inside, a hand-sized book of prayers, and a small wooden box. Closing the chest again, he took the mat to the center of the room and rolled it out, smoothing the ornately woven fabric, enjoying the soft, familiar feel of it. Most prayer rugs were fairly plain or decorated with various types of geometric designs. Chass's bore an actual image: a red and gold sunburst breaking up dark clouds. The mat and cards in the box were a gift from Lanora, the priest who'd supported him when Chass had finally managed to ask for help. The first person to listen to him, and believe him, and tell him he was neither weak nor evil nor broken beyond all repair.

The only person, outside of a small circle within Penance Gate, who knew what Chass had eventually done to Bateker.

Kneeling on the mat, Chass then bent so his forehead rested on it and began his prayers.

Traditionally, prayers to the Pantheon were done in the morning, the afternoon, and the evening, the exact times varying with the seasons and the gods bound to those seasons. Moreover, his Prayers of the Penitent were to be done twice a day, at midmorning, and midevening.

But such schedules had been set and most heavily practiced by priests and monks who kept to strict routines. The life of a prince and captain was not so neatly ordered. Chass never missed his daily prayers, but he rarely was able to do them at the appointed hours. Sometimes, all he

could do was murmur them to himself in the quiet space between one problem and the next.

When the starting prayers were complete, he opened the wooden box and withdrew his prayer cards. Shuffling them thoroughly, he fanned them out in front of him, closed his eyes, and selected three cards. This was a basic draw, meant to give him some idea of what he would face in the coming days, so he might recite the proper prayers.

Chass opened his eyes, arranged his chosen cards in a row, and flipped them over. He frowned thoughtfully at the results:

Prima Falling. Morden in the Peak. Senn in the Peak. At the bottom of each card was a small number that corresponded with prayers in the book at his side.

Taken together, the cards promised the next few days would be arduous. That was hardly surprising, but it was disappointing. He'd hoped, after all their careful planning, that the final stage of the mission would go with relative smoothness.

Well, it was what it was. They could only be prepared, adapt to every situation, and fight strong.

Scooping all the cards back up, Chass returned them to the box, then once more bent, hands forming a point in front of him, and recited the prayers advised by the drawn cards.

When he was finished, he rolled up the mat and made to put everything away.

"Those were Gaulden prayer cards," said a raspy voice.

Chass's head jerked up sharply, his cheeks flushing faintly as he met Desmond's gaze—which was unexpectedly rapt, rather than amused or derisive, as Chass had come to expect. "Yes."

Mouth quirking, Desmond said, "I used to be a monk, you know. Most people think I simply lived in Highmont Monastery like it was my private manor, some spoiled prince in comfortable seclusion, but that wasn't the case. I worked, I was treated no different from the others. It was my entire life. I had long taken vows when I was yanked from my life and dropped on a throne. I know what it's like to be belittled for my faith."

Shoulders easing, Chass kept hold of the box of cards as he closed the chest and rose. *Open up more*. He hated that admonishment. Opening up was for people like Kamir, who had not "let" their abuse turn them into monsters. Into anger and resentment, into being closed off and sharp-edged

because that was the only way he knew to survive. Nobody wanted him to open up. They wanted him to leave the room, so they could go back to the world being a comfortable place. But he'd promised Lanora that he would do his best. "I suppose you would, at that. Prayer cards are regarded as little more than fortune telling nonsense these days." He reclaimed the chair he'd sat in previously to read to Desmond. "Even my closest friends consider me superstitious at best."

Desmond's smile soured. "It's funny: ceremonies of state are rife with religious elements. Our most important celebrations are either religious in nature or have religious elements. Yet one of the things people hated most about me is that I am deeply religious. That I insisted on doing my daily prayers—all twelve of them." His sweet smile returned.

The words, that understanding smile, left Chass feeling connected to him in a way infinitely more dangerous than simple desire could ever be. Understanding on such an important level, one that left him feeling isolated, even from Aria, was too precious for words. "You seemed fascinated by the cards," he said gruffly, hoping his stupid, pathetic thoughts did not show on his face. The last thing he needed was to seem a simpering fool instead of the fearsome soldier he was supposed to be.

"As you say, they're largely considered fortune-telling nonsense. There's always one or two fortune-tellers at the fairs and markets who claim to know 'the mystical Harken art of foreseeing.'"

Chass didn't know whether to laugh or rage.

Desmond burst into laughter, though he winced slightly and pressed a hand to his ribs. "Your face!" He smothered his giggles with the back of one hand and shook with it a few more moments before finally saying, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but I've never seen such an expression of—of horrified offense. I wish I could capture it somehow."

"Horrified offense describes my feelings on most matters," Chass said dryly.

Desmond grinned. "I can imagine. Unfortunately, I know little more than carnival nonsense; even the impressive library of Highmont did not contain much information about them. Only that they originated in Gaulden, and that is the only place where you can find people who still use them the way they were originally intended. I know learning how to use them properly can take years. You must have been using them a long time, given the fluidity you displayed. I am sorry. Something woke me, and then I



did not want to interrupt you, but I did not mean to intrude on your prayers, either."

"It's fine. There was hardly anywhere else for you to go. As to the cards, this is only a basic set; they don't take much to learn. The difficult part is memorizing the prayers, otherwise you have to flip through the book every single time, and that can get tiresome." Chass moved his chair so he was directly facing the bed and used a clear space of it to deftly sort the cards. "It sounds like your books are referring to the more elaborate sets used by priests; those *do* take years to master. Basic decks like this are meant to be used by anyone. They're more akin to Bentan prayer beads."

"Fascinating," Desmond replied, eyes on the cards, still a little heavy with sleepiness but bright with interest.

Chass started to mention he had the complete priest's deck back in Harken, but bit it off. That would sound like bragging, and likely wasn't interesting anyway. He finished sorting the cards and turned them so the images were right side up for Desmond. "There are three 'houses' of cards, one for each plane. Within those houses, there are three cards for each god: rising, peak, falling. Some translate that as sunrise, midday, and sunset, or morning, day, night. Those aren't really accurate, but people seem to think it sounds... prettier, I guess." He tapped the card on top of the first stack, which was the House of the Divine Fields. "This is Prima, God of Life. She's dozing and surrounded by night blooming jasmine with the full moon above her. So this is Prima Falling."

"Which means...something positive is coming your way?" Desmond asked.

Mouth tipping up at one corner, Chass gave a slight shake of his head and said, "No, that's where the fortune tellers always mess up. The point of these cards is to advise and guide. They're saying this is who you need to pray to..."

"Which means something *negative* is coming your way, so you need to ask her for guidance and support." Desmond broke into a beautiful smile. "I get it. You're right, the fortune tellers don't do it that way at all."

Chass wanted to smile back but resisted. His face was never improved by such things. The last time someone had made him smile, they'd looked away so quickly he'd been astonished their neck hadn't snapped. "Prima Falling speaks specifically to praying for fortitude and calm in the face of enormous strife."

"What if it had been Prima Rising or Prima...Peak?"

"Prima in the Peak," Chass replied. "Prima Rising is advising one to pray for strength and comfort against terrible grief. Prima in the Peak is prayed to for wisdom and peace in the face of great betrayal."

"So Prima in general is prayed to for help in facing some of the worst moments in our life. She is the God of Life, though, so that make sense." Desmond's fingers hovered over the card on top of the center deck, which depicted a figure with pale brown skin, dressed in black armor, and who seemed to glow beneath the sun-and-moon above their head. One half of the card was green with gold roses. The other half was orange with black roses. "This is Kero, if I'm not mistaken."

Chass replied, "Kero in the Peak, part of the House of the Mortal Plane. They're the god of chaos. This card bids the pious to pray for ambition and creativity, to ward against becoming too apathetic and biddable." Chass touched the last card, shoulders tightening. It depicted a beautiful woman with dark skin and hair so short it was barely there, with fierce red eyes and a translucent gown that seemed to be made of flickering violet flames. One hand rested on a shapeless black beast with red eyes and horns. "This is Shallana, Queen of the Beasts, part of the House of the Penance Realms, who defended the Penance Gate to her siblings and so ensured they would stand forever. Shallana Rising appears when the pious will be faced with a difficult choice and should pray for the strength of will and heart to make the *correct* choice."

"I can think of a lot of people who need to have drawn—and heeded—that card," Desmond said bitterly.

Chass pushed cards aside until he found the two he sought, chest giving a sharp, twisting ache. "If they had not the sense to listen to the first warning the gods gave them, there is still Shallana in the Peak and Shallana Falling." He touched the card that depicted Holy Shallana in armor that seemed made of the night sky. "Peak advises praying for humility and grace in the face of having committed a terrible wrong." He touched the last card, swallowing the rock in his throat. This card showed Shallana with her back to the viewer, surrounded by a blood red sky cast by a rising sun. "Shallana Falling bids the pious plead for strength and patience as they walk the penitent path."

Fingers gently touched the back of his hand, and Chass looked up to see concern etched deeply into Chass's face. "Are you all right?"

Shaking himself, annoyed at his own pathetic weakness in letting his inner turmoil show and trouble others, Chass scooped up the cards and returned them to the box. "I'm fine, my apologies."

"What in the world are you apologizing for? Being affected by something important? Please, don't do that." He smiled faintly, somewhat shyly. "You are talking to a man who misses his prayer beads and sled dogs more than he misses all the people he left behind. I do not judge you. I'm honored you would share so much with me, especially when I've been nothing but trouble from the moment I collapsed in front of you." He wrinkled his nose. "That is never how being rescued goes in the stories. If, heavens forbid, my adventures ever become a tale, I hope somebody lies flagrantly about my role. I should like to be a *little* more dashing in the stories."

"You underestimate your own bravery. My people have brought me reports from prisoners about what you said."

Desmond's eyes widened. "You took prisoners?"

Chass's good mood faded. "Yes. High-ranking officers who might provide useful information or be used for bargaining."

"I wish that hadn't been necessary," Desmond whispered, staring down at his hands. "I prefer to solve problems with words. I am saddened all my efforts to forge peace with Harken were not good enough."

Chass curled his fingers into fists to avoid reaching out. It wasn't his place to comfort, not when the man before him was a good friend of Allen's. He had earlier, but he should have behaved then too. Any comfort he could offer would ultimately prove empty; the moment Desmond learned of what Chass had done to Allen, he'd be one more person who rightfully stopped talking to him, stopped looking at him... who just *stopped* where Chass was concerned. Then he would recall every touch, every word, and find them vile.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Monsters didn't exist to provide comfort.

Standing, Chass said, "You should get some more rest. I must make my rounds and attend other duties."

"Of course," Desmond said with a smile that was a paltry imitation of all his previous ones. "Thank you for spending time with me."

Chass bowed slightly. "The honor and pleasure were mine." Turning, he strode from the cabin to get back to work.

## Chapter Three

It was stupid, but Desmond missed his dogs the most. They were good dogs, a well-trained sledding team he'd bought from the monastery once he was officially made king. He generally ran a team of twelve for the longer hauls, and used three to four in shorter hauls, and had twenty-four dogs in total. They were his dearest treasure, the one thing he loved as much as the Goddess herself, may she forgive him his weakness.

In winter, sled teams were the only way through the hills and valleys to the tiny villages and scattered farms that relied on Highmont to provide food, supplies, and much more while the endless frigid months trapped them in their homes.

Desmond had gone on many of those trips, relished the thrill of the cold, shared the excitement of his team. They were never happier than when the air was too cold for nearly everything else, only wolves and winter hares and a smattering of birds roaming the woods and valleys.

Whenever they reached a village, the adults were thrilled to have the supplies, and the children were delighted to be permitted outside to play with the dogs. Desmond and the other monks helped dispense everything, then everyone gathered in the main hut for hot beer, brats, pickled cabbage, and fresh bread.

Wherever he went, be it somewhere in Harken or elsewhere in the world, he would not be going home, and his dogs would likely never come to him.

What did it say that he did not miss his crown, his throne, his wealth? Only his dogs. Well, and some of the precious books he'd brought with him from Highmont, gifts from the monks for all the years he'd helped them in ways no one expected of a prince.

Desmond missed Highmont too—the quiet, the order, the simplicity of his days. He'd been terrible at brewing beer, but he'd had some skill for gardening. His mornings had been spent on that, his afternoons on copying books or doing other library work. His evenings had been devoted to study—prayer, language, politics, history, and more. He'd also frequently traveled with the other monks to visit the villages and farms, saying prayers over the dead, blessing fields, new wells, children, providing food and

trading beer, singing and dancing when they were invited to stay for festivals and other celebrations. In winter, they traveled to ensure villagers had enough food and other supplies, break up the monotony of winter life where the days were short and sunshine rare with songs and stories and other entertainments.

It was not the life he'd chosen for himself, but he'd grown fond of it, had sincerely loved it, and his faith *had* always been his choice.

Perhaps he missed more than his dogs after all, but no matter what he wished, he was a monk no longer. He'd had no choice but to become one, and then the choice to remain one was taken from him. No point in dwelling, though. Especially now, when he had far more important things to worry about.

Like the fact he was a disgraced, fallen king, too weak and feeble to hold his throne, betrayed by the people he'd trusted to protect and assist him. Bile, sharp and bitter, scraped the back of his throat. Desmond hoped —

He cut the uncharitable thought off. Wishing pain, suffering, and death on others, no matter their sins, was unbecoming of the children of Her Most Brilliant Grace. He would not further poison his own heart for something as selfish as vengeance.

Sighing, he tried again to read the book in front of him—a book of poetry Chass had lent him from the cargo they carried to strengthen their façade as Harken merchants. It was even written in Bentan, and by a well-known poet that Desmond always enjoyed.

Despite his efforts and the beautiful words before him, his thoughts strayed helplessly back to Chass, who was beautiful, rough-hewn and sharp edged, and the very definition of the word *complicated*. Desmond had never been more fascinated or confounded by another person. If not for their looks and a shared talent for language, Desmond would never have believed Allen and Chass were brothers.

He gnawed on his bottom lip. Why had Chass tried to deny he was a silver tongue? He'd said he only knew enough of Outlander to get by, but he'd flawlessly translated that essay he'd read to Desmond the other night. That took a great deal of skill. So far as Desmond could tell, Chass spoke Gaulden, Harken, Bentan, and Outlander. By Harken law, and most international standards, that made him a silver tongue, in practice if not in official paperwork fact. Why did it seem like Chass wanted to hide it?

That was just one of the many things he seemed to want to hide about himself.

As much as Desmond wanted to ask, though, he would never be so rude. Bad enough he'd invaded Chass's privacy while he prayed. Chass had been gracious in explaining the prayer cards to him, but by the end, it had seemed like he was done accommodating his charge. He'd clearly been annoyed that Desmond had gotten upset about the prisoners. Understandable, but Desmond couldn't help how he felt, and he hated the idea of people being dragged away from their home in chains—literal, metaphorical, or both—to be subjected to who knew what torments as information was rung from them. Even if they'd been party to trying to kill him.

Her Most Brilliant Grace urged forgiveness above all else, for no creation in her world was perfect, and all were prone to mistakes great and small. He'd rather have just left the rebels to their own mess. But when you were the frail, useless king in need of rescue from a tenuous ally, you didn't get to make the decisions.

He set the poetry aside with a sigh and pushed back the blankets—and immediately regretted doing so as chilly air washed over him. Clearly he'd gotten softer than he realized, to be bothered so easily by the cold. Highmont had not believed in unnecessary suffering, but it hadn't believed in coddling either. Unlike the palace, where he'd been wrapped in fine wool and soft furs, and the heated bricks beneath his blankets had been regularly swapped out.

His body screamed at him to get back in bed, everything from his head to his feet aching, but Desmond set his jaw and, step by step, headed for the table on the far side of the cabin. He was sick of being abed, sick of having only his thoughts and books for company. Normally he was more than happy to spend hours alone, but right then he wanted to escape his own head.

At the table, he took the seat usually occupied by Lieutenant Aria and wished stupidly that Chass was there. He'd already done more than enough for Desmond, especially considering that his own life should not be risked so, let alone for the fallen king of a nation turned enemy once more.

Bitterness ran through Desmond, chased by despair. He'd tried so hard to establish and maintain peace. Whatever the rebels said, Benta had been on its way to flourishing. Having Harken as an ally was leagues better

than having them as an enemy. He could not understand, though he had tried, why the rebels preferred to resume hostilities.

Why they preferred to collude with Treya Mencee, make blood-soaked deals that resulted in so many unnecessary deaths. For a country that largely followed a goddess who preached understanding, tolerance, and forgiveness, his people certainly struggled with all three.

The door opened, and Desmond looked up hopefully—and tried not to show his disappointment when it proved to not be Chass, but his third in command, Lieutenant Riker, dressed like a sailor, save for the sword at her hip, which was not the type of curved, slicing sword favored by sailors, but a thrusting sword meant for getting past heavy armor.

She paused as she saw him, then said in Harken, "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be out of bed, Your Majesty."

"You really should stop calling me that," Desmond said with a grimace. "I'm not a king anymore."

"I do what Captain Chass tells me," Riker replied. "That being said, if you don't like the form of address, I won't keep using it, either. What do you prefer?"

"Desmond is fine, and friends have always called me Dez."

She snorted. "Dez. You don't look like a Dez to me, but then again, I hardly know you. Desmond it is, then." She smiled briefly, and it banished the severity of her features, gave him a glimpse of the person she was off duty. "Whatever your name, you shouldn't be out of bed."

"I am really sick of being in it, though," Desmond said. "Please?"

"I'm not going to put you back, but Captain Chass will," Riker said with a laugh. "So good luck with that. I came to see if you'd like food and to let you know that right now we've got clear skies and good wind, so we're making excellent time. We should pass by Port Valar in a couple more hours."

Valar was one of the major ports of Yryma, on its western edge, just a couple of days north of the major port of Korlow and about five days out of Bentamasura. Desmond had never been outside of Benta before, but Valar was one of the most important stops for Benta along their trade routes. Desmond had worked as hard on keeping relations with them friendly as he had with building a new relationship with Harken. "Are we stopping there?"

"No, not unless some emergency requires it. Captain wants to make it to Kyri before we stop."

Kyri, that was a minor port in Fyr Dane. Not a typical stopping point for most merchants, but they'd be less likely to draw attention there—and even if people thought to send scouts to look for them there, they'd never reach anyone in time to stop them from setting out again. All that pretending Fyr Dane would just let Benta run amuck to kill their runaway former monarch was just that: pretending.

Politics were such a headache. Desmond didn't entirely hate them, but he wasn't sorry to leave them behind for a bit, either. "Food sounds delightful, by the way. Now I'm upright, I'm hoping to manage more than broth."

She laughed again, a warm, rolling sound that banished all her edges. Riker was tall, broad, and heavily built, with the sorts of muscles that could lift whole barrels without noticing the weight. She had the dark brown skin common to many parts of Harken and sharp amber eyes that turned gold when she laughed and smiled. "I'll do my best, but the captain is overseeing your care like a—" Her face went blank. "Damn it, I've forgotten the Harken for it, even though I speak the language every damn day."

"Mothering hen?" Desmond asked. "That's the only term I know that might fit."

"Close enough, at any rate," she said with a wink. "I'll be back."

Desmond returned the wink with a smile, but it faded again as she left. But no, he wasn't going to go right back to fretting and whining.

Instead, he brought his hands up so they were flat against each other, then lifted them upward and inward, the fingers tipped forward slightly, as though in supplication. Bowing his head low, so his forehead almost but not quite touched his thumbs, in Benta, he recited, "Bless us, Beloved Goddess, and the bounty you bestow upon this day, and accept our most humble and earnest gratitude. Amen." As ever, the simple act of praying, even such a short and simple one, made him feel better. His life might be in tumult, but he still had this.

The door opened as he finished, but it wasn't Riker holding the fragrant food that left his stomach grumbling. It was Chass, who as ever was like looking into the sun, like standing too close to a fire after being out in the cold overlong.



Desmond's breath hitched as he drew closer, and Goddess grant him mercy, there was no reason to be acting so. He'd been around people even more beautiful than Chass and people just as fierce as him. Perhaps his head really was addled from the beating Bitter Frost and the royal guards had given him.

He turned away from thoughts of Bitter Frost before those thoughts turned sinful. "Riker told on me, eh?"

"Not in so many words, but I know all about patients who do not like to stay in bed as they're told, and it does not surprise me you're among that number," Chass drawled in flawless Benta. He set down the tray he held, the kind that had raised sides so the stuff on it was less likely to fall or slide off.

If there was one thing Desmond preferred about life outside the monastery, it was the food. Monks did not skimp on food, but they did tend to cycle through the same ten meals—though they made up for it with the variety of beers they produced. Nobody loved beer more than monks.

He'd made himself sick several times the first couple of months he'd lived in the palace, his body was so unused to such rich foods and the frequency with which people ate. While technically Benta as a whole had the usual three meals a day, it was really more like six to seven small meals, not including the all-day eating of holidays and other major affairs.

Thankfully, the meal Chass set before him was nothing so fancy. Simply a stack of the flatbread so ubiquitous across Harken, a bowl of fish congee, and a smaller bowl of various pickled vegetables. There was also a small, stoppered earthen jar that was probably alcohol of some sort, though he wasn't familiar enough with Harken alcohol to know for certain what kind.

"Smells wonderful," he said. "Thank you."

Chass gestured dismissively as he sat down. "I'm happy to tell the cook you're excited about—" He broke off, scowling, and said in Harken, "*Rice porridge with smoked fish*. My apologies, I have strange gaps in my knowledge; it's why I dislike anyone thinking I am a silver tongue."

Not bothering to point out all the ways he'd already seen that Chass *was* a silver tongue, Desmond replied, "Even the most experienced silver tongue struggles with the most ridiculous words at times. I was in the middle of a trade negotiation with Korlow a couple of months ago, and I forgot how to say 'thank you,' of all things. It was humiliating, but

something all we silver tongues commiserate with. You're looking for 'fish congee.'"

"That's it," Chass replied. He smiled, though only sadly, but the tight lines around his eyes eased some. "Cook will be delighted to know that someone on board is excited to see their fish congee. They do not always get the warmest reception from the rest of us, as we eat it about a thousand times a year."

Desmond laughed. "I know a bit about that, except in Highmont it was barley gruel with egg and bacon fat. All winter long, and Benta is at least two thirds winter." Chass's nose wrinkled ever so briefly, making Desmond laugh anew. "So fish congee is not so bad for me, you see."

"I suppose it wouldn't be. Personally, I hate gruels, porridges, congee—all of it, any variation. I ate far too much of it in my younger days and still cannot stand the stuff."

"Military really likes their porridges. I had no idea."

Chass gave a bare nod that barely counted as such, and Desmond couldn't shake the idea he was agreeing simply so he didn't have to say anything further. But that seemed a stupid thought. Why else would Chass eat so much gruel? Certainly a royal prince could do better, even in the middle of nowhere, unless he was the sort of person to refuse such things if they weren't available to everyone. Chass certainly seemed the type. Maybe he'd spent a great deal of time sick?

Goddess, he was slow. Chass was a soldier, and those scars on his face told stories. He'd likely been bedridden more than once. Gruel was a good, healthy, and simple meal for the wounded just as much for the sick. He could imagine how much time Chass spent healing between one battle and the next. Of course he hated gruel.

He picked up the spoon, which was Harken style, wooden and with an angled handle and deeper, flat bowl, rather than the straight, shallow and curved Benta style.

Despite Chass's assurances the congee was universally hated by the crew, it was delicious. The fish was flaky and soft, packed with smoky, spicy flavor, and there was more heat in the congee itself, and a remarkable amount of depth to the fish broth it had been cooked in. Combined with the pickles, and supplemented with the bread, it was a meal he could find no complaints about. "This is marvelous."

"It won't be after you'd have it every single day, twice a day, for the foreseeable future."

"Food is food, and only the unwise snub the bounty the Goddess offers."

Chass's mouth twitched. "Which is why we all still eat it."

Desmond smiled and pushed away the empty bowl. "I was so busy eating, I forgot the drink, though I'll be honest in that I've no idea what it is."

"Lotus wine, from Soldonir. We brought it with us when we left there after assisting the High King in sorting matters out." His eyes gleamed like moonlight on ice, and Desmond was eternally grateful to the Goddess that he'd never been on the receiving end of Penance Gate's notorious fury. Chass leaned forward slightly and picked the jar up, pulling a knife from somewhere and deftly removing the wax-sealed top. "Have you ever had lotus wine?"

Desmond shook his head. "No, I'm vastly more familiar with beer than wine. Most parts of Benta do not play nicely with the grapes and rice required for the latter."

"Well, Bentan beer is nothing to scoff at, but I admit that, like most of Harken, I prefer wine." He poured a small measure in the provided cup. Like everything else, it was of Harken style, with no handles, carved from wood rather than made from porcelain as a nod to the needs of ship travel.

Desmond accepted it and took a sip. "Sweet, much sweeter than I expected. I thought only dessert wines were so sweet."

"If you think that's sweet, the High Court will alarm you greatly," Chass said. "Stick to Gaulden wines if you want to survive, or your beers."

"I will keep—" Desmond's words were drowned out by a deafening explosion immediately to his right. He screamed and recoiled, but hadn't even entirely gained his feet when he was knocked to the ground by Chass and covered entirely by him. Clinging for dear life, Desmond stuttered out, "What was that?"

"Your navy," Chass replied grimly. "I don't know how they discovered us, but it's clear the ruse has failed." More explosions followed, from what Desmond now recognized were dragon stones, a larger, nastier version of Harken's precious firebombs. They were difficult to make and even more difficult to keep stable, so were not used often, especially not at sea, where disaster was practically guaranteed. They really wanted him

dead. Or Penance Gate. Both. "Come," Chass said, voice low and rough, filled with anger and violence. But he was gentle as he pulled Desmond to his feet. "Are you all right?"

Every last bit of Desmond screamed in agony, but right then was hardly the time for whining. "I'll live, Captain. What do we do?"

"Abandon ship!" Aria bellowed as she slammed open the door. "Chass, you have to go. We're sinking and the other ships—" She broke, and for a second looked like she was going to break down in tears. "You have to go before they reach us; they seemed to know what ship you're on, and so which ship Desmond is likely on."

"Damn it," Chass snarled, and strode over to the chest at the foot of the bed, throwing it open and quickly donning the clothes—and what seemed to be some sort of lightweight armor—inside. Desmond also noted he shoved his box of prayer cards into a pouch before slamming the chest shut and rejoining them. "Aria, I'll take Desmond inland and travel that way to Harken. You take care of our people."

Aria nodded, then stepped in close, clasped Chass's head in his hands, and dragged him down into a quick, hard kiss that spoke of years of history, of intimacies that had nothing to do with sex. She pulled away with a rough noise. "Don't get yourself killed, you stupid bastard." Then she was gone, as abruptly as she'd arrived, bellowing orders that were quickly lost to the racket of screams, explosions, and a rushing wind.

Chass grabbed his arm, threw something around him, and bellowed, "Stay close, but out of my way."

"Understood," Desmond shouted back, and righted what he realized was a cloak, the kind treated to repel water and keep the wearer warm in all but the most frigid weather. He followed Chass out of the cabin and across the ship, screaming briefly at the sight of a body that had very little of its insides left where they belonged. Another had lost a head; another had been blown roughly in half.

After that, he stopped looking and focused solely on Chass's broad back, the sword that flashed as it cut down the sailors who'd already managed to board.

They reached the lifeboats unhindered, and Chass practically threw him into one before swinging it out and down. He jumped down into it a moment later and cut the ropes with the knife he'd used just minutes ago to open the wine.

Desmond huddled down in his cloak, in the bottom of the boat to make himself a more difficult target—not that he expected anyone to be able to hit a cloaked figure in a moving boat from a moving ship in the dark, but he'd seen people achieve crazier.

Across from him, Chass rowed like a man possessed, his breaths coming out hard and heavy, in time with his strokes. For all the distant noise, the screams and explosions, the choppy waves and the rushing wind, it was also eerily silent right around them, as though Chass's heavy breathing created a barrier that muffled the rest of the world.

Desmond stared at the sinking ships—and noticed a point of light that didn't belong. "I think someone's coming after us."

Chass only grunted in reply and rowed faster. Desmond bit back useless frustration and self-loathing that he couldn't help. If they were on sleds or horses, he'd be of some use, but he'd only ever sailed as a coddled passenger.

There was a series of smacking sounds around them, and after a moment, Desmond realized their pursuers were trying to shoot them. Arrows in the dark after all. Chass said nothing again, only rowed and rowed, breaths growing more labored.

Desmond started to ask if he was all right, then stopped. That was a stupid question, because whether or not he was didn't matter. They had to keep going if they wanted to have any chance of surviving.

Several minutes later, they hit a rocky beach, and Chass grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the boat, then threw him over one shoulder before hiking his way over and up the rocks and boulders.

They'd just crested them, spilling out onto the snowy, sandy field beyond, when angry voices shouting orders and obscenities reached them.

Chass said something low and rough, but the words were Gaulden, and Desmond wasn't yet fluent enough to recognize them. By the tone, they were probably profanities. He set Desmond on his feet. "Get to the trees. "

Desmond started running. When he was about a third of the way to the trees, however, he turned back—and drew up short to see there were two arrows sticking out of Chass's back. He resumed running, stomach roiling, guilt and shame leaving an ache in his chest.

He wasn't worth all this. He was one fucking person, and clearly his kingdom didn't want him, so why were so many people dying to keep him alive? Why was Chass risking his life when, of the two of them, Chass was

the more important? Benta was happily putting Kettermane in Desmond's place, but if Chass died, there was no one left to replace him. Gaulden had already buried—well, burned—one prince. They shouldn't have to mourn a second.

Desmond reached the trees, but with only moonlight as a guide, he couldn't do much more than fumble his way to cover, hunker down, and pray for the mercy of Her Most Holy Grace.

In the distance, he could hear the far-too-familiar sound of people fighting. Dying. Swords against armor, occasionally sword against sword. Then the rush of feet rapidly growing closer.

"Majesty!"

"Here," Desmond said, rising and stepping toward the figure he could just barely see, the moonlight making him slightly less dark than their surroundings. "Are you all right?"

"Let's go." Chass took his arm, drew him in. "Can you walk? Or should I put you on my back?"

Every last bit of Desmond's body screamed in agony, and he was fairly certain a couple of his wounds had reopened. But he also remembered the arrows likely still sticking out of Chass's back. The way he'd just fought for their lives while Desmond cowered first in a boat, and then in the bushes. He would be damned if he also made Chass carry him. "I can walk."

Chass let him go. "Stay close, follow me. If you need to tell me something, say my name, otherwise remain silent."

"Understood."

Chass strode off, and Desmond hastened to keep up with him, tripping and stumbling the whole way. How in the world did Chass see so clearly? He never seemed to so much as hit a twig wrong, whereas Desmond's body seemed to acquire new bruises and scrapes with every step.

They walked and walked. Trudged until Desmond could not hold back the tears, until it took everything he had not to whimper and scream. They walked until his vision blurred and only the determination not to be a weak, useless royal kept him going.

When they finally stopped, it took him a moment to realize he was no longer moving.

"Come," Chass said, and swept him up, carrying him like a child as he left the forest and trudged through the snow until they reached what seemed to be a stable.

Inside, out of the biting wind and snow, Desmond whimpered, huddled in his cloak and biting back sobs of pain.

Chass, however, did not so much as pause. He lit a torch by the doors, then went around the stable doing... well, frankly Desmond had no idea what, but he was moving and shuffling things, pausing now and again to soothe the horses. Any other time, Desmond would have admired how deftly he handled them, how quickly the horses came to like him, but right then he could barely stay on his feet.

All the while, Desmond could see the arrows still in his back.

He must have fallen asleep where he stood, because he jerked awake with a cry a moment later, staring blankly up at Chass, whose face was only half-visible in the flickering light of the torch. "Come on," Chass said gruffly, and took Desmond's hand before leading him to the back of the stable, where he'd turned an empty stall into an improvised shelter.

Chass motioned for him to lie down. "Any injuries that require attention now?"

"Your back," Desmond blurted out.

"Armor," Chass said dismissively. "I'll deal with them in the morning, when I have real light. For now, we need rest."

Desmond crawled onto the bed, made from hay and horse blankets. When he was settled, Chass put out the torch and bedded down beside him, drawing their cloaks up to cover them both completely. Well, as best he would when *there were arrows sticking out his back*. Suddenly Desmond had a much clearer idea of why Chass had spent so much time bedridden.

Blood, sweat, hay, and horse were all Desmond could smell. None of it entirely pleasant, but none of it bad enough to keep him awake. Wrapped in the warmth of Chass's body and their combined cloaks, even the pain was not enough to keep him from sinking into the merciful oblivion of sleep.

## Chapter Four

Chass woke all at once, the result of a lifetime of having to be ready for literally anything the moment he opened his eyes.

He registered pain first. Then location.

His eyes snapped to Desmond, who was still fast asleep on their makeshift bed. He had blood on his face from myriad cuts likely caused by branches and leaves, and his skin was entirely too pale. Hopefully it was nothing food and rest wouldn't fix, though first they'd have to get through a lot of hard traveling to get to somewhere even remotely secure.

Chass sat up slowly, listening carefully to their surroundings. Only the shuffling and snorting of the horses came to him, though. Crunching, too, so someone had already come and fed them, and not noticed their uninvited guests in the back stall.

Best not to press their luck, then, but Chass couldn't bear to wake Desmond quite yet, either.

Instead, he slowly rose, looking carefully around before rising to his full height. The arrows pulled painfully where the tips had only just barely punctured his armor—that was what he got for not having full plate, but there hadn't really been time for that.

He'd gambled the merchant ruse would work, and he'd lost. Only way was forward.

Reaching back, he found the arrow that had lodged in his left shoulder and ripped it out, grunting softly at the pain. The second arrow was harder to reach, unfortunately. His seeking fingertips were able to just barely touch it, but no more than that. At least it had only struck the meat of his back, instead of over just another finger's width to lodge in his spine. That would have required a watery burial that left him shuddering.

He unbuckled the side straps of his armor and then the top straps, letting the front fall off and away. He then reached behind and tore the back plate away, hissing as it succeeded in taking the arrow with it. Blood trickled from both wounds, hot and sticky, but minor. The bleeding should stop on its own, and once he found relatively clean water, he could tend them properly.



Setting his armor aside, Chass stripped off his ruined tunic and undertunic and set them with the armor, then moved carefully out of the stall to the open areas of the stable. There, he knelt on the floor and went through his morning prayers. When those were done, he recited the starting prayers for the card drawing, then pulled out his cards and shuffled them.

Closing his eyes, he drew three and set the rest of the deck aside. Laying the cards out, he then slowly opened his eyes.

The reading was...difficult, to say the least. There was nothing good coming in the future. It was a nearly perfect triad, one each from the Mortal Planes, Divine Fields, and Penance Realms, one each rising, falling, in the peak. But all male, which was an indication of brutality.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Chass shunted the words aside before dark thoughts, dark memories, got hold of him. They'd do him no good here. They did him no good anywhere, but right now especially he needed to focus on the present and the future, not his past.

Allorna Rising, depicting a handsome man with dark brown skin and dark hair and goatee, resting on a small bit of ledge as he took a break from cliff-climbing. Nearby was a goat, and a falcon perched on a rock just above him, as they all three bathed in the light of a rising sun. God of Land, broadly prayed to for strength in the face of long, hard journeys and surmounting great obstacles. Allorna Rising specifically advised praying for the fortitude needed to face a difficult journey.

Eshta in the Peak, depicting a man with white skin and ink-dark hair worn in a trailing braid, his hands stained with ink. He was walking between stacks in an enormous library, the shelves filled with books, scrolls, and more, various little spirits and creatures tucked in amongst them. Eshta wandering the Library of All Knowledge, his pale gray eyes glowing softly. God of Wisdom, Knowledge, and Wit. Prayed to when faced with difficult questions, puzzles, and other such intangible challenges. Eshta in the Peak specifically bid the faithful pray for patience while on the path to knowledge. Interesting, especially when taken together with Allorna Rising.

They were all new levels of interesting when combined with the final card: Tash Falling, an amorphous shadow beast ravaged with wounds, being scorched by the sunlight he stood in, with other beasts skulking behind him beneath the shade of several jagged boulders. Tash was the God

of Blood and Violence, the first penance beast to reach the surface and the most severely burned by the sun. It was Tash who first proposed what would become known as the Penance Gate. He was the patron god of the Penance Gate mercenaries.

In this context, Tash Falling was prayed to when one needed strength, grace, and fortitude in the face of unbearable pain and strife. Chass ran his fingers over the card, mind and stomach churning.

Altogether, getting Desmond to Harkenesten would be an arduous, brutal, and painful ordeal. It was entirely likely Chass would not survive. But he'd drawn the patron of his people, and blood and violence were what he knew best, for better and worse. So though he might not survive, he stood a good chance of succeeding, if he heeded the advice of the gods transmitted via the cards and focused on fulfilling his duty. On doing the only thing Allen had ever asked of him.

Chass recited the appropriate prayers, the ritual and all the cards promised if their advice was heeded lending him strength. After he was done, he put his cards away and rose to get on with the day. They'd already lingered too long. Rolling his shoulders to ease some of the soreness in them, he set to further exploring the stable.

Up in the loft, he found exactly what he'd been hoping: old clothes and other home goods that the family had opted to store instead of selling or repurposing. Most homes could not afford to simply keep old goods lying around, but this stable was well-maintained, and there were three horses, all well-groomed and fed, so it was clearly a family that did not struggle overmuch for money.

There wasn't much, but there was enough to work with. Carrying the clothes, blankets, and even a few pairs of boots, he returned to their commandeered stall and set it all in a pile. Then he fetched a bucket of water from the barrel just inside the door and hauled that back as well.

Finally, he could no longer delay in waking up Desmond, who stared groggily at him for several seconds before realization flooded his face. He jerked upright—then his face drained of what little color it had gained, and he toppled back down. "I am really tired of pain."

"Few things are as exhausting as pain, especially when you're unaccustomed to it," Chass replied. "I've got water here to wash any wounds, hopefully keep them from worsening."

Desmond slowly sat up again, clutching at his right side, where somebody had given him a sound enough kick he likely had fractured ribs. "How is your back? I hope the arrows didn't cause you too much harm. I'm so sorry you've been hurt, that you've lost so much, for a single person who doesn't matter all that much." He bowed his head, but not in time to hide the tears that ran down his cheeks. "I'm not worth all this pain and loss."

"You are worth that and more," Chass replied, "but now is not the time to discuss the relative worth of human lives. If you can get those clothes off, we'll tend your wounds, and then I've found some old clothes here that will hopefully suffice until we can get somewhere to supply properly."

"Help me to my feet?"

Chass ignored the hands Desmond held out, instead simply reaching down and scooping him up, then setting him gently on his feet. In the end, Desmond needed help getting out of his tunic and undershirt, but after that it was thankfully simple enough to clean the cuts and bruises, and use an old sheet to improvise fresh bandages.

"Your turn," Desmond said when he was dressed in clothes that were slightly too big for him, but at least were warm and clean. He still looked far too pale and strained for Chass's liking, but there was no help for it right then.

"I'm fine."

"You're bleeding. You got hit with two arrows that only just missed killing you. I know a thing or two about bandaging wounds. Please?"

Chass relented, but only because arguing would take longer. He sat on a stool borrowed from the front of the stable and tried not to notice how deft and gentle a touch Desmond had, the pleasant scent of him, despite all the sweat and grime from their exertions the night before. He had no business, no right, noticing such things.

"Your tattoo is beautiful. It's a pity the arrows damaged it."

"Thank you. I'm sure my tattooist can do something to tidy it up." Thankfully, Desmond did not ask further about the tattoo that spanned most of his back, an old prayer written in its original Pemfrost.

Closing his eyes, Chass prayed silently to Holy Shallana, his patron god. Queen of the Beasts who defended the Penance Gate to her angry siblings when they wanted the rebellious beasts responsible for it destroyed. Not the god one generally called upon when dealing with matters of the

heart, but Chass could not stomach calling upon Holy Toriana. Devout as he was, or at least tried to be, they had never responded when he'd called upon them. Over and over he'd begged for help, and in the end he'd taken the only path that had seemed to open for him. It was a path he deeply regretted now, but at the time it had seemed his only choice.

He had not been able to invoke Holy Toriana since. They never showed up in his prayer cards. It was abundantly clear the God of Love and Beauty wanted nothing to do with him.

*Has anyone ever told you how lovely you are? Toriana herself must have crafted you.*

Thankfully, Desmond finished quickly, and the abrupt loss of a gentle touch snapped Chass back to attention. He rose with a gruff thank you and set to work dressing. The clothes barely fit him, and the sleeves he had to cut in places so he had proper range of motion, but they would suffice for the present.

He used some of the remaining improvised bandages to wrap around his torc, hiding the gold and jewels from sight, and further hiding it by way of a torn and faded scarf.

Desmond managed to make one of the pairs of boots work for him, and Chass's boots were already suitable. Once they were dressed, Chass tidied up the stable and soothed the horses when the unusual activity agitated them.

"Are we borrowing them?" Desmond asked. "I guess I should just say stealing."

"Tempting, but no." Chass gave the last horse, a beautiful black mare, a last stroke and withdrew. "We don't have the resources to tend to horses; we don't have the resources right now to tend ourselves. They'd just prove a burden. Plus, these are farm horses; they're not meant for the hard traveling we'll be doing."

"So we're walking."

"We're walking."

Desmond followed him to the front of the stable. "I was just thinking yesterday about how much I missed my sledding team. We'd make wonderful time with them, even with two of us to haul."

"I've never traveled that way, though I've always heard it's interesting." Chass pressed a finger to his lips, and when Desmond fell

silent, cracked the stable door open and looked around outside. Still early morning, and the sun was dampened by clouds heavy with snow.

Chass would give anything to have a decent map right then; memory was only going to get them so far, and he was not well-acquainted with Yryma, not beyond the major ports. He certainly couldn't speak the language. No, his language skills were far too pathetic for that.

*"But Mother—"*

*"But nothing. This discussion ended ten minutes ago. You are wasting my time. I have things more important than rehashing an argument I've already ended multiple times. I know it's hard, but trust me to know what's best for you. Now go, I'm late for a meeting, and you're late for training. It's rude to keep someone like Master Keltii waiting."*

*"Yes, Mother."*

Chass's mouth tightened. He must be more exhausted than he realized, the way tiresome memories kept trying to rise up to haunt him. That part of his life was done. Over. Opening the door again and again only let in the cold and allowed the warmth of the new life he was building escape. Lanora had said that so many times, there were days Chass almost hated the words. But they helped when he was able to listen to them.

"Come on. The coast is as clear as its going to get. When I tell you, run for those trees there, to the south. See them?"

"Yes," Desmond replied. "I don't know that I can do much in the way of running, but I will do my best, may the Goddess guide me."

"Good. Wait for me several paces back into the trees. I'll follow you shortly."

"What are you going to do?"

"Steal some food, hopefully," Chass replied, eyes shifting from the tree line to the shed near the house that would be filled with smoked meat, dried fruit, other such goods meant to last the family through winter. As well-off as this farm seemed, likely there would be more than enough food that he could take some without hurting the family. "Now go!"

Desmond limped off, hurrying as quickly as he could across the field, falling snow hopefully obscuring him further from anyone who might catch sight of him—unlikely, of course, since homes like this seldom could afford the sort of thin, clear glass more common to cities, but it never paid to make assumptions and rest easy on them.

When Desmond reached the trees, Chass did one last sweep of the area and then headed to the shed, moving as quickly as he was able with his wounded back screaming and the rest of his body aching from their mad dash of the previous night.

Thankfully, Holy Kinar continued to bestow her favor upon him, for his luck held as he slipped into the shed.

The smell of smoked meat, herbs, and more washed over him, making his stomach growl. Chass swiftly set to work, filling the saddlebags and satchel he'd found in the stables with all the food they could comfortably carry. There were also a couple of skins he could fill with water once they found a suitable stream, and even some old camping supplies, probably used by the owners when hunting.

Praying to Holy Kinar for his luck to hold just a little longer, he slung the satchel across his chest, the saddlebags over one shoulder, and headed off into the snow, which was already falling much heavier.

Trudging across the field, Chass silently recited further prayers. To Holy Jenn, God of the Hearth, he sent prayers of gratitude for the food he'd found. To Holy Allorna, who presided over the seasons as the God of Land, and his daughter Holy Callorni, who on behalf of him controlled the winter season. May the weather continue to be their friend, rather than their enemy, and keep them safe while they made their way to Harken.

Holy Prima must be favoring him, at least for now, because he made it to the trees without trouble. It took only a moment to spy Desmond, tucked away in the roots of an enormous tree. He was pale and bruised, clearly out of his depth, but not once had he complained. Even now, he only stood with a soft smile that Chass did not remotely deserve but cherished all the same. "You made it."

"By the will of Holy Prima, and probably all this snow," Chass replied. "Come. My memory of Yryma is poor, but I believe if we get through this forest, heading due south, south-east, we will come to some villages in a few days."

Desmond's face lit up, as though Chass had just told him they'd be somewhere warm and comfortable that night, rather than relaying that he barely knew where they were going and would be sleeping outside for the foreseeable future. "We are about two days, four with this weather likely, from Zyri village, if we came to shore where I think we did. About a week or two of travel, and we'll reach Shirtani, a town of modest size. They deal

heavily in smuggling, so should give us little trouble if we want to resupply there, even rest and plan properly."

"You are coping rather well with being a fallen king on the run," Chass replied as they started walking.

"My father threw me first in Highmont Monastery, and later in Gradow, a prison reserved for the most dangerous and irredeemable prisoners, all for the crime of existing," Desmond replied, smiling crookedly. "I was kept separate from the others, in a private cell with more comfort than prisoners generally get, but even then, it was not pleasant. On bad nights, I can still smell the place. Hear the screaming, the fighting. I'm sure you can imagine."

"I am sorry," Chass replied. "I can imagine all too well. That's no place for anyone other than the worst criminals, the sort who should never be allowed out amongst people."

"I'm fortunate they had the sense and... courtesy, I suppose...to keep me separate. It's probably all that kept me alive. Before all that, though, I spent years traveling by sled from village to village, helping them survive the winter. That is an overly long way of saying that while I may not be accustomed to running for my life, I am used to snow and hard travel. Memorizing maps of everything north of Cartha is a base requirement of children in school. I was a good student and memorized a good deal more than that. Teachers loved me. Other students, not so much."

Chass smiled faintly, unable to help himself. Desmond's smile widened in reply, so perhaps his face didn't look as awful as usual. "Come, we should get moving before the cold gets the better of us."

"Would you like me to take something? You shouldn't have to carry all the weight."

Something about the words, the way he said them, struck Chass hard in the chest. Desmond's eyes were as gray as the world around them, but soft and warm, rather than sharp and cold.

"My honor to serve," he replied, but let Desmond take the satchel. He used the buckles on the saddlebags to secure them to his chest as best he could before taking point as they trudged off through the snow.

"A pity we couldn't find any spare snowshoes," Desmond said with a sigh, then subsided into silence as exertion took all their focus and strength.

Chass kept a slow pace, partly from the weather, partly from caution. His compass, a gift from Aria after his last one had been destroyed by arrows and careless cadets who'd swiftly been made to regret that carelessness, kept them on course, not that 'go south, southeast' was much of a course.

When they crested a hill, Chass stared down at the field below. It was more of a bowl, a miniature valley framed by a circle of lazy hills and piled with enormous boulders. From the shape of them, they'd probably been hauled here once, decades if not centuries ago, for some project that had likely been lost to time or long-since repurposed.

Not trusting his voice would work after so many hours of disuse, Chass motioned to the rocks. The snow-soaked figure that was Desmond gave a stiff, exaggerated nod, and they slowly, carefully made their way down the slippery hill to the boulders.

From there, it took only moments to find a suitable hollow formed by a cluster of them that was protected from snow and wind, and provided adequate shelter for a fire. Stripping off the scarf he'd wrapped around his face, rubbing at it to get blood flowing again, Chass said roughly, "Sit, rest. I'll collect firewood and then get some tea and food going."

Desmond looked like he wanted to argue, but when Chass pushed him to sit, he more fell to the ground than sat. Frowning, Chass set his worries aside until the essentials had been addressed and went off to find wood.

It took him longer than he liked, between the weather and his own exhaustion, but finally he trudged back to their makeshift camp with plenty of wood in tow. He pulled out a firestarter, one of the objects he always kept on his person, alongside the compass and a few other things, and quickly got a fire going.

Once that was taken care of, he used one of the battered pots they'd brought along to start melting snow, until he had enough to make them plenty of tea.

Throughout, Desmond hadn't so much as stirred, fast asleep where he'd settled against a rock, his cloak wrapped tightly around him. His face looked bruised, there was so much exhaustion and strain filling it, even in sleep.

If only Chass hadn't gambled wrong. Messed up. *Again.*



He took a deep breath and let it out in a hiss between his teeth. Self-recrimination wouldn't help. What was done was done. He could only move forward. It was a mantra he'd once been made to repeat five hundred times while Lanora sat and listened, always there with him, always helping, never judging or shaming. He had been a sorely needed pillar when Chass had felt there was nobody in the world who would miss him if he died, except maybe Aria, and even she would probably be better off without him.

If Lanora were there now, his advice would be to focus on what Chass could do, not what was done or beyond his control.

Chass finished preparing the tea, poured it into one of the bowls he'd filched from the poor farmer's shed, and stepped around the fire to crouch beside Desmond.

Gently grasping his shoulder, Chass gave it a firm shake. Desmond's eyes pinched tight, soft groans filling the air as the need to stay asleep warred with the command to wake up. Finally those winter gray eyes opened, focused on him. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes, and I'll let you again once you've warmed up and had some food."

"We need to keep moving, don't we?"

Chass shook his head. "We'll just dangerously exhaust ourselves. We'll make better time in the end if we move at a more controlled pace."

Desmond's mouth pinched, but he took the tea and sipped at it. "This tastes marvelous."

"The best food is that which you've starved for," Chass replied. "I'll get started on actual food now, but drink all you like, tea is easy and there's plenty of it." He poured another bowl for himself and sipped it as he melted more snow and got porridge and smoked mutton cooking. It would take a while to cook, since the stores had been mostly dried grains, but they wouldn't be going anywhere until morning, and he was cooking enough to prepare future meals, if he could improvise a mold, anyway. One thing at a time.

"You seem to know your way around a campfire," Desmond said around a yawn.

"I've been doing it since I was young and began my martial training, and given how extensively Penance Gate travels..." Chass shrugged. Given his status, it would have been easy enough to demand that every luxury be carted around with him, but he detested the sorts of commanding officers

who enjoyed every comfort while their soldiers were given only the bare minimum, and sometimes not even that.

"My favorite camp food was sweet potatoes. We'd let them cook in the coals and eat them just as they were. The children especially loved them, though not as much as they loved the sled dogs." Desmond smiled faintly, until it was overtaken by another yawn. "What about you?"

"Me?" Chass asked.

Desmond gave a sleepy laugh. "Yes, you. Did you have a favorite camp food?"

"Oh," Chass replied, feeling silly. "Roasted peanuts. You cook them in sugar until it melts, then add oil and whatever spices you like, and keep cooking until the sugar hardens. I like them really spicy."

"That sounds delicious," Desmond said between yawns.

Chass refilled Desmond's tea and his own, biting back an offer to make Desmond roasted peanuts sometime. When would they ever have the chance? They weren't likely to find peanuts here, or have time for such nonsense, and once they reached Harken, Desmond would likely never speak to him again outside of absolute necessities.

Once he'd had a couple cups of tea and felt vastly more invigorated, Chass found a clear area under a nearby tree where so he could kneel and bow properly. Simply settling into the praying position eased some of his tension, and more of it bled away as he recited all the prayers he'd missed while they were traveling, and then did his afternoon prayers a bit early in case something kept him from them later.

They were soothing in their familiarity and helped his mind to calm and focus. On staying strong. On not wasting energy on those things he could not control. On accomplishing one task at a time, instead of being overwhelmed by the whole and choking.

When it felt like he'd had nothing left in life, he'd still had his faith. When it felt like even that had failed him, it was a priest who'd found him bleeding out and saved him. Helped him. Never given up on him. Even when he'd lost faith, faith had not lost him.

He wouldn't have minded if the gods had spared him Bateker entirely, but questions like that were entirely too complicated for him.

When he was done, he went scrounging again, this time for small branches, including a few that were still pliant or could easily be made so. Returning to camp, he set that pile aside and headed out yet again, this time

bringing back branches from evergreens, still lush and resplendent, unaffected by the biting cold.

Eventually he had enough for two long piles. Over one, he draped the spare cloak he'd tucked into a saddlebag. Next he gently hefted Desmond, already fast asleep once more, and carefully settled him on the bed. None of his wounds seemed to have bled through his clothes, so Chass left well enough alone. He arranged Desmond's cloak snugly around him, then returned to his place by the fire and checked on the porridge.

As it still needed some time, he set to work on his next project, drinking tea while he worked. By the time the porridge was done, he had a rough mold ready. He set enough porridge aside for himself and Desmond to eat, then poured the rest into the mold. Normally, it would be a metal mold that could make twenty or more cakes at a time. This one was much smaller, uneven and slightly crooked, and made only ten. But it worked, which was all that mattered. He'd probably make a second batch, maybe add tea leaves to it.

Back home, something similar was done with oats and dates, and it also reminded him of the rice cakes from Soldonir that were becoming increasingly popular in Gaulden.

He swiftly turned away from thoughts of home. Picking up his porridge, he ate it in slow bites interspersed with sips of rapidly-cooling tea. He should wake Desmond up, but he also hated to deprive him of sorely needed rest. At least he'd had some tea.

Once he'd finished his meal and cleaned the dishes, and got a second batch of porridge going, Chass was left with nothing to do. Too cold to do things like tend his weapons, though he would if it came to that.

His eyes landed helplessly on Desmond, so still and wan that only the bare rise and fall of his chest gave away he was in fact still alive. Back on the ship, he'd occasionally talked in his sleep, sometimes names or nonsensical statements, but most often prayers.

Where Chass had his cards for guidance and comfort, Bentans usually carried prayer beads, an intricate string of beads of various shapes and sizes—round, square, diamond, small, large—that guided the faithful through their prayers, be they the daily prayers or for a specific purpose, like pleading for someone's health or demonstrating penitence. Affixed to the beads was usually a talisman of some sort, most often the eight-pointed

Star of the Goddess or the simplified version often called the Holy Wheel, but many also had more personal talismans.

Chass ran the back of his thumb across his bottom lip, back and forth, as he weighed various ideas. Settling on one, he pulled out his knife and sewing kit and set to work.

A couple of hours later, when the dark was falling fast and his eyes were nearly too heavy to keep open, he carefully pressed the results of his labors into Desmond's hands. Resettling the blankets, he added more wood to the fire and then put Desmond's porridge where it would stay warm and he'd easily see it.

Everything attended to, Chass settled onto his own bedding, pulled his cloak snugly around him, his sword where he could easily grab it, and finally let sleep have him.

## Chapter Five

Desmond stared blearily around at his surroundings, which were painfully bright from the early morning sun reflecting off snow. Where in the world was he? Why was he still asleep when the sun was nearly up? The dogs should have woken him long before—

Reality came crashing down, and for a moment all Desmond could feel was anguish, fear, and a bone deep exhaustion that no amount of sleep would ever help. He lifted a hand to scrub at his face—and stopped when he realized he was holding something.

Desmond stared, heart lurching almost painfully in his chest. Prayer beads. Chass had made him prayer beads, from roughly carved wooden beads, strung on braided threads that must have been pulled from a cloak or tunic or something, and even a Goddess Star made from wood and strips of fabric. It was the most beautiful thing Desmond had ever seen.

Why had he only ever heard that Chass was a cold, heartless, remorseless bastard?

Wiping away tears, Desmond gripped the beads in his left hand and began his standard morning prayers, going through with familiar, soothing ease. The beads were surprisingly smooth, made with a level of care that was especially precious, given how exhausted and in pain Chass must have been as he worked. They weren't as heavy as typical prayer beads, but the woody scent of them reminded him of Highmont, of traveling from village to village through the snow.

His father had sent him to a monastery for two reasons: because killing him or imprisoning him would have caused more trouble than it was worth at the time. Later, as defeat and failure grew inevitable, he'd been beyond caring and moved Desmond to an actual prison on charges nobody had taken seriously.

The second reason, never voiced but stated clearly all the same, was the hope that Desmond would grow so discontent that he'd run away, vanish altogether, and no longer be his father's problem. That he'd do all the work of removing himself *for* his father.

He'd remained at Highmont out of sheer stubbornness at first, but had gradually settled into the life. It helped he'd always been religious,

more so than was considered socially acceptable in an age where cynicism and being too learned for gods was the fashion. Highmont Monastery was not the life he'd have chosen for himself, but it wasn't a bad life in the end, and it had allowed him to deepen and develop his faith without being judged and mocked by those around him.

*I trust the tapestry Your Holy Grace weaves for me. I walk the path Your Holy Grace makes for me. I embrace the life Your Holy Grace has forged for me.* Even when it was hard, even when it felt impossible, all was as She willed, as She saw, and the faith that all that happened, good, bad, and otherwise, was to a greater purpose only Her Most Holy Grace could see. It was the most difficult part of his devotion, but that was why it was called *faith* after all.

When he'd circled through the entire strand, he began again, but this time on prayers for safe, speedy travel, gratitude that they'd already come so far. They had a long way to go to reach Harken, and even once they were in Harken, they would still have to reach Harkenesten itself. So he prayed, trusting all his worries and fears to the Goddess, Mother of All, the only parent who'd ever been there for him, was always there for him. Every prayer was a warm touch to his shoulders, a kiss to his brow, safe arms wrapped around him. His life was entirely beyond his control right now, even more so than usual, and all he could do was have faith. That gave him strength where he otherwise would not have any.

The third time around he recited prayers of mourning. For all the people who had died because they'd truly been his friend or ally. For all the soldiers who'd died for the machinations of others after surviving a brutal war and working so hard for peace. For Penance Gate, slaughtered, lost at sea, a cruel fate for those who believed so strongly in burning their dead.

By the time he was finished, he felt better than he had for days. He pressed the beads to his lips, enjoying their scent one last time, and then carefully tucked them away in a pocket of his cloak. Prayers completed, Desmond took a proper look at the campsite and marveled at all Chass had done while he had slept. Had done nothing but sleep.

He was awake now, though, and knew all about camping in the snow.

Chass had left porridge for him, and a bit of water was all it took to make it edible again, if not exactly the most delicious thing he'd ever had.

Then he got tea brewing and added more wood to the fire. Once he'd had a cup of tea, he ventured away from the rocks and into the woods.

The first thing he did was set a couple of snares, though it took him some time to find the right items to make them. Once those were done, he ventured further to forage for herbs and greens. Thankfully, that didn't take as long as he had feared. He found some big, leafy kale that also made good improvised carrying devices, some smaller winterbor kale, as well as chives, mint, rosemary, and winter savory. You could always count on there being plenty to forage in the empty spaces between homesteads, where leftovers and dregs always turned into wild crops.

Once he had a sizeable bundle, he gathered the wood he would need to make them snowshoes.

On his way back, he stumbled across Chass, who was taking a hare from one of Desmond's snares. "I was starting to wonder where you'd gone when I came across our breakfast here."

Desmond winced. "Sorry, I should have left you word somehow. I thought you'd be asleep for a while yet."

"I seldom sleep long on missions," Chass said. "Come on, I don't want to leave the fire unattended for too long."

"Of course." They walked back to the camp in silence, and Desmond took a seat near the fire and began to strip and prepare the herbs for travel. It'd be better if he had the time to dry them properly, but it was cold enough they'd keep for a few days if packed properly. As he had years of practice in doing precisely that, it was done by the time Chass had the hare butchered and cooking.

Finished with the herbs, Desmond set to work on cutting, heating, and bending the pliant wood he'd gathered to make two sets of snowshoes. Like the herbs, it was something he'd done so many times at Highmont that his hands needed little attention from the mind to do the work.

On the opposite side of the fire, Chass had turned his attention to preserving the hare's pelt. Given how much traveling they had to do, they'd likely come in handy for trading. At the very least, there'd be enough to do something with by the time they reached their destination.

They worked in a surprisingly comfortable silence, and for a brief moment, Desmond was sad that they were traveling under duress and with so much death in their wake, rather than just as two friends enjoying a journey together.

"Thank you for the prayer beads," Desmond said into the easy silence. "You must have been exhausted, but you took time to make them for me, and that means a great deal. Having them helps me in a way you would appreciate."

"I'm glad," Chass said gruffly.

Desmond would have loved to keep going, but if he recalled correctly, Harken religion had strong admonitions about receiving gratitude for gifts, charity, and the like. Traditionally, gifts of any sort should be given anonymously. That practice had changed as Harken became an increasingly powerful international presence, but he suspected Chass, devout as he was, would adhere to the practice and not want too much fuss made.

So he carried on, finishing up the snowshoes and setting them aside. By the time he was done, their food was ready, and they settled into a rather good meal of roasted hare, porridge, and tea.

"I hope we aren't lingering because of me," Desmond said. "I can travel harder if that's what is required."

Chass shook his head. "No. We're safe enough for now, I think, and cold kills the unwise quickly. Better to be full and rested and push on carefully, especially since we must travel on foot for the foreseeable future. Though we should be leaving soon to make the most of available daylight."

Desmond nodded and ate his food a bit faster, and together they broke down the camp and obscured that it had ever been there. An hour or so later, they were on their way, moving much more easily thanks to the snowshoes.

The skies remained clear, but to judge by the clouds off in the distance, that was not going to remain true. They traveled in silence that was broken only to give a direction, request a break, and on one occasion, to take down a nice, fat hare for their dinner. Once Chass had it dressed and ready for travel, they continued on. They paused for a quick lunch, then continued pushing on until the light started to fade, at which point they found a place to camp and set to work setting up for the night.

It reminded Desmond a great deal of all the time he'd spent traveling with the monks, though they'd had the luxury of time and plenty of food—and brandy—to enjoy while they sat around the fire praying, singing, and talking.

"We'll get you to safety as quickly as possible," Chass said gruffly.



"What?" Desmond stared blankly, unable to sort out the reasoning behind that unprompted statement.

Chass frowned. "You looked so sad. My plans have gone horribly awry, and this is far from an ideal trip, but I will see you safely to Harken, and home again if necessary."

Desmond was starting to have a sneaking suspicion that Chass made a habit of taking on more weight than he could or should be expected to carry. "I was thinking of how much this trip, when you forget all the depressing stuff, reminded me of the traveling I did for Highmont. It was always my favorite part of the year. Going from village to village, bringing people food and supplies, the children always so excited to see the dogs... sitting around the fire with my friends, drinking and talking. It was not a life of luxury the way most would define it, but it had all the luxuries I ever needed."

Chass's mouth curved faintly, a bare hint of just how beautiful a smile he probably had when it was allowed to shine in full. "That is more wisdom than most will learn in a lifetime." He finished rigging the spit he'd improvised for the meat and got the neatly butchered chunks speared.

"What sort of weather makes life in Gaulden occasionally difficult?" Desmond asked.

"Hurricanes. The wind takes anything not nailed down or sufficiently heavy, and the water can rise up so high that houses not built suitably high off the ground, or not otherwise guarded, will flood within minutes. Carts float away, sometimes even entire buildings if they're small enough, like sheds. All families, even the poorest, have some manner of emergency boat. Those that don't go quickly to the temples, which are always prepared for hurricanes."

"That sounds terrifying."

"No better or worse than snow coming down so quickly and in such quantities that houses are buried in it. Water is deadly no matter what form it takes."

Desmond smiled wryly. "Yes, that is very true. The lake near Highmont took a few travelers every year when they did not heed our cautions. More come in the winter for ice fishing or to swim the Challenge, and a few of them always die too."

"The Challenge?"

"My apologies, abbreviating it was silly. The Nordecht Challenge, named for a large fish that's best caught in winter months, common in the mountain lakes. The challenge entails swimming in the freezing waters for various set lengths of time. The shortest time is thirty seconds, the longest is two minutes."

Chass stared at him with that same hilarious expression of horrified offense from the ship. "That is the most insane thing I have ever heard."

"You don't have any activities back home that would seem strange or mad to outsiders?"

"No."

Desmond laughed. "I don't believe you."

"The closest activity I can think of is the pearl diving of the Islanders, but it's nothing as insane as *swimming in freezing water for fun*."

"Also pride," Desmond said with mock primness. "It's a great source of pride to have the charms granted for meeting the challenges." He smirked. "I have won all three ten years in a row." His smile cracked, faded. "Well, had them, anyway."

"I am sorry. Holy Prima pushes hard right now, but hopefully her touch will soon gentle."

"All as the Goddess Wills," Desmond replied. "I will be happy when Her Will is a bit more positive." Desmond added some of his carefully gathered herbs to the porridge and gave it a stir to ensure there'd be no clumps. Then he sat back and sipped at his tea while Chass finished up with the meat. "I would give anything for a good plate of sausages with pickled cabbage and mustard, or a hearty beef stew with a good, crusty bread."

"Thinking like that won't help anything," Chass said with a small huff. "I admit, though, I would not mind a good fish curry, the way we make it in Gaulden, spicy enough to numb your lips. Or a good spiced tea; nowhere else in the world makes it quite the same as Harkenesten."

"That's because nobody else uses even half the spices Harken does, especially not in the unique combinations they favor. There are reasons the rest of the world calls it 'Harken tea.' I will always prefer coffee."

"Well, you wouldn't be Benta if you didn't."

Desmond laughed. "Benta has beer and coffee; Harken has wine and tea. Soldonir their rice wine and green tea." He tapped his chin with his thumb. "Hmm... Treya Mencee has... honestly I don't know. Sometimes,

dealing with them, I have the unkind thought they simply drink the blood of children."

That got a single sharp laugh from Chass. "They are best known for their liquors, strong and fruity. I don't doubt the blood, though." He set to serving the food, and there were certainly worse meals to be had, especially now they had herbs to help with flavor. "I think tomorrow we're..." He trailed off at the familiar sound of sled bells, faint but unmistakable, followed by the barking of several dogs before he heard the crack of a whip in the air that signaled the dogs to resume running. "Those are sled dogs."

"Those are pursuers," Chass said, throwing his food aside and sweeping snow into the fire before kicking it to scatter the pieces, stamping hard to ensure it was dead. "Into the trees, now."

Desmond fled as quickly as his battered body permitted, Chass on his heels. "This way," Chass said, leading him to an enormous tree with exposed roots nearly as big as Desmond. Grandmother trees, they were called in Benta, the kind that had been around so long, they were probably the saplings that started the forest, old and wise and strong. "Climb up, as high as you can, and stay there until I say otherwise. If something happens to me—"

"Don't," Desmond said tightly. "Just don't."

Chass's mouth flattened, but he remained silent, thank the Goddess.

Even though he wanted to do no such thing, Desmond climbed, his body screaming, wounds tearing open anew, until he could go no further. He tucked himself as out of sight as he could manage and pulled out his prayer beads. Squashing the urge to let the fear out on a scream, he channeled all of it into his prayers, closing his eyes and focusing on the chanting. For luck. For safety. That they might live another day. That Chass would come to no harm. Whatever he could think of, around and around the string of crude wooden beads, an eye at the center of the storm his life had become. His breathing calmed with each prayer, his mind and hands steadying, though his heart continued to race.

His concentration was broken by the sound of voices speaking in the rough tones of eastern rural Bentans, with a couple who sounded more north-western. Mercenaries, likely—soldiers were usually much more uniform in sound, most of them picking up the Bentamasura accent during training.

Still holding tightly to his beads, Desmond peeked through the branches as best he could, down to the ground where soldiers were rapidly approaching and Chass waited for them. Four were prowling toward their hiding place, two with crossbows, one with a longbow, and the last with only a sword.

Damn it, why couldn't he help? Why was he so useless when he was most needed? Chass shouldn't be down there fighting alone for a man he barely knew, weeks from home, the odds they'd actually reach that home so bad even the most reckless gambler wouldn't take them.

As the forest opened up a bit close to the grandmother tree, the group of four—a standard scouting team—fanned out, skimming for signs, weapons ready.

Chass moved, quick as a diving bird, and suddenly one of the crossbow-bearers screamed as a dagger sank into his hand. That throw didn't seem possible, but the blood and screams said otherwise.

Before the group could recover from the surprise of the abrupt attack, Chass was on them, sword thrusting through armor to gut the nearest archer, whom he then kicked backward into the swordsman. The remaining crossbowman fired a shot, but it went wide as Chass rushed him.

By the time the injured crossbowman managed to draw his sword, it was too late. The four men lay scattered in a lurid mess all around him, a ragged circle of blood and awkward limbs. Chass cleaned and sheathed his sword, then stooped and relieved the archer of his longbow and arrows. "Stay there." Then he was gone, rushing back the way they'd come.

Desmond resumed his prayers, all the while waiting, watching, dreading that someone other than Chass would be coming back for him.

A few minutes, though they felt like hours, passed and then he heard unfamiliar footsteps. How had they gotten by Chass? Even Chass could only contend with so many enemies at a time, though.

Desmond swallowed, barely daring to breathe as he held as still as he possibly could while tucked into the curving hollow of a giant tree branch.

"He's got to be around here somewhere. How many places could there be to hide?"

"Are you stupid?" the second of the two asked. "It's a forest: there are thousands. He could be right on top..." The man stopped and looked up as the idea suddenly struck him, eyes sweeping the trees. "Got you!"

The first man pulled down the longbow on his back. "Want me to shoot him down?"

"No. Orders were to bring him back alive."

"I can shoot without killing," the first man snapped.

"Can you guarantee the wound won't get infected or worsen some injury we don't know about that *will* kill him? Exactly. So shut the fuck up. Come on."

Desmond shoved his beads inside his tunic and scrambled even higher up the tree, heart in his stomach the whole time, fear burning the back of his throat.

Eventually, he could physically go no further, between the thinning of the limbs and his own pain. He could feel blood, hot and sticky, soaking into his clothes. What was he going to do?

His feeble hope that their armor and weapons would impede that was quickly dashed as they climbed the tree with alarming ease. They did wind up having to throw their weapons down, but it delayed them barely a minute before they were climbing again.

The first one, the bowman, reached him first. "Come along now, Your Majesty." He got a grip on Desmond's left ankle and tugged hard. "Don't want to fall, do you?"

Desmond held on to his branch for dear life and with every last scrap of strength he had remaining, kicked out hard with his right leg, catching the man full in the face—and sending him tumbling backward, down and down, until he struck a branch with a sickening crunch and fell the rest of the way like an old rag doll.

His body, lying contorted on the ground, neck at completely the wrong angle, was the last that Desmond could take. Wholly without his control, his stomach tossed up the dinner they'd just been eating—and to his horror, the mess landed all over the second soldier, which caused him to recoil, lose his grip and balance, and go tumbling down after his companion. He groaned as he hit the bottom.

Desmond didn't wait to see what was going to happen next, just climbed down the tree. It was slow going, his body screaming in agony with every movement, and he had to stop twice to recover his breath, but eventually he did finally reach the ground—and stumbled, nearly toppling right onto the bodies.

Which definitely seemed to number two, from the look of them. The second one hadn't made it after all.

Pressing his palm to the trunk of the tree, Desmond whispered, "Thank you, Grandmother." It was an old tradition, referring to the oldest of trees as 'grandmother' but one still common in Highmont.

He grabbed up a handful of snow and used it to clean his mouth, spitting the mess out and doing it a second time, so that his mouth no longer tasted of vomit.

Hands shaking, he dropped to his knees and rifled through the men's clothes, retaining anything that looked useful: a hunting knife so he'd have one of his own, a firestarter kit, a tin filled with dried spices, a pouch of jerky, another of nuts and dried fruit, a flask of brandy, and a few other odds and ends. These men had clearly expected to be traveling hard for weeks and knew that they wouldn't always be near camp.

He took the knife from the second man as well, sliding it into his boot before he affixed the first one to his belt.

The sound of footsteps had him snatching up the bow and arrows and whipping around, knocking one—and stopping short, letting everything fall to the ground.

"You shouldn't just abandon your weapon like that," Chass said, wiping blood from his face with one sleeve. "Why are you on the ground?"

Sinking to his knees, which were suddenly too weak to hold his weight, Desmond said, "They came after me. I kicked one hard enough he fell, broke his neck or something on the way down. The other... he seemed alive after he fell, when I threw up on him." Desmond gave a ragged laugh. "By the time I reached the ground, he was dead too." He'd killed two men. He hadn't meant to, but that didn't soften the blows. These men were gone, off into the waiting arms of Her Most Holy Grace. They would never see their loved ones again. He covered his face with his hands and begged the Goddess's forgiveness. "I've never killed anyone. Just—just a couple of dogs, when they were either too sick or too wounded, and forcing them to live would have been agony. I—" He broke off, swallowing, eyes stinging. He was a king, damn it. Shouldn't he be taking this better?

Chass grabbed him by the upper arm and hauled him to his feet. "Come on. We'll discuss it later, but right now we have to get out of here."

Desmond swallowed, gave a jerky nod, and followed him out of the woods, pausing only to grab up the bow and arrow he'd dropped. He was no

soldier, but he could hunt the occasional fat partridge or slow hare.

He almost threw up again as he took in the campsite. It was nearly more red than white. Bodies were strewn everywhere, some of them stabbed, others ripped open, some with arrows through their heads, even one through an eye.

Though Desmond had seen this and worse in the aftermath of battlefields, the sight never stopped making him sick—to the stomach and at heart. *May you find rest, and in rest gain peace and forgiveness.*

Barking jerked his attention away from the man with the arrow in his eye, and he bolted across the field to the team of sled dogs waiting impatiently for orders to get moving again. "How are there so many soldiers but only one mushing team?"

"Mushing? Is that the word?" Chass shook his head. "There were four in total, and a few horses as well. I sent them back the way they'd come, but kept this one, since you've mentioned sledding more than a few times now, and they seemed more advisable for the terrain and weather."

"They are," Desmond said softly, and whistled three sharp notes. The dogs immediately settled. "Military trained, that's good. Some people use their own signals, which means controlling them would have been impossible." The dogs moved restlessly in place, a few barking in excitement. If they cared their previous masters were now dead, they gave no sign, which only confirmed these were general military use, not unique to a particular owner. Desmond had never understood that attitude. Mushing dogs always did better when treated as family rather than as tools. When they knew who they belonged with, instead of just being shuffled around. But then, Desmond had always had a soft spot for dogs. "They should be able to take us all the way to the wall, just short of entering Cartha proper."

"Marvelous. Let me finish stripping these men of anything useful, and we can get moving." Chass strode off, briskly going from corpse to corpse, stuffing items into knapsacks.

Desmond checked over each dog, examining paws and testing limbs, looking in their mouths, along with various other little things that told him if the dogs had been properly cared for up to that point, and if they were fit to keep going.

After he was satisfied with the dogs, he turned his attention to the sled. Given his and Chass's combined weight, they wouldn't be able to carry too much more, though still enough to significantly improve their travels.

He tossed weapons, alcohol—the soldiers shouldn't have had that anyway—and other things they wouldn't miss. When he had done that, he repacked what remained and everything that Chass brought him. In the end, they had food—for humans and dogs—bedding, a few tools, and their two longbows.

"This will make life much easier for us," Desmond replied. "All right. You sit there."

Chass stared at him, then at the spot on the sled, looking very much like he'd just drunk something incredibly bitter.

"I assure you it's safe—as safe as any mode of travel is, anyway. If I can avoid killing rambunctious children, I can probably keep you alive. If there's ever opportunity, I'm happy to teach you how to mush."

"We'll see," Chass replied, tone level, but nevertheless full of 'not if my life depended on it.' Which, amusingly, it very well could.

Desmond let it go, as Chass didn't seem the type to enjoy being teased overmuch about what he probably perceived as a weakness, instead of as a perfectly reasonable wariness for a new experience that did often prove dangerous, even fatal, in the wrong hands. "You've taken care of me this far, Captain. I promise that in this, I can take care of you."

He faltered, memories rising unbidden of the men falling out of the tree, the horrible crunching sounds of bone breaking. For a moment there, he'd managed to forget he was now a murderer.

Heavy hands landed on his shoulders and squeezed gently. Desmond looked up, movements jerky, and stared into Chass's blue eyes. They really were the very color of a summer sky, and somehow just as deep and fathomless, holding things that Desmond would never comprehend, not if he was given a hundred years to try. "Do not take on guilt that is not yours to bear. Every single living creature on this planet has the right to defend their own life. Those men were out to hurt you, and they accepted the risk that came with their choices and actions. I'm sorry you were forced to do such a thing, but don't burden yourself with the results of *their* choices. I know your Goddess has admonitions that say essentially the same thing."

"She does," Desmond said, some of the knots in his chest and stomach easing. "Thank you."

Chass smiled faintly and let his hands fall away. Stupidly, Desmond missed the touch. He shoved the feeling away. "Shall we get going then?" Chass moved to the sled and sat where Desmond instructed.



The dogs were all but vibrating in place as Desmond took up the driver position. For the first time since he'd been dragged away from the only life he'd ever known and ordered to be king, Desmond felt like he was somewhere he belonged. Pitching his voice so it would carry clearly over the wind blowing up the snow falling all around them, he called out, "Hike!"

With a couple of elated barks, the dogs took off, running over the snow with an ease no human would ever possess. Desmond made certain they didn't go too fast, setting up a pace they could maintain for hours.

They raced off into the snow, southbound deeper into the continent, and far away from the latest bloody battle.

## Chapter Six

Chass wanted to be home. Not Harkenesten, though that would suffice, but home in Gaulden. To stand on his private balcony overlooking the sea, catching hints of the foods and spices being sold in the local market. Rice cakes stuffed with smoked fish. Spicy fish curry. Fragrant saffron rice, with steamed scallops and fish and vegetables.

Music playing softly in the temple, rolling through the open halls and archways of the palace, soothing and encouraging while he worked. The trickle of the fountains that kept the palace cool during the hottest days. Spiced tea with plenty of milk. In Harkenesten, spiced tea was toned down, made more palatable to the bevy of foreigners that were as much a part of the city as the natives in some ways. It wasn't as strong, and often was made sweeter.

Back in Gaulden though, nothing was held back, and the palace in particular used a prized recipe that favored going heavy on the spices and made certain to include clove and pepper.

Thinking of all the things he couldn't have wasn't exactly making his current situation more bearable, but his only other options were more praying, thinking about the weather, thinking about the enemies trying to catch up to them, and thinking about his dead soldiers.

So thoughts of Gaulden spiced tea it was.

As the sled slowed down, however, he shifted his thoughts to setting up a temporary camp, so they'd be reasonably comfortable while the dogs ate and rested. Tumbling out of the sled with more relief than he hoped showed, far too cold and stiff to do anything with coordination, let alone grace, Chass stretched and rolled his limbs until they were reasonably obedient.

Then he went off to secure firewood, a chore that could take ten minutes or all damn day, depending on the mood of the Pantheon.

Thankfully, Holy Jenn took pity on him that afternoon, as he had the wood gathered in no time. The wind was low, the snow falling lazily, which meant it was also easy to start the fire. Chass sighed softly as the heat washed over him. What he wouldn't give for a cup of tea, a hot bath, and his own bed.

Dark thoughts roiled up, of all the people he'd lost who would never have those things, but Chass shoved them away. The grieving would have to come later, no matter how much the anguish hurt.

Desmond sat next to him and stripped off his gloves to pull out and hand over some of the dried meat, nuts, and fruit that had been in the supplies taken from the dead soldiers. "Not far to go now. If the weather cooperates, we'll make the village by tonight. Might even get to sleep in a warm bed, or at least a warm barn."

"I'll take anything that's not lying in the damned snow," Chass replied, and ate the food as quickly as he could, just to get the bland flavors and tiresome textures over with. Whenever he was away from home, his bed was the thing he missed the most, followed by the foods he loved, and his own bath.

Desmond chuckled and murmured agreement as he quickly finished off his own food. Nearby, the dogs had made quick work of their meals, and were currently burrowing into the snow to stay warm while they slept.

Chass downed the last of his nuts and berries, then wandered back into the trees to relieve himself. After that, he found a clear, quiet space to do his afternoon prayers. He hadn't been able to do a proper card reading for the past couple of days, but no matter how much it bothered and nagged him not to have done it, in this weather the cards would be immediately ruined. So a reading would have to continue to wait. Soon, though, if Desmond was right about how close they were to a village.

It was hardly the first time weather, or other circumstances, had kept him from using them, but it made him antsy every time. He liked having the guidance, and frankly needed it. All his problems had come when he'd been left to find his own way out of the storm.

When he returned to the clearing, Desmond was putting out the fire, and the dogs were already stirring from their naps, clearly eager to be moving again. Chass had never encountered anything like it; even dogs back home did not show all the bottled-storm energy of these dogs. It was like they had more energy than they could possibly ever use.

Desmond smiled. "Ready to go?"

Did it really matter if he was ready? Chass bit off the reflexive snide reply. Those thorns had their purpose, but they weren't needed here. "As ever," he said instead, and settled into his seat, pulling up the fabric that would protect his face from the cutting snow, and the special glasses that

would protect his eyes from snow and glare. Even with all the clouds, the relentless glaring white of the snow could cause problems.

He hated the glasses, because they were carefully carved wood with narrow slits for vision, so the reduced strain on his eyes came at the cost of his field of vision. If someone came after them, there was a good chance he wouldn't realize it until too late. But blinding himself on the snow would be even more of a problem.

Mercy of the Pantheon, he could not wait to be home, to a place where blinding snow and bone-freezing cold simply did not exist. Where he didn't race along at neck-breaking speeds on a sled controlled by over-excitables dogs.

Desmond settled behind him and gave the cry for the dogs to move. With delighted barks they fell into formation and took off, slow at the start but steadily increasing to the speed that Chass vehemently disliked. The worst part was that they could go *faster*, but Desmond paced them so they could run longer.

As they settled into the journey, Chass kept part of his mind on the rapidly-passing surroundings, and let the rest of it wander. Unfortunately, his options for thoughts with which to occupy his mind had not improved. He stretched desperately for something, anything, that would keep him distracted for the last few hours of their journey. Well, this portion of the journey.

Finally, he settled on language. Despite the grueling life he led, Chass had worked assiduously to learn multiple languages, an aspiration he'd never entirely been able to let go of, no matter his mother's cutting admonitions on the matter.

Like anyone of his station, he knew formal Harken. He also knew the informal Harken that many nobles considered beneath them, despite the fact informal had come first and many of the oldest documents in the imperial archives were written in it.

He was passable in Bentan, Outlander, and Farlander. Nowhere near good enough to be counted a silver tongue, not that he'd ever waste his time or anyone else's by taking the tests, but he could go to market with them. He was slightly better than passable in Carthian.

The only language skill he dared take any true pride in was his fluency in Harken hand language, taught to him by a healer who'd been assigned to his care while he was recovering from some particularly nasty

injuries. She was deaf, which got her poorly treated by many because people were all too often ignorant and mean. He'd asked her to teach him, and she'd been delighted to do so, and given he could barely move from his bed for months, it had been the perfect opportunity to master the language in a way he'd never master the others.

Now that he was to be king, there'd be even less time to continue his studies, and he already barely had any of that to begin with. Just as well, really. Nobody needed him for his tongue, only his sword arm.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Chass jerked away from the incessant memory. Words that would likely haunt him all the way up to death. At least the way this journey was going, that death likely wasn't far off. It was little comfort, but he was in no position to be picky.

However haunting the words were, however clearly he could still hear them every time he let his guard down, said with a cold smirk or whispered huskily in his ear, the final blow had ultimately been his. Another cold comfort, but it was the only kind he ever seemed to get. To be fair, even that was more than he deserved.

None of this was helping.

He shifted his focus to what they would have to do over the coming days. It might be worth it to rest and recuperate in the village for a couple of days. Hard travel and cold were both extremely draining, and combined they could be devastating—and often lethal.

After they rested, however, they would have to push hard to reach the border, and then to traverse Vemeteria, and then there was still Benta and Cartha to surmount. It would take them weeks, possibly months, to reach Harken at the pace they were going. The dogs had already made an enormous difference, but there was still a long way to go—and the hardest part, Cartha, was the last. He would have some advantages there, but it was still going to be a dangerous trek.

Whatever it took, though, he would deliver Desmond to Allen. If the Pantheon said the price of that success was his life, then so be it.

He reached up reflexively to grasp his Tear, but it was buried under all his layers, warmed by his skin, a familiar presence he would quite honestly be lost without.

Thoughts of his Tear brought him back around to Desmond, how happy he'd seemed to have the simple prayer beads. Faith was not

something he'd expected to have in common with the King of Benta. Like everyone else, Chass had assumed the monastery was simply where he'd lived as a royal prince. That would teach him.

The knowledge pulled at him in ways he could not afford to feel. Desmond was Allen's friend. He was a king. Chass was hated, and the crown prince of a kingdom nearly as far from Benta as it was possible to get. They could not be more opposite, more *opposed*, if they had tried.

Whatever resonance he felt whenever he heard Desmond murmur a prayer or talk about his Goddess, he was best off ignoring it. The more distance he kept, the better for them both.

He could not, however, simply ignore Desmond's pain. From his wounds. From killing. Chass's first kill had been so long ago, one amongst many on the field of battle, that the memory was faded, unimportant. He'd never even seen the enemy soldier's face.

By the time he'd murdered Bateker, killing was just another skill.

Chass had hoped to avoid forcing Desmond to kill anyone. It had been clear from the start he had no experience with such brutal work. Another failure on Chass's pile.

On the other hand, Desmond definitely had the soul of a survivor. From flourishing in banishment to becoming a good king to kicking a man right out of a damn tree...

There was much to admire. Too much. Chass was a fool.

Despite everything, drowsiness finally got the better of him, even with the wind in his face. Though he tried to stay awake, Chass kept nodding off, lulled by the cold and the steady movements of the sled.

He woke with a jerk when the sled came to a halt, going immediately for the sword he kept near to hand—and relaxing when he saw they were a short distance from the village.

Desmond stepped off the sled behind him and came around, pulling away the head and face coverings that reduced him to a faceless stranger. "Get some rest?"

Chass grunted and climbed out of the sled, shaking and stretching until he could feel his limbs again. He removed his snow glasses and tucked them away, long tired of the damned things. "Nothing happened while I was failing at my duty?"

"Hardly failing. What else is there to do but drift and sleep? But no, nothing happened. There was a stag the dogs very much wanted to run after,

but they stayed their course. I stopped here because I thought you'd prefer to be fully awake before we rejoined society. I also didn't know if you had a particular cover story in mind, or something along those lines."

"Less said the better. We're traveling to see family. I'm very clearly not from this half of the continent, so I wouldn't even bother with lying about that. Say a friend who's joined you for the winter here, learning the thrill of being dragged around by over-excitable dogs in the freezing cold. Hopefully, though, we won't have to tell any story at all. We can rest through tomorrow, refresh supplies, and be on our way."

"We get to rest for a day?" Desmond asked, and the way his face lit up washed Chass in fresh guilt and recrimination. If he hadn't judged wrong, gambled wrong, they wouldn't be in this situation at all. They were both fortunate Desmond had experience in such travel, but the fact remained it never should have come to this point.

Chass excelled at nothing like he did at making mistakes. His entire life was a legacy of that. Recriminations would have to wait for later, though. "Yes, we'll need to be fully refreshed before pushing on into Vemeteria, where we'll need to be more on guard than ever since they must have soldiers patrolling all over for us. Come, it's long past time we had a warm fire and good food. Let's go find it."

Desmond restored his coverings and returned to his place on the sled, and Chass settled in for the last few minutes into the village.

As they reached it and drew to a stop at a small, unremarkable tavern, his hopes for a quiet evening vanished as he took in the guards roaming the city. They were dressed in light armor and seemed relaxed for soldiers, but there was no mistaking them. Their uniform wasn't one he recognized, save that the style was Bentan, not Yrymian or Vemetarian. Damn it. "We should go."

"No, that's the mark of the Earl of Nettle. He's an ally."

Desmond sounded so happy and hopeful, Chass hated himself for immediately having to ruin it. "So was Bitter Frost."

Pained noises broke through Desmond's face coverings, the hope and happiness shattered as anticipated. Chass wished they weren't necessary, but he wouldn't apologize for the truth. Bitter Frost should have been more loyal to Desmond than anyone else in the world, and most of them had turned on him with little to no hesitation.

Recovering with visible effort, Desmond said, "Be that as it may, Lord Wessel is one of the reasons your Commander Jader is still alive. He has nearly been killed by the rebels himself, on at least two occasions. If his people are here, I would wager they are looking for us, and they could be just the help we need."

"Fine. Stay close and do what I say." Chass heaved out of the sled, since it seemed they would be staying, however stupid a decision he still thought that was, and made certain his sword would draw easy should he need it. More like *when* he would need it.

Desmond flipped a coin to a girl who came rushing out of the stable. "The dogs need food and a place to rest. The change is yours."

The girl brightened at that, and immediately set to work tending her new charges.

Inside, Desmond removed his face coverings and tucked them into a pouch at his waist meant for such things. Chass kept the hood of his cloak up for the time being, but made certain his armor and weapons were apparent. He'd prefer to be in full Penance Gate regalia, but that would draw too much attention, even if he did have it.

They settled at a table against the wall, where he could keep an eye on the room. Desmond ordered food and arranged a room, the smooth, easy cadence of his words speaking to fluency. Chass didn't even know Yrymian enough to pick out a few words. He'd feel a lot better if he could understand what was being said around them, especially as two soldiers slipped not-so-discreetly out of the tavern. But there was no helping his lack of language skills, so no point in dwelling on it.

Instead, he focused on the food that was brought in short order. It was some sort of hearty stew, with goat, vegetables, and barley. There was also a dark, nutty bread to go with it, and dark beer that was like drinking cold coffee.

Sadly, he hadn't gotten more than a few bites when the door opened, and a figure blew in with the bearing that only a nobleman from a long line of nobles possessed. He was large, fat, but moved like there was plenty of muscle beneath the insulating fat. The man could likely pick up any person in that room, Chass included, and throw them across it with very little effort. Chass always put such persons on his front line, because they could take a lot of blows and knock down the first wave, saving many lives in the process. He was handsome, and had a welcoming air, rather than a



threatening one. He certainly didn't carry himself like a soldier, though he didn't strike Chass as a fool either.

The man's eyes swept the room, and his face flooded with relief as he spied them.

As he approached, Desmond rose before Chass could stop him. "Lord Wessel, you make for a happy sight."

"Your Majesty," Wessel greeted quietly in Bentan. "I've paid well and told good stories to cover the chance of your arrival, but we should still make haste to depart. There are spies everywhere, and if I knew there was a strong chance you'd make your way here, then so have others."

"My dogs need rest. They can't make another journey tonight."

"They won't need to. I'll leave people to guide them to my home, but for now, we should be on our way. I've secured safer lodgings a short distance from the village, with plenty of comforts besides."

"Let's get moving then," Chass said, before Desmond could protest further. No matter how exhausted they were, how fed up he was with traveling, if the end of the road was a safe place to hide for a time, it would be worth the additional discomfort and exhaustion.

Wessel looked surprised that Chass had spoken in Bentan, but said nothing, only ushered them out of the building. In short order he had them bundled into a large sleigh, pulled by four of the enormous horses with hair around their legs that Chass only ever saw in cold climes. They were off moments later, moving too swiftly for conversation to be possible.

On the positive side, however, they had warm furs and heated bricks to stave off the bitter cold that seemed to grow worse with every hour.

Mercifully, the journey was as short as Wessel had promised. Chass climbed out of the sleigh, helped Desmond out, and together they followed Wessel into the small but handsome home. If he had to guess, Chass would say it was a hunter's lodge, belonging to someone wealthy enough to have one, but not so wealthy they essentially turned it into a second (or fourth) home.

In the front room Wessel led them to, a fire was already roaring, and someone had set out a tray of food and drink. Chass let a soldier help him out of his stiff, wet clothes, though he detested when anyone who wasn't Penance Gate or one of his trusted staff ventured into his personal space.

"So you're the one who helped High Commander Jader when he was sent to Benta," Chass said, standing by the sofa where Desmond sat, one

hand resting on his sword. Every bone in his body screamed in agony, especially where it was still healing from the arrow wounds he'd taken, but he hadn't lived this long by letting his guard down easy.

"Yes, that is me, and I was contacted by him a few days ago, with a request that I keep an eye out for you on the chance you would come close to my estate on your way to Harken. If I found you, I was to tell you that Aria is alive, and she and what remains of Penance Gate are being retrieved and taken home."

"Thank you," Chass replied. The greater portion of Penance Gate was dead now, but at least some of them had survived. At least Aria was alive. He still had her.

"I know this area well, from my territory all the way north to the coast. My family traveled extensively when I was a child, and I continued to do so on my own until my duties required I settle down. So I had a good estimation of where you might be traveling, and scattered my soldiers across several villages. It was only by fortune I was in this one tonight to check in. I was, in fact, preparing to leave when they told me you'd arrived."

"Her Most Holy Grace is granting us mercy tonight," Desmond replied. "Chass, sit down. You must be exhausted."

Chass gave a brief, terse shake of his head and remained right where he was.

Desmond sighed, but Wessel only smiled. "You remind me a great deal of Lord Jader. His men caused quite the scandal wherever they went, refusing to surrender their swords in places no Bentan would even think to bring them. There are reasons that Harken possesses one of the finest fighting forces in the world, and its mercenaries are rightfully feared, especially your Penance Gate. I think only some of the Treya Mencee groups are considered more terrifying."

"My honor to serve the High Throne," Chass replied. Feared. If there was one word that was universally used to describe him, it was that one. Violence and fear were what he'd been crafted for, as surely as Larren had been crafted to be king, and Allen to be a consort, and then later, specifically High Consort. The way Manda had been crafted to be a spy and killer.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Whatever he'd wanted to be, little mattered. He was feared. Reviled. Hated. No matter what he did going forward, when he turned in his sword to take up his brother's crown, they would remember spiked armor dripping blood.

Chass had learned to accept that, but he still hated the way people said 'everyone is afraid of you' like that was an admirable thing. Only people who'd never been feared would think that a compliment. He would give anything to be regarded in almost any other way, but his mother, Bateker, and his own bad decisions had ensured that would never be the case.

"Once we are in Benta and at my estate, we can make further plans to get you into Harken, Your Majesty. I have some ideas, but best to wait until we know how things are back home before deciding. Ideally, we can get you back to the coast, but—"

"No," Chass said. "It would be far too easy to pin us down in a coastal town, or worse, on a ship. We tried that and failed. Too much of a risk to try a second time. Our best chance is to go through Cartha."

Wessel winced. "I have little faith in any plan that relies on Cartha as the least dangerous option."

"Not all of Cartha is bad," Chass said quietly, mind filling helplessly with thoughts of Keeta, the Carthian child he intended to adopt, whom he loved more than anyone or anything else in the world. He tried so hard not to think of Keeta at all while he was working, but it was impossible to think of Cartha and not think of Keeta. If he managed to live through this, which granted, the chance was slim, he could finally fulfill his promise to take Keeta home with him to Gaulden. "It's no different than any other country. They've been caught between our two feuding countries for a long time. That would embitter anyone."

Desmond gave him a curious look, with a soft smile that Chass did not understand. "It sounds like you know the Carthians well."

"I wouldn't go that far," Chass said, "but I'm acquainted with one of the clans. If we can reach them, we should be able to travel through the mountains mostly unimpeded. That's easier said than done, however, as they're located pretty far in, and there are other clan territories we'll have to get through first. Still safer, somehow, than attempting the coast again."

Sadness and excitement twisted through him. Sadness because he would be bringing great risk down on people who had nothing to do with

this mess. Excitement, because they were important to him, especially Keeta. Sweet, earnest, with a true heart of sunlight.

Chass had not seen him for nearly a year now and hated it. As soon as this mess was over, he would see his promise fulfilled, one way or another. He and Lord Kamir had not talked much, but... but if Chass asked, he thought Kamir would be willing to help Keeta find a new home, the life he'd always wanted.

"I look forward to meeting your friends," Desmond said with a smile. "My interactions with Cartha are limited, and drastically different between when I was a monk and when I was dropped on the throne. I preferred being a monk. I wonder if this rebellion might not be a problem if I'd preferred being a king."

"This rebellion is not the result of you, Your Majesty," Wessel said. "It's the result of warmongers, and those who made money off them. The very last thing they wanted or needed was Benta building peace with Harken, and bridging peace between Harken and Cartha, which would have been the next step."

"Worse still, all three uniting against Treya Mencee, which is not a force they would be capable of resisting," Chass said. "Treya Mencee flourishes when the rest of the world fights and bleeds."

"Yes, we had many plans in various stages of progress," Desmond said, seeming to sink in on himself. "I was looking forward to forging that peace. It is deeply shameful that so many of my people apparently prefer spilling blood to splitting bread." His mouth flattened. "Nor have I forgotten that some of them colluded with Treya Mencee and purchased the services of Soldonir assassins." He looked at Chass, then looked away, shame and anguish cutting deep lines into his features. "A scheme that cost Captain Chass and High Consort Allen their brother and Gaulden a worthy leader. Never mind all the other lives that were lost, and the long shadow those events will cast over an important Harken holiday."

There was also the fact that Sarrica, acting under international law, had taken over Soldonir, better known as the Triumvirate. The three countries had always existed in cooperation with each other, but had been made to rely dangerously on each other after Benta had taken them over. Only recently freed from being a Bentan colony, they'd still been struggling to get on their own feet again. Now they were under command of the

Harken Empire, and Chass had never been so grateful to be far away from international politics.

Sarrica would be far kinder and more generous than most rulers in his position, but a takeover was a takeover.

"You are not to blame for Larren's death or any of the others," Chass said. "Just as you are not to blame for those men who died falling from the tree."

"I was the one who kicked them," Desmond replied. "I'm not *not* responsible. Same for this situation. If—"

"If the world was perfect, many things would be different," Chass said scathingly. "Dwelling on 'if' is a waste of time, and we already have too little of that."

Desmond sighed. "You remind me greatly of Father Ronne."

Chass didn't bother to ask what he meant by that; he wouldn't like the answer. "I say we eat and rest, and in the morning we move on."

"Of course. Would you like food here or in your room? There are guards all over, men I do and have trusted with my life. They will stand by me, and so stand by His Majesty. I know it is against your training, and likely your nature, Captain Chass, but you can relax." Wessel brightened. "Would you like to speak with the guards? They would be honored."

"I would, yes," Chass said. He looked at Desmond and pointed to the floor. "Stay in this room. Open it for nobody except Wessel and I. Understood?"

"Understood, Captain."

Wessel rose and led Chass out of the room, then deeper into what was essentially a glorified cabin, out a back door, and into a barn that had been commandeered to form a barracks of sorts. Several men rose as they encountered, saluting Wessel and standing at attention.

Still speaking Bentan, Wessel said, "Captain Chass, this is Captain Trevor Black of the Order of Nettle, my personal guards. They've guarded my family lands for longer than my family has owned them. Captain Black, gentlemen, this is His Royal Highness Crown Prince Chass Telmis of Gaulden, Captain of Penance Gate, and brother to the Imperial High Consort of Harken."

Every set of eyes in the room widened as Wessel needlessly rattled off all that information. If Chass had known he was going to do that, he would have told him to keep it simply to 'Captain.' Honestly he should have

anticipated it; Bentans had very different rules when it came to titles and formality.

Captain Black stepped forward and bowed. "Captain, an honor to meet you. We have a lot of respect for Penance Gate and the often thankless job they do."

"Thank you, Captain," Chass replied, more startled than he'd ever admit at the understanding in those words. "I appreciate your assistance in this matter."

"We're loyal to Lord Wessel and the rightful King of Benta," Black said fiercely. "I've lost family, friends, and comrades to those rebels. All they want is more war. The rest of us were enjoying the peace. We'll get you both safely to Harken, no matter what it takes."

Chass offered a hand, and the man took it, shaking firmly. He was then introduced to the others, who mostly gawked like they didn't know quite what to say to him. But they didn't stare at him in terror, which was new and strange. He'd figure out whether or not that was a problem later.

For the present, he was content enough to call the night ended. "If you don't mind, Lord Wessel, I would appreciate food in my quarters."

"Of course, of course. I'll have someone bring it up."

"They can leave it in the hallway, thank you."

Wessel gestured, and Chass followed the soldier who stepped forward back into the cabin and to a small bedroom. A fire had been laid, and there were clean clothes on the bed that looked like they might actually fit him.

There was also, mercifully, a bathing tub and extra buckets of water. It had cooled some, but Chass was long past caring about that. He waited until his food arrived, then brought it in, locked the door, and ensured the window was securely barred. When he was relatively satisfied with his safety, he stripped and made swift but thorough work of a bath.

When he was clean and dressed, in sleep clothes that were in fact slightly too big, he knelt on the floor in front of the bed and did his night prayers, then pulled out his cards and drew three. He stared pensively at the results:

Kinar Falling: Kinar, God of Luck and Fortune, a capricious and dangerous god. She had warm, gold-toned brown skin and freckles across her nose; one green eye, one blue eye; and vibrant red hair falling around her in tight, springy curls. She wore a loose shirt and clingy pants, the shirt

low-cut and partially unlaced, revealing part of her breasts and the gold cat charm dangling between them.

This card depicted her sitting on a luxurious green and orange cushion on an ornate wooden floor, lamp light shining down on her but casting the others in the circle in shadow. In the center of the circle were several pairs of dice, all of them with strong rolls. The chances of beating them were nigh impossible. Kinar held a dice cup, her throw not yet made, a smile on her lips that said whatever the outcome, it would amuse her greatly.

The next card was Jenn Falling. Jenn, God of the Hearth, sometimes translated as Home and Community. They had warm, red-toned brown skin, a large figure, and gentle eyes the gold of the sun, dressed in simple but elegant robes stitched with all manner of flora and fauna, and a gold pin shaped to resemble various wildflowers kept their hair up.

They were sitting before a fire with small children gathered close, crying and afraid, while in the window behind them a fierce storm raged. The house was old, with cracks and leaks, faded paint and plugged holes. The troubles would not end with the storm, but for now, they were warm and safe.

The final card was Allorna in the Peak. Instead of scaling a cliff as he did in Rising, Allorna in the Peak was wrapped in a dark cloak as he traveled a difficult road, lightning his only source of visibility, hail pelting down, the trees around him being battered by the wind, scattering leaves and broken branches. Allorna walked calmly though, his eyes glowing amber as summer turned into fall.

Taken together, the cards warned that the road ahead would be impassable, even lost, that loneliness and despair would follow, so he should pray for guidance, the support of family, and luck.

Not so different from the last reading he'd done. Certainly the promise of difficulty ahead remained consistent. Support of family... in this context, family could mean blood relations, family by bond, friends, even a broader community. Allies and comrades. Jenn was the God of the Hearth, where people gathered to be together, warm and safe, and that could take many shapes.

Chass put the cards away and recited the prayers, going slowly, taking his time, letting the ritual and the words calm and soothe as they were meant to, taking their advice in to ponder slowly and quietly.

Feeling better, if not exactly *good*, Chass rose and went to sit at the table where his food waited. It was good, even excellent, given their situation, but all it did was remind him of all the foods he missed.

Foods that, if he was reading his prayer cards correctly, he might never get to taste again.



## Chapter Seven

Tucked away in the safety and luxury of Wessel's estate, Desmond could almost forget he was being hunted. Almost.

Life was too far from normal, though, for him to entirely forget, even after a couple of days trapped by snow and ice and freezing winds but suffering little because Wessel and his staff knew what they were about.

Having little else to do, Desmond resumed those things he'd done while in Highmont, when leaving the safety of its walls was ill-advised, if not impossible. He read and studied, availing himself of Wessel's limited but impressive library, and once there was enough light to see by, he switched to sewing and embroidery.

Wessel had plenty of fabric and other sewing necessities to hand and was happy to share, so Desmond set to work first on a cowl scarf for Chass. He'd chosen a deep blue wool that held the faintest notes of purple, and was embroidering it all around the edges with stylized sea creatures, a popular motif along the coasts that he'd done numerous times for charity deliveries. And of course, throughout the day he used Wessel's private chapel for prayers and contemplation.

Chass, meanwhile, seemed to prowl like a caged animal. Desmond couldn't really blame him. The longer they stayed in one place, the more likely they were to get caught. But the snow was impassible, especially with the way the wind howled. Anyone foolish enough to venture out into it would find only death.

Desmond shuddered and knocked away memories of finding bodies while they traveled from town to town with supplies and gifts. They were usually so frozen they couldn't be moved, only marked to be found later in the thaw and finally taken home or, more often, simply buried where they'd died.

He finished off another delicate octopus, this one done in aquamarine thread, and snipped the remaining thread. He was working with three colors total: aquamarine, sea green, and white. If he had time, he'd add final touches in silver thread, but he highly doubted that would be possible.

The sound of voices in the hallway drew his attention, mostly because one of them was Chass. After all Chass had done for him,

especially saving his life on multiple occasions, Desmond was sharply attuned to his voice. His mere presence.

Chass was beautiful: in his intensity, his motions, his appearance, and his faith. The small bits of him Desmond had picked up during their travels, it was not hard to discern that Chass had lived a difficult life. More difficult, he'd wager, than most royalty. Most people, even. Her Most Holy Grace advised against gambling, but Desmond felt it was a wager he would win.

When Chass was nearby, it was impossible not to be acutely aware of him.

Setting his sewing aside, Desmond rose and went to the door, grasping the cool metal handle and pulling it open.

Chass stood in the hallway conversing in easy tones with a servant bearing a heavily-laden tray that must be on its way to Wessel, who often spent his mornings locked away in his study attending correspondence and estate miscellany.

The conversation itself wasn't striking, merely a discussion about the weather, food supplies, and coffee. The striking part was that the entire conversation was taking place in Carthian.

Spying him, the servant finished the conversation, murmured parting platitudes in Bentan, and with a bow, went on his way.

Desmond watched him go a moment, then slid his gaze back to Chass with a smile. "For a man who claims not to be a silver tongue, you certainly seem to possess one."

Something passed over Chass's face, there and gone so quickly it was like catching a flitting bird at the corner of the eye. The only thing Desmond got from it was pain, or maybe anguish. Impossible to say for sure. Then it was merely Chass's usual stony expression, where even Her Most Holy Grace would surely struggle to interpret how he truly felt about anything. It was less an expression than more armor, cold and impenetrable—to pain, but also to everything else.

"Anyone can learn a smattering of various languages. There's not a soul in Harken who can't haggle in at least three of them, even if they could never carry a conversation over dinner in any one of them. That does not make a silver tongue. I am what I was always meant to be: a soldier, specifically a mercenary."

The words were heartbreaking. Like a wolf describing itself as a stray dog. Why did Chass seem to hold himself in so much contempt? Truly terrible people never regarded themselves as such, not in his experience. Those that most often did hate themselves, though... Desmond had encountered them numerous times, when they came to Highmont for help, to recover, to hide. Some returned home, back to what they'd fled. Some built new lives. Some went into the waiting arms of Her Most Holy Grace.

Tucking his worries away to address later, in private, Desmond said, "You're a great deal more than that. A brother, a friend, an ally, a prince..."

"A monster, an abusive bastard, carved from blood and violence, a beast dragged from the Penance Realms themselves to visit terror upon the Mortal Realms. Do not make me out to be more than what I am, Your Majesty. It will not end well for any of us." Somehow, as he drew himself up a bit more, he seemed to wear more armor than even that which he'd donned when storming the keep to save Desmond's life. "Did you require something?"

"No," Desmond said, feeling sick and sad over all the pain that had forged the armor Chass wore, even when he was in a safe place. "I heard your voice and wanted to come say hello. I did not mean to upset you, Your Highness. If you'll pardon me, I'll return to my sewing and leave you to your business."

He closed the door before Chass could reply and returned to his seat, but didn't bother to pick up his sewing, simply stared at his hands and let his thoughts tumble and churn.

Where was the man who'd cradled him so carefully? Gave him medicine? Read to him? Why did it seem like now they were back amongst other people, Chass was retreating?

*A monster, an abusive bastard, carved from blood and violence, a beast...*

Abusive bastard. That was an alarming pair of words. Nothing about Chass would ever make Desmond think he was capable of abusing someone. Then again, how well did he really know Chass? Then again *again*, no abuser he'd ever known had ever been willing to admit, in any way, that they were in fact abusive.

What a strange, thorny tangle.

Sighing softly, Desmond picked his sewing up and started work on the next creature in the pattern: a starfish, requiring meticulous work to get

the texturing and rounded corners right so it didn't simply look like the usual sort of star.

If Chass didn't want it, he could leave it with Wessel to be passed on to someone who did.

Setting his jaw, refusing to wallow in self-pity over a conversation that probably wasn't nearly as bad as his brain wanted him to think, he focused on his stitches, working on the starfish for several minutes before moving on to the next in the pattern: a seahorse. After that would come a shark, eel, crab, whale, turtle, clam, and finally stingray. That would complete the second repetition of the pattern, leaving one repetition to go on this edge. A few more days and he'd have the scarf done.

He'd only gone a few more stitches into the seahorse when his fingers slipped, and he wound up stabbing himself. Biting back a swear the Goddess would most definitely frown upon, he all but threw his work aside. Maybe he should do something else for a bit, until he could stop sulking and being stupid.

Out in the chilly hallway, he pulled his wrap more securely around his shoulders and with a soft sigh, went to find something to do that would actually occupy his mind. He hadn't gone more than a few steps, however, when the soft strains of a harp drew his attention. Did Wessel play harp? A guard who was off duty? One of the servants?

Whoever was playing, they had skill, and the piece they'd selected was beautiful, though Desmond didn't recognize it.

Desmond followed the sound until he came to an open door, though it proved to be a mezzanine access that overlooked a modest ballroom. Down below, playing alone on a dais, the rest of the instruments under dust cloths, was Chass. Though it was hard to tell from the angle, it seemed like he was playing with his eyes closed.

That really should have occurred to Desmond; the harp was a central element in Harken culture, especially throughout the southern kingdoms, like Gaulden. Much like all nobles in Benta were thrown at piano or violin until they could find a way to squirm out of lessons, Harken children were expected to learn the harp or flute.

Chass must have kept at the lessons, to be so good. Even the naturally inclined required a great deal of practice to reach such levels. Professionals would outstrip him, but not all of them.

Helplessly drawn, Desmon found the stairs and headed quietly down to the ballroom proper, eyes fastened on Chass, who seemed completely lost in the music. His eyes were indeed closed, his face relaxed, baring the sadness that always seemed to lurk in the depths of his eyes. Looking at him set a deep ache throbbing in Desmond's chest.

Desmond's ear wasn't trained for Harken music, past a handful of pieces that had made their way to Benta, but the piece seemed to be a solemn one, if not outright sad. Knowing Chass, it was likely a hymn, which tended toward somber in Gaulden. Further north, more cheerful hymns could be found, and around Harkenesten itself, they even approached joyful.

He wrapped his arms around himself and listened, terrified of doing something that would startle Chass out of playing. As ever, his face gave away nothing, but the intensity of his playing conveyed enough. With the armor momentarily stripped away, Desmond was given a glimpse of what Chass might be like without it, harkening to the man of soft smiles and gentle laughs who'd nursed him on the ship, and later comforted him after he'd killed two people.

Why did he care so much? Because Chass had saved his life? That was certainly reason enough, but he couldn't deny even to himself that beyond all that, Chass drew him. He was like one of the brightly colored fish that swam in the lakes near Highmont, surviving in even the coldest weather, always just out of reach of those who saw and wanted desperately to touch.

As the song reached its crescendo and then slowly wound down, Chass blended it seamlessly into another. The only word Desmond could muster was 'entrancing.' He could stay there forever, simply listening.

If Chass saw him, though... Well, Desmond didn't think it would go well.

Heart heavy with reluctance, he turned to go—and slipped on the glossy wood, slamming into the staircase railing, pain whiting out the world as he gasped for air and tried to scream at the same time.

Warmth pressed against him, strong arms steadying him, and Desmond forced his eyes open and stared up at Chass. "I'm so sorry."

Chass squinted at him. "You're apologizing for slipping?"

Desmond huffed. "I mean, I am very sorry that happened, believe me, but no, I meant I'm sorry for disturbing you. The music was beautiful,

so I followed it here, but when I saw you, I thought you'd prefer not to be interrupted. I'm all right, now, I think." He blinked up at Chass as his arms slowly fell away and he stepped back. "How in the world did you get across the room so fast?"

That little crooked smile flickered across Chass's pale, pretty lips. "I wouldn't be a very good mercenary if I couldn't move quickly, and it is my sworn duty to see you take no harm, even if I've not done a very good job of that so far."

"Not even Her Most Holy Grace can spare me from the occasional fit of clumsiness, I promise," Desmond said, smiling tentatively. "What was that first piece you were playing? The one that sounded so sad."

Chass hesitated, but right as Desmond started to apologize and withdraw the question, he said, "It was a mourning piece, called *Tears of Prima*, for though she is the God of Life and understands death better than most, still she mourns when her creations pass on to the domains of her siblings."

It did not require intelligence to discern he'd been playing for his people lost at sea.

"I am sorry for your loss, and that I am the cause of those losses," Desmond said. "I pray for them every day and hope they have found peace and rest."

"You are not the cause," Chass said scathingly. "Those rebels are to blame, that craven bastard Kettermane is to blame, and I will have him in my grasp, dead or alive, before this is over."

"I hope you do," Desmond said. "Her Most Holy Grace admonishes strongly against vendettas, but I am weak and hope to see his head on a platter."

Chass's eyes burned as he said, "You will get it. Holy Shammari is God of Death and Justice, and appreciates how often those two are intertwined."

"Your gods are a lot more understanding of that than mine," Desmond said with a faint smile. "Even in the oldest tomes, Her Most Holy Grace preaches non-violence and forgiveness. It is where I struggle most in my faith. There's a phrase that crops up often in the books I've read on the Pantheon, about penance."

"Penance must be paid in blood and pain," Chass replied immediately, saying the words like a prayer. Like they were not just

important to him, but vital. *Abusive bastard* Chass had called himself earlier. Did that tie to his fervency over the phrase?

"That's the one," Desmond said. "When we come to the end of our path, we are judged and the matter closed forever. I always liked that the Pantheon offers a second chance for those who prove sincere in wanting one. Everyone makes mistakes, and true monsters are rare."

Chass stared at him, expression as closed off as ever but his eyes burning like blue flames. "You are kind," he said at last. "More than most in your position would be."

"I am aware how easily I could have turned out like the rest of family, and their wrongs are mine to correct. You call yourself a monster, but there are many who would rightfully claim I come from a family of them. People are quick to judge and slow to forgive, and I feel that most of the time the opposite should be the case. That being said, forgiveness must be earned."

"Yes," Chass replied softly. "Forgiveness must be earned."

"Chass..." Desmond swallowed, looked down. It wasn't his place to ask, and even if he did, Chass more than likely would not feel like explaining, especially if he was, as he'd already admitted, the abuser in the story.

There was the barest touch to his shoulder, and then Chass was gone, striding from the room in that commanding way of his, the walk of a person born and raised to be a leader.

Unlike Desmond, who could fake it well enough when he must, but... well, he wasn't on his throne anymore, was he? He hadn't been able to hold it. That was all that really needed to be said.

Sighing—at himself, at Chass, at the whole stupid world, he headed for the kitchens to procure coffee and a snack to tide him over until lunch. He got as far as the threshold before he was imperiously shooed right back out, with orders to await the arrival of his repast in his parlor.

Knowing better than to argue with the people who really ran the household, Desmond obeyed. He hummed softly as he went, unable to forget that somber tune Chass had first played.

His curiosity burned. Chass was a silver tongue but vehemently—agitatedly—denied it. Was a musician of some accomplishment, but did not advertise that fact even slightly, if Desmond had to guess. What other skills did he hide? Why hide them at all? It was hardly unusual for a royal prince

to have such a variety of accomplishments to his name. Royalty tended to have the money, time, and resources necessary to acquire a broad range of skills.

Reclaiming his seat, Desmond picked his sewing back up and resumed work on the seahorse, which thankfully now felt like cooperating. The coffee arrived just as he was putting the finishing touches on it. Thanking the woman who brought it, Desmond took a break to rethread all his needles—one for each color, so he wouldn't need to stop and rethread as often—and enjoy the coffee. Few things in life were better than a fresh cup of hot coffee, especially when the world was covered in snow, and everything seemed confined and dreary.

There was a rap at the door a few minutes later, and then Wessel stepped in with his usual warm, welcoming smile. He'd never been much of a presence at court, always preferring to be afield, but he'd always been faithful and true. Unlike the literal army that had sworn to protect Desmond.

"Good afternoon, my lord."

"Your Majesty," Wessel replied. "I came to see how you were faring."

"It's a bit strange to be remaining in place so calmly, after all the turmoil of the past several days," Desmond said. "A good kind of strange. I'm eternally grateful to you, and forever in your debt."

Wessel waved the words aside. "No one is owed anything for doing their duty, and it's an honor besides." He nodded to the pile of fabric lying on the table next to Desmond. "It's not often I see anyone of station, let alone a king, embroider."

Desmond laughed and rubbed his thumb over the newly finished seahorse. "Highmont Monastery did not acknowledge ranks of the outside world. We were all equal; we all worked. I think such a practice might do some people out here some good. But what does a fallen king know?" He hadn't even been able to hold his country together. If he went into history books at all, it would be as a terrible king who'd had to be pushed out by bold, brave rebels who knew better than anyone else what Benta needed.

Goddess knew rebels had been right more often than not, but these ones still left a foul taste in his mouth. They wanted war—to conquer. That was no way to lead a country.



He returned to his coffee, sipping quietly as Wessel poured a cup for himself, since the servants had thought to include a spare on the tray. "It's impossible to say for certain, but I think the snow will cease falling in the next day or so, and a couple of days after that you should be able to depart. Are you still determined to go through Cartha?"

"Unless Chass has said otherwise, I presume so. Even Benta cannot traipse through there as we please, especially since our tenuous alliance with them was built on a promise of peace, that the warring that stuck them in the middle would cease. The rebels have broken that promise, so they'll not find Cartha full of friendly faces."

Whereas Chass, it seemed by what little he'd said, had friends aplenty in Cartha. That was a remarkable feat, and Desmond burned to know how he'd managed it, but like so much else regarding Chass, the explanation was bound to remain a mystery.

"Well, your borrowed sled team is more than ready for the journey," Wessel said with a laugh. "I will also send further guards with you, as many as I can get Chass to agree to, without so large a party it would draw attention."

"The dogs can't pull that many people."

Wessel's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Am I Benta or am I Benta, Your Majesty? You'll have dogs aplenty, I promise. I retain two teams of my own. Usually they get their exercise via my guards and staff, since I am too old for that nonsense these days. They are up to the journey and will do it eagerly."

Desmond nodded. "I'm grateful, Lord Wessel, and no matter what you say, I owe you greatly."

"We'll argue about it another time." He patted Desmond's knee and rose with a series of snaps and cracks in his joints. "This cold weather; it gets harder every year, I vow."

"Harder and colder," Desmond replied with a faint smile.

Wessel laughed. "Just so. Enjoy your coffee, Majesty. I'll see you at lunch in a few hours."

"My lord." Desmond bowed his head slightly as Wessel bowed himself out of the room, and after pouring a second cup of coffee, resumed his embroidery.

He'd nearly finished the first edge when the clock chimed it was time for lunch. Setting his work aside and taking the coffee tray to place by

the door so it would be easier for the servants to retrieve it, he headed off for the small dining room where they'd been taking their meals so far.

Chass and Wessel were already there when he arrived, chatting idly over cups of jewel red wine. There was a steaming basket of bread on the table, and servants were bringing in the first course. In social settings, dinner was the meal that mattered. In more casual settings, it was lunch that was the focus meal, with breakfast and dinner much smaller affairs.

Desmond took his seat, smiling briefly at both of them, though it faltered a bit when he came to Chass, who as usual gave nothing away. "I hope your days have been pleasant."

"Quite, quite," Wessel replied congenially, and launched into an easy discussion of the weather and all the usual problems that resulted while they were all given bowls of hearty barley soup, redolent with winter roots and venison.

As the servants departed, he turned to more serious matters. "Captain, I wanted to discuss your departure."

Chass set down the spoon he'd only just picked up. "If this is about us taking an escort, my answer remains the same: no. It's endangering more lives to little purpose and will only slow us down and make it far more likely we'll be noticed and caught. Two men traveling about is not as remarkable as two men with an armed escort, not to mention the wealth that such an escort—and mode of travel—indicates. I appreciate you want His Majesty protected, but drawing more attention to him is not the way to do that."

Wessel huffed. "You cannot do all the protecting alone. You barely survived two fights now, and they are only going to be increasingly prepared. Eventually, sheer numbers will trump even your remarkable skills."

Chass's mouth flattened. "I have allies in Cartha, and they will be more inclined to help if I do not arrive with Bentan soldiers in tow. I've made my decision. Let the matter drop, my lord."

Wessel heaved a long sigh. "Fine. I think you're making a mistake, but it is your decision, even if Desmond is *my* king."

Looking tired despite his stony façade, Chass retrieved his spoon, and they spent several minutes in silence as they ate. Desmond used a piece of bread to mop up the last of the broth. "You have a wonderful cook."

"I do indeed," Wessel said with a half-hearted smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty." He rang the bell at his elbow, and servants came to carry the dishes away while another pair brought in the second course, which was on delicate blue porcelain covered by gleaming silver cloches.

One of the servants set a plate in front of him and withdrew the cloche with a slight flourish, revealing a beautiful main course: roasted venison with raspberry sauce, roasted potatoes redolent with butter and herbs, and glazed carrots.

"Thank you, this looks wonderful." He looked up to smile at the servant, then Wessel, but the sudden cracking of glass jerked his attention to Chass.

Who looked gray, near to passing out, as he stared at the plate.

"Chass?"

"Captain?"

"That smell. The sauce." The words came out rough, ragged, as though Chass was speaking through gravel or the shards of the wine glass that lay shattered around his bleeding left hand.

"Raspberry sauce with balsamic vinegar and herbs," Wessel said. "Is something—"

Chass stood so quickly his chair crashed to the floor. "Excuse me, please."

Then he was gone, a trail of blood droplets in his wake.

Wessel turned wide-eyed to Desmond. "What in the world was that?"

"Trauma," Desmond said quietly, even as his heart thundered in his chest. He'd seen similar reactions from those who came to Highmont seeking sanctuary. It was not something he'd expected to see from Chass, as strong and formidable as the mountains they'd soon be crossing. "That was trauma. Something about the smell of raspberries triggered a traumatic memory." He stood and set his napkin in his seat. "I'm going to see if he's all right and if I can help."

Wessel nodded, already ringing for the servants to come and take the food away.

Out in the hallway, Desmond saw a bewildered footman. "Did you see which way Captain Chass went?"

"He headed for the front hall, though um, I believe he paused briefly in a washroom to, uh, lose his lunch, Majesty."

What in the world could have happened to Chass to provoke such a horrifying reaction? He was a royal prince, Captain of Penance Gate, who were feared and respected across not just Harken, but most of the known world.

Nobody was immune to the traumas that life could inflict, but he should have been shielded from many of them. Not all, not being a soldier, but his wealth and privilege, his authority, his *family*, surely...

Well, that was possibly an answer right there. More often than not, the people seeking help from Highmont were fleeing loved ones—relatives, spouses, people they should be able to trust. If Chass had once been an abuser himself, a confession Desmond still did not know how to handle, then it was highly likely he'd been abused himself.

More troubled than ever, he pulled on jacket and cloak, grabbed Chass's cloak, a spare gifted to him by Wessel not long after their arrival, and headed out into the relentless snow.

He followed the crude trail Chass had left and soon found him in a copse of trees, half-heartedly sheltered beneath an enormous evergreen so dense that only the barest sprinkling of snow was on the ground beneath him, though it had piled up in a significant circle around the tree, forcing Desmond to wade more than walk.

Desmond dropped to his knees beside Chass, who seemed oblivious to all but the torments in his own mind. His skin still had that awful gray tone, his scars standing out more starkly than ever, and his eyes were closed, even though he must have heard Desmond's approach. His legs were drawn up, his head angled slightly down, arms curled around his stomach as though something pained him. He was shuddering, shivering, and probably not entirely from the cold. His breaths were ragged, uneven, as though he was struggling, and failing, not to entirely fall apart.

Desmond had never wanted to hold someone so desperately in his life, but touching people in such a state was a tricky thing. Touch could help some, worsen others, and sometimes they completely lost control and lashed out, though that last was exceedingly rare.

Reaching out with one hand, Desmond lightly touched his fingertips to Chass's knee. Chass jerked slightly, but then his breathing leveled ever so slightly. Taking that as a good sign, Desmond wrapped Chass's cloak around him as best he could, then sat down next to him, not quite touching, lending support and body heat.

Eventually, Chass loosened the arms around his middle, letting his hands rest in his lap instead. Desmond reached out and touched the back of Chass's hand as lightly as he'd earlier touched his knee. When Chass didn't move his hand away, Desmond went a step further and twined their fingers together. Chass shuddered again, but relaxed the barest bit. His breathing shifted too, and after a moment, Desmond realized there was a pattern to it. A breathing exercise. Now *those* he knew well.

It was a skill the monks learned in earnest and tried to teach wherever they visited. Desmond used breathing exercises all the time, for everything from calming a bad mood to prayer and meditation. Sometimes he did it simply to distract himself or help him sleep. He'd seen them used successfully on several occasions to calm people in a state of panic, sometimes caused by events, other times induced by their own minds.

Chass gripped his hand tightly, though Desmond doubted he was aware he was doing so.

Several minutes passed in a silence broken only by the rush of wind through the snow and trees. It was cold, but Desmond would remain there until he froze to death if that was what proved necessary.

Eventually, Chass's grip eased and after a couple more minutes slowly withdrew. He opened his eyes, the very color of summer, stark and bright and beautiful in the midst of the frigid winter around them. "I apologize—"

"Don't," Desmond said. "You don't owe anyone that. So don't. Are you all right? Is there anything I can do? I can listen, if you want to talk."

Chass made a noise that, after a moment, Desmond realized was a broken laugh. "Do you know how to make a man brutal?"

"What?"

Shaking his head, Chass rested a hand against the tree for balance and pushed to his feet, then offered his uninjured right hand to Desmond to help him up. "Nothing. Despite my best efforts, bad memories occasionally get the better of me. I won't let them interfere with my duty or compromise your safety."

"I'm not worried about me, you stubborn ass. I'm worried about you!" Desmond said. "You're one of those fools that refuses to bend, right up until you break. Until you *shatter*. You've done so much for me, including saving my life on three occasions now."

"I have not—"

"In the castle, on the ship, at the camp where I had to hide in a tree," Desmond hissed, fighting a sudden, sharp urge to grab Chass by his shirt and shake him until he started showing sense. "Do not downplay your efforts or attempt to deflect me. You're not obligated to tell me anything, but leaving aside I want to help, I am a former monk, literally *trained* to be of such service. Better than most, I do know how to listen without offering judgement or unwanted advice."

Chass gave a curt shake of his head. "I already have a priest, but thank you."

Desmond had never been so close to losing his temper in his life, and he wasn't even actually angry. He was worried, but it was easier to be pissed off. Looked like he was going to need those breathing exercises very soon. Biting back his temper, he said, "I don't want to be your priest. I want to be your friend."

That turned Chass's beautiful eyes as cold and bleak as a winter sea. "You are High Consort Allen's friend."

"So?"

"So he has good reason to despise me—reasons that are his to tell, not mine. You would do well to heed him, Your Majesty. My honor to serve, but you and I will never be friends, not if you truly care about Allen. Now let us get back inside; you shouldn't be out here."

"There is snow as far as the eye can see, who could possibly find me out here?"

Chass ignored that and simply took hold of his upper arm, all but dragging Desmond back into the house.

"I can walk you know," Desmond muttered, and yanked his arm free when Chass ignored him.

Inside, Chass strode off in that soldierly way of his, vanishing into the dining room to undoubtedly apologize to Wessel and the staff.

No longer hungry, Desmond retreated to his parlor, where thankfully there were decanters and glasses aplenty. Pouring a brandy, he returned to his embroidery, but both lay neglected as the brief moment in the woods turned over and over in his mind. That haunting question wouldn't leave him.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Desmond could find no good answer to that question. Strangely, he felt like he'd heard it before. Or, more likely, *read* it before. Where? Why?

The answers wouldn't come. Like the rest of his life lately, he had a pile of questions and no answers. A pile of fears and no solution.

All he could do was hope he'd make it to land before the ice gave way beneath his feet and he drowned in the freezing dark.

## Chapter Eight

Chass hated those moments when he fell apart. No matter the revenge—justice—he'd taken, no matter the talks with his priest, no matter the time that passed and all that he did to atone and put his past behind him.

Still every now and then something slight, something small and stupid, something *trivial* would come along and he was right back like it had happened yesterday. Would happen tomorrow. Even if Bateker was dead, nothing but a few bits of bone lost in the silt of a river. If even that much was left by now.

His stomach roiled anew, despite the three days that had passed since he'd been defeated by a stupid sauce. *Raspberries*. He'd never known what that fucking scent was, but he could still taste it, smell it, the expensive imported cordial laced with bitter powder that had started it all.

It had been Bateker's favorite drink. Favorite way of drugging his victims until he could use other means of keeping them silent and obedient. Chass had drunk it the first time, despite it being far too sticky sweet for him, to please Bateker, and by extension his mother. He'd wanted desperately to win approval with the obedience his mother had trained into him, to show her he was a good son, even if he was forced into a life he'd never wanted.

After that first horrible night of many, he had drunk it for years, desperate to keep Bateker's attention on him and away from everyone else. Especially Aria, whom Bateker would have greatly enjoyed breaking. Chass had bargained hard and dangerously to keep him away from Aria. Whatever memories he was now left with, at least they weren't Aria's memories instead. He'd meant to spare her everything that Bateker had forever engraved on him, and he'd succeeded in that, but he'd also left her with a complicated guilt. Not his intent, but nothing he could do now... and he'd gotten first a friend, and then a lover, despite deserving neither.

He'd hoped with every battle that Bateker would finally catch an arrow to the head or a sword to the gut. The bastard had possessed a knack for staying alive. Slimy things always did.

*Has anyone ever told you how lovely you are? Surely they have, Your Highness. Toriana herself must have crafted you. You're*



*brehtaking. Those looks are wasted on a battlefield. We shall have to hope nothing too severe happens to them.*

*Tell me, Your Highness, do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Whatever remained in Chass's stomach threatened to come up, but he closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, mentally reciting the prayers that helped him keep the proper pace.

He needed to stop dwelling, but he hadn't expected that *smell* after all these years. Bateker had never told him what it was, too smug and pleased with himself at having such an expensive import that even a prince had never heard of it. The one time Chass had seen the cask it came in before Bateker's aides decanted it, his Bentan hadn't been good enough to read the words scorched into the side.

At least now he knew exactly what to avoid in the future.

Desperate for distraction, he sat at the window and stared out at the unending snow, drawing one knee up to rest his arms on. So much snow, piles and piles of it, more than he'd ever seen, despite his lengthy travels abroad to places where snow was no stranger.

Holy Allorna had commanded winter run deep this year, and his daughter, Holy Callorni, had obeyed with relish. Hopefully it wouldn't last overlong and interfere with the spring planting. Back home, problems were far more likely to arise from Holy Denala, God of the Sea, who had ruined more than one harvest with her tsunamis and hurricanes.

Thinking about home was doing him no favors. Hurricanes and harvests should be Larren's problem.

Sighing, Chass unfolded from the window and returned to the little table where he'd accidentally gathered a small collection of books. His Bentan, largely self-taught and therefore pocketed with gaps and imperfections, made his progress slow, but he was enjoying what he read. Histories, mostly, but there was also poetry that was certainly forcing his skills to improve.

*"Mother..."*

*It had taken him all day—all week, in fact, from the moment he'd returned home—to muster his courage, but at the look on her face it died like a flower under a carriage wheel.*

*"If you've come to lodge some complaint about Penance Gate in the hopes I'll pull you out and let you do as you like, you may as well stop wasting my time."*

*Chass rallied. She had to care. Bateker was— was— was a monster. "But Mother—"*

*"I don't want to hear it. If you worked half as hard at being a mercenary as you worked at trying to slip the net you would be flourishing. Trust me to know what's best for you—and more importantly, what is best for Gaulden."*

*"I understand, Mother." Chass bit back the hurt. The shame. The rage. Why had he been stupid enough to think his mother would listen to him? That she would care even if she did? All she cared about was Gaulden. And Allen. Precious, perfect, crafted-in-her-image Allen, who got all her attention and adoration, got everything he wanted, got to sit at home, where life was safe and easy. Who would never be denied his dreams, never be expected to risk his life daily for the good of the kingdom, would never be forced into bloodshed and murder. Would never be raped by his commanding officer again and again. Beaten until he couldn't move. Trained until he puked and passed out. Would never be woken by a bucket of ice-cold water in the dead of a winter night and forced into a series of impossible exercises under the guise of crafting him into the perfect soldier. Molding him to defend kingdom and empire at all costs. The perfect beast of the Penance Realms. Fierce. Ruthless. Remorseless. Brutal.*

*"Since you're still standing there, I assume you have something to say that's worth my time?"*

*"Yes, Mother." If he was never going to win the war, he could at least win a few battles. "I believe some of the commanding officers are stealing Penance funds for their personal use. It's one of many reasons Penance Gate is lacking. I'd like an independent investigation to remove the rot, so we can reach our full potential."*

*The irritation on her face vanished, replaced by the look he knew best: a queen on the hunt, pleased to have a problem to address, one she could solve ruthlessly, shaping the outcome to her liking. "It'll be taken care of. You were smart to come to me. I'm sorry for assuming the worst and being so harsh. We'll have you captain in no time, and the best mercenary force in Harken. I'm proud of you."*

*Chass almost laughed, but if he did that, he might finally snap. "Thank you, Mother. My honor to serve. If you'll pardon, I need to be off to the horse market to select my new war horses."*

*"Of course. Tell them to bill me personally, a gift for my son."*

*"Yes, Mother. Thank you."*

*She gestured, dismissing him, and Chass departed with a sharp military turn, mind churning with emotions that eventually boiled down into scorching white rage.*

*If being a monster was all he was good for, then so be it. He'd be the greatest monster on the continent.*

Chass pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, trying to stave off the stupid, useless fucking tears that still tried to escape after all this time. Stupid, it was stupid. Bateker had been dead for years. Chass could still hear him screaming. Cursing. Threatening. Sobbing. Pleading. At the end, he'd been lost in hallucinations, incoherent mumbling. The bastard had taken nearly three full days to die. Chass had camped there by the river the whole time to watch, ensure the bastard didn't escape, that he suffered right up until the end, a small measure of justice meted out for all the harm he'd caused. Continued to cause, because some wounds never fully healed.

Bateker had been a monster. He'd made more monsters. Died at the hands of his finest creation. It didn't get more Penance Gate than that.

So many memories he usually kept banked. Pushed down where they couldn't torment him. All slowly rising again to the surface in the aftermath of Larren's murder and all that followed. Dragged the rest of the way by one stupid, fucking Pantheon-damned smell.

Worst of all, he'd had one of his breakdowns in the middle of a mission, possibly the most important mission he'd ever been given. A mission he'd botched from beginning to end. Well, middle. They were a long way from the end.

Desmond had been kind, but all it had done was remind Chass that this was a mission, and once they returned to Harken and Desmond learned the full truth about him, he would regret every kind word and gesture.

As nice as it had been not to be wholly alone while bad memories—no, traumatic memories, he wasn't supposed to avoid acknowledging that—tried to get the better of him, it would be despicable to continue accepting comfort from a man who called himself Allen's friend.

Chass was here to deliver Desmond safely to Harken. That was all. Clearly it was a reminder he'd needed, even if Holy Eshta had been particularly, well, brutal in his methods.

He would probably need many more reminders, because despite himself, despite everything in him that railed against having to endure one

more pain, Chass was drawn to Desmond. His honesty, his humor. His kindness, despite a world and life that should have left him hard and mean. Like Kamir, though, Desmond had kept his sunshine center.

Desmond was also a man of rare integrity. He was a good king, and if Desmond did not take back his throne, Chass had every faith that Benta would regret that mistake for the rest of their existence. Much like High King Sarrica had made all the difference for Harken, Desmond was good for Benta. Unlike Harken, Benta was too fucking stupid to see that.

It was also nicer than Chass wanted to admit to have someone who understood him in ways even Aria didn't. He loved her dearly, but she'd never understood his faith, as casual and dismissive as most people.

The way Desmond had helped him, comforted him, when so many only saw a monster and left him alone...

Yes, it was far too easy to think more of Desmond than he should. Feel more about Desmond than he would ever be allowed to acknowledge. The more distance he kept between them, the better.

When he had himself under control, Chass washed up and got properly dressed to face the rest of the day. He wished this damnable snow would relent so they could be on their way. There was some comfort in the fact that it was bad enough their pursuers couldn't travel in it either, but Chass wouldn't be happy until they were moving again.

Taking a last few calming breaths, he pulled on the mantle of Captain of Penance Gate and finally left his room. The past few days, he'd left it only to check on the guards and ensure all was well, that nothing in the weather had changed. For better or worse, Lord Wessel and His Majesty had left him alone, though Chass cringed to think it was from pity more than anything else.

Whatever the motivation, though he would vastly prefer it not be pity, he was grateful. There was nothing anyone could do, not really, and they only made things worse when they tried. He could still feel Desmond's hand curled in his own, while Chass sat out in the woods trying to bring himself back under control. It was a touch he'd treasure, because few were the people willing to even approach a monster, let alone touch one.

But there was a world of difference between a helpful touch in the moment and hovering incessantly trying to fix something that couldn't be fixed. Desmond seemed to understand that... Chass wanted it to be that Desmond understood... but probably it was pity. At least it wasn't 'I don't

want to deal with this anymore.' Even the most cynical parts of him could not see Desmond behaving that way. Even thinking that way. It was part of the appeal that Chass wanted desperately not to feel.

Relief swept through him when he encountered a maid in the hall, a real distraction from his own stupid head. "Do you know where His Majesty and Lord Wessel are?"

"In the green drawing room, Your Highness. Would you like me to escort you there?"

"No, thank you, I can find my way, and I do not want to interrupt your day."

She curtsied and went on her way, and Chass went on his.

The green drawing room was toward the back of the house, one of the smaller parlors that seemed to be used exclusively by family, rather than the fancier ones toward the front used for guests.

He rapped on the closed door, and a moment later Wessel opened it, breaking into one of his earnest smiles. "Your Highness! We were just discussing whether or not to come bother you—we had such good news to share. Come in, come in." He opened the door wider and once Chass was inside, slipped out himself, likely to call for more coffee or some such.

"Good morning," Desmond replied quietly.

Chass hated the reserve there, the lack of warmth. He was the one who'd said they couldn't be friends, though, and he stood by it, no matter what he truly wanted. "Your Majesty."

Desmond's mouth tightened, but he said nothing, only resumed his embroidery. He had a deft hand, the work quick and beautiful. An unusual thing to see in a nobleman of Benta, even stranger in a royal. It was a skill that suited Desmond, though, with his patience and attention to detail, how self-contained he tended to be.

He took a seat and swept his eyes around the room—and landed on a book that had been set aside on the table, likely discarded by Wessel or Desmond at some point when they'd switched to conversing. Despite himself, he picked it up and read the spine. The lettering was ornate, though, difficult to read. Why did books always insist on using typesetting that seemed counterintuitive to its purpose? Didn't they want people to actually read the book they put so much time and effort into?

"It says 'Condori' if you're struggling as much as I was," Desmond said quietly. "It's horrible lettering. That particular printing shop is well-

known for making their book covers practically illegible."

"I see," Chass replied, and set the book down again, because he had no idea what 'Condori' was and had no intention of asking. It wasn't any Bentan word he'd ever heard before—it didn't even sound Bentan, almost more Carthian, or a bad attempt at Tricemorien. "What are you embroidering?"

Desmond sighed. "Is this what we're going to do now, Your Highness? Resume formal address, ask banal questions with even more banal answers? I know you're mad at me, and even angrier with yourself, but I liked us the way we were, whatever decisions you made for me regarding our relationship. I respect your feelings on the matter, as there is clearly a sordid history between you and Allen that I know nothing about. But I won't have it inserted into the middle of my relationships, my choices, especially while each day my survival is tenuous at best. If you will not be my friend, so be it, but I would at least like us to go back to being friendly. I do not want to spend the rest of this journey, in all the misery it will undoubtedly provide, acting like I'm trapped at the world's most tepid afternoon tea."

Chass inhaled sharply at the words, thoughts tumbling, but in the end, Desmond was right. There were circumstances where Chass very much had the right to make all the decisions, but this wasn't one of them. Even if he'd done it primarily to protect himself, to avoid the inevitable hurt when Desmond learned just how much of a monster he really was, all the friendliness he'd wasted.

But what was one more hurt? There were so many, they formed a shapeless pile, not all that different from the way he'd swiftly stopped counting his kills. "As you wish. I did ask sincerely after your embroidery. All soldiers know how to sew, it's how we keep our expensive armor and surcoats functioning for as long as possible. Few of us know anything as delicate and labor intensive as embroidery."

That earned him a soft smile, the happiest he'd seen Desmond since Chass's stupid—no, not stupid, another thing he was supposed to not think or say about himself. Though he was fairly certain he'd already failed that one roughly ten times this morning alone.

"There's not much to do when you're snowed into a monastery. During the rest of the year, we have more work than we can handle, but by winter it's only the little, quiet things: copying manuscripts, cleaning,

sewing and embroidery. We make ice wine too, but that still leaves plenty of hours to while away." He smoothed out the piece he was working on for Chass to see, which proved to be a shawl. "Normally I'd have it on a frame, since it's much easier to stitch that way, but Wessel has no spares around, and I certainly am not going to commandeer one from the staff. They have plenty of their own work to do without me making it more difficult. Especially since we probably won't be here much longer."

Chass smiled ever so faintly. "I think they would have enjoyed telling people that a king borrowed their tambour frame."

Desmond laughed. "Maybe." He nodded to the discarded book. "I don't know if myths and mysteries interest you, but if they do, you'd probably enjoy the tale of Condori. It's a legendary 'lost village' from the days when Benta extended into parts of what is now Cartha. There is some truth to the tale, but the vast majority of tellings these days are largely embellishment and outright fantasy. That book is a discussion of the few facts that are known, and how the most popular fantastical additions came to be. Does Harken have similar tales?"

"I would imagine most cultures do," Chass replied. "I do not know them all, but there's a popular Gaulden one, I think absorbed from Islander tales that reached the mainland and were spread and altered accordingly. It's about a magnificent society that once lived on a small island, smarter and more advanced than all the people around them, but wiped out by a terrible earthquake and storm, and lost forever, their knowledge with them."

"That sounds fun. You'll have to tell me the tale sometime, I—" He broke off as the door opened, and Wessel entered, followed by a servant with a fresh coffee service.

Once the servant had settled the new service and removed the old, closing the door behind her, Wessel sat with his usual exuberance. "Did you tell him the good news, Your Majesty?"

"I would never break your heart by denying you the chance," Desmond said with a laugh.

Chass's brows rose. "I don't suppose the good news is the rebels are all dead?"

"Not that good, I'm afraid," Wessel said with a sigh. "No, a falcon managed to reach us today, because the snow is easing to the south, which means it likely will clear up here in the next day or two. Three days at worst, hopefully, and you can be on your way again. I still wish you'd take

an escort with you." He held up his hands in defeat when Chass gave him a look. "I know, I know. Drink some coffee, Your Highness."

Why the man insisted on 'Your Highness' instead of 'Captain' Chass could not deduce, but it wasn't worth constantly arguing over. Instead, he obediently poured himself coffee, which he was forced to admit Benta did better than anyone. "What are the chances more snow will arrive before we can depart?"

"High, unfortunately, but there will be a break, according to people I trust. Weather is a mercurial mistress, but she can be predicted to a point. You should have enough time to make it to a reasonably safe location. It's all marked on the map we're packing with the rest of the supplies."

"I appreciate it, my lord."

Wessel scoffed. "You are the one doing all the real work, Your Highness. I can do this much." He took several swallows of coffee, then set the cup down. "Now then, my kitchen staff has been on me to ask you a question."

It took more effort than Chass liked to remain unaffected by the question. He'd known questions would arise, but he'd stupidly hoped otherwise, that after he made his apologies the matter would be closed.

"They want to know your favorite foods. They're quite determined, and I'd be grateful if you indulged them."

"My favorite foods?" That was not the question he'd expected. Not at all. No one had ever asked him that before. His mother approved all the menus back home, and when he was with Penance Gate, he ate whatever was available. Prince he might be, but he was the hammer, not the crown. His favorite foods mattered to nobody.

Except he was the crown now, and someday approving menus would be part of his job. The first thing he was going to do was get rid of that stupid rule.

"I like seafood. Scallops. Smoked fish. Especially with rice. There's a dish we make back in Gaulden, rice with saffron and other spices, piled with all manner of seafood."

Wessel laughed. "Of course your favorite would be one of the hardest things for us to get here inland. But I think they can manage something."

"I'm a soldier more than I'm anything else. I like food, and am grateful to get it, no matter what kind it is." Unless it was raspberries,



apparently, but thankfully nobody said anything.

"If I tried to tell them that, I'd be sent back here with my ears blistered. Pardon me again while I go appease my kitchen staff." He finished his coffee and hustled out of the room, speaking with someone in the hall before the door had even fully closed.

Desmond glanced his way briefly, smiling softly. "They were quite distraught, from what Wessel has told me."

"It's hardly their fault," Chass replied. "I didn't even know what the damned fruit was called. It's not common in Harken—anywhere in Harken. I wish everyone would drop the matter, instead of making a production of it."

Desmond lifted the shawl to give his stitches a critical look-over. "They take pride in their work. Let them restore their honor, unless it troubles you that greatly."

Chass stifled a sigh. This was precisely the sort of thing Lanora was always talking about. "As they wish, then." He was fairly certain there was no stopping it anyway.

They lapsed into silence, and Chass retrieved the book he'd earlier set aside. Opening it, he flipped carefully through the delicate pages, the edges catching on his callouses, a constant reminder his hands would never be those of a nobleman. He was far more suited to snapping necks than sipping coffee, no matter what his bloodline.

"Do you think we'll encounter much more trouble on our way?" Desmond asked, and there was no missing the faint hope in his voice that the answer would be no.

"Yes." Chass looked up from the book, which was full of long, complicated words he didn't recognize anyway. He detested academic works that went out of their way to be as inscrutable as possible. The point was to share knowledge, not hoard it. "There's been plenty of time for them to relay messages to contacts in Cartha that we may be traveling that way. We can't outsmart Cartha in their own mountains."

Desmond's mouth quirked, hands falling idle in his lap as he focused on Chass. "You have allies, though. That should make things somewhat easier for us, I should think."

"After a fashion, yes. Cartha is understandably loyal to no one except Cartha, but there is a clan I've formed an alliance with."

Desmond huffed a soft laugh, shaking his head ever so faintly. "How in the Goddess's name did you manage that? I have experienced negotiators who have been trying their entire professional careers to build any relationship better than 'tenuous' and failed miserably."

Chass laughed, which seemed to please Desmond for some reason, to judge by the way his face brightened. "Penance Gate helped them once."

"We help Carthians all the time, and they'd still gladly murder us in our sleep. Come on, Harken bird, chatter like the rest of your countrymen. Stop being modest and taciturn; the gossip is wanting."

That got another laugh, which made Desmond look even more pleased with himself. Still smiling faintly, Chass said, "The whole story really isn't that interesting. Penance Gate was pushing through the mountains, hunting out some problematic Bentans at the time who'd raided some villages in Delfaste."

"We saw smoke—a lot of it. Too much. We headed for it and found an entire Carthian village on fire. The whole place reeked of gunpowder and fire oil. We never caught the Bentans, so we can't say for certain, but it seemed pretty clear they came across the village and decided to burn it to ensure their own escape. If we hadn't gone to investigate, a great many more people would have died. By the same token, it was our fault, to a degree, that the village was burning at all. We lingered some weeks to help them rebuild."

"What did His Majesty say when you told him?" Desmond asked quietly, a strange tone to the words that Chass couldn't parse, as if he was expecting something, waiting for it. That made no sense, though.

Chass gave a bare shake of his head, staring at the table as memories rolled through his mind. "I never reported it. Blamed the weather and frustrating Carthians for our failure."

"I see," Desmond said softly, but with satisfaction. "That was kind of you."

Chass looked up, startled.

"Not what a king should say?"

"You've never been what a king 'should' be," Chass said gruffly. "If you were, we'd still be at war, and you'd still have your throne." They'd never have met, not even as enemies on the battlefield. They'd have lived and died without ever knowing the other, and while Chass could not think of a reason that Desmond would be happy to have met him... no matter the

pain that would come later when Desmond rejected him, Chass was happy to have met him, even gotten to know him. He wished he hadn't lost so many of his people in this fight, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

"Interesting words coming from a man who had the chance to gain a powerful ally for his empire but instead chose to let the people live in peace."

"One village out of dozens would have made no difference." Cartha dealt with enough always being stuck between Harken and Benta. Chass wasn't going to turn one village into a tool to wrest cooperation from the whole, which was exactly what would have happened. "Hopefully we don't bring them renewed harm by seeking out their help."

"Given all the backstabbing Benta has done lately, they won't want to do anything further to piss Cartha off once and for all. Then again, if my countrymen had that much sense, we would not have cooperated with Treya Mencee and hired the Triumvirate to try and restart war with Harken." He smiled sourly. "I'll say this for being a fallen king: I don't have to be in charge of the political games anymore."

Chass tilted his head. "Are you not planning on taking your throne back?"

"I don't think I'm in any position to be making such decisions. I'm not even capable of keeping myself alive at present. If Penance Gate hadn't come for me, I'd be missing my head right now. Kettermane had just finished insisting on doing it himself." Desmond shuddered visibly. "So it wouldn't have even been a quick death."

Chass's mouth flattened. Despite what people said, Penance Gate only caused what death and destruction couldn't be avoided, unlike entirely too many mercenary bands. They had a role and they filled it, but that role wasn't, contrary to popular belief, to cause mass destruction and endless suffering. Their role was to prevent those things. They were the beasts sent to fight monsters. If he caught any of his people doing something as horrible as making sport, they were thrown out with a week's pay and told never to show their face again. If he had to kill, he preferred to do it quickly and efficiently. Bateker was the only person he'd ever tortured to death, and that bastard had deserved every single moment of his suffering.

Beheading was an awful way to kill someone. If done correctly, it was quick and relatively painless, but it took a great deal of skill to do it in

one smooth, clean blow. More often, it resulted in a horrific, hacking mess where the victim passed out from pain, and then died from blood loss, long before their head was successfully removed.

"It was Bitter Frost that hurt the most," Desmond said quietly, staring at his embroidery. "I thought they at least were truly loyal. I never thought people I trusted that strongly would be the ones to cut the deepest. Bethany used to sit with me some nights. I counted her a friend. Matthias and she were former lovers. She slit his throat like he was a pig sent to the butcher. I'll never understand."

"I'm sorry," Chass said, aching to offer more than useless words, but what in the world did he know about comforting anyone? Even with Kamir, he'd only been able to offer up awkward, fumbling words. "I wish I could offer an explanation that would grant understanding, but the minds of people are as mercurial as the weather. Those such as her always get what they deserve, though, in life or in death. I would wager my crown she is regretting her choices. Most of them do."

Desmond smiled faintly and returned to his embroidery, and Chass went back to tackling the cumbersome book while they waited for Wessel to return. The silence that fell between them was easy, comfortable, a final mocking note on how easy it was to talk to Desmond, to simply *be* with him, in a way Chass couldn't with most people. Aria, Lanora. Riker, to a lesser degree. Kamir, likely, if they ever spent more time together, something unlikely to ever happen.

Whatever his relationship with Desmond, if it could even be termed that, it would melt like snow in spring when they reached Harkenesten. He'd be wiser to leave the room, retreat to his solitude once more, and spare himself a bit more future hurt.

Chass stayed where he was.

## Chapter Nine

They departed in the dead of night, when the air was painfully cold but the full moon reflecting off the snow provided more than adequate light. Ideally, their pursuers would not make the same choice, and it would give them that much more of a lead. Only time would tell.

It was the kind of night meant for stargazing, huddled under warm blankets and furs, sipping hot mulled wine, only the occasional cry of an owl or other nocturnal creatures to break the silence. Desmond could not think of a better person to do that with than Chass, even if he tried to be grumpy and ruthlessly practical about it as seemed to be his habit.

Tucking that hopeless fantasy away with many others, Desmond looked over the map one more time, making absolute certain he had his route memorized, down to the last detail. Tucking it securely away, double checking Chass was set, he finally gave the order to move to the eager team.

The dogs burst into motion, treating the snow and bitter cold like the greatest of toys. The first stage of the journey was relatively straightforward, with only a single turn that would have to be made once they cleared the low hills that led into the valley they had to cross that night. Come morning, they'd rest, and after that the journey got much trickier, as they'd be dealing with far more complicated terrain.

All that was assuming they had to contend with nothing more than weather and terrain. Though it seemed impossible people could still be chasing them successfully after that, Chass was certain they were, and he didn't strike Desmond as being wrong about that sort of thing very often.

So they traveled, stopping only a few times for brief breaks. Though he kept some attention on the trail, the dogs didn't really need his help much to run a straight line. The rest of his attention rotated between reciting prayers, worries about the journey, and Chass.

Ever since that dinner, that moment in the woods, it had been impossible not to wonder what had happened to Chass that he was so deeply traumatized. Desmond could come up with several possibilities, every last one a nightmare, but how could such things happen to a prince?

Surely Chass would have had avenues to stop the abuse, whatever form it took, by simply removing the problem outright or having his parents do it.

On the other hand, how many people had Highmont helped over the years, from the poorest to the wealthiest, when they fled for sanctuary, desperately trying to escape abusive husbands, wives, parents, and more. Some of the victims who'd come to them had possessed all the power in the world, but abusers always had ways to render it useless, to make themselves the only power that mattered. From what little Chass had said about his mother... well, it wasn't hard to imagine that he might have been primed as a child for further abuse later in life.

Desmond ached to ask, to help, but the questions weren't his to ask, and forcing help upon someone wasn't helping at all. Still, after all that Chass had done, endured, and suffered for him, it gnawed at Desmond to be able to do nothing in return.

Except make and embroider a stupid cowl he'd yet to work up the nerve to give. Honestly, it was a wonder to him anyone had thought dragging him out of a monastery—well strictly speaking, he'd been moved from the monastery to prison by the time his father was dead and people needed Desmond to make all the uncomfortable decisions—was a good idea.

A copse of trees and a prominent sign drew him from his thought, and as they passed it, Desmond called out, "Whoa!"

The dogs came to a halt, and Desmond stepped off the sled, removing the protective coverings from his eyes as he strode off toward what looked like a low, shallow hill, but was in fact an embankment. Easy to miss with all the snow and ice, but the trees and signpost designated it. He slid down the embankment, coming to a stop right where the snow thinned out.

"What are you doing?" Chass called out, and then slid down to join him.

"Investigating a possible shortcut," Desmond replied. "If we can cut across the lake instead of going around it, we'll shave at least an hour from our journey."

Chass's usual inscrutable face fractured into a look of abject horror. "You want to sled across a frozen lake? That sort of nonsense is reserved for stories, not something people actually do."

Desmond burst into laughter, muffling it with one gloved hand as the open air caused it to echo loudly in the still night. "We do it all the time, depending on the time of year. I know you've dealt with this kind of weather before, surely."

"I assure you, nowhere else I've been do people go sledding across water just because it's covered in a few fingers' width of ice." Chass grimaced as he stared out over what inexperienced eyes would mistake for an iced-over field but was really the fourth-largest lake in the kingdom. Thankfully, they weren't near the middle of it, but at one of the relatively narrower ends. Still wide enough that having to go around would take time they did not really have. "This sounds like a miserable way to die, and I have nearly died any number of particularly nasty ways."

The comment drew Desmond's eyes helplessly to the lurid scars on Chass's face. "I am surprised you came out of bear claws to the face as well as you did."

"My helmet took damage that allowed the claws to slip between it and my faceplate. The faceplate managed to prevent some of the damage before it was lost entirely."

Desmond sent a silent prayer of gratitude for that bit of divine intervention. "That makes me morbidly curious about your other scars, but I'll have to save being nosy for another time. We need to get moving."

Chass looked like he'd rather just wait and fight if his only other option was going over a frozen lake, but he set his shoulders and returned to the sled like a man going with dignity to his execution. Ugh, no, why had he thought that? Desmond took a deep breath to calm his suddenly churning stomach, tamping down the bad memories that tried to rise up.

Returning to the sled, making certain Chass was ready, he then gave the commands to get the dogs moving, turned to head down the slope and out across the lake.

Ice crackled here and there, but though he listened carefully throughout, Desmond never caught so much as a hint of the ominous cracking that meant they were going for a final, icy swim. He'd fallen through ice once, when he was young, but there'd been people nearby to talk and help him through it, and he'd had training previously. It had been months before he'd been willing to go out on the ice again, but life in Highmont meant life in the rugged wilds that surrounded them, wolves, bears, storms, snow, and more.

Thankfully, that area was so remote that no one else had traversed the ice, leaving it somewhat slick in places but also free of the damage that would have been done by multiple sleds and hundreds of feet, as was always the case on the main portions of the lake.

By the time they reached the other side and cleared the embankment, which was a little steeper and more challenging than anticipated, the barest hints of dawn were beginning to creep along the horizon. Desmond pushed on a little further, until they reached a campsite frequently used by various surrounding villages when they were traveling to and from one another.

Chass all but jumped out of the sled once it came to a stop, and if Desmond was the sort of person who enjoyed flirting with death, he might have teased the fierce and mighty Captain of Penance Gate about being scared of crossing a solidly frozen lake.

Instead, he left Chass to make camp while he tended to the dogs, checking paws, limbs, and more, getting them water and food. They hadn't been able to carry much with them, not with all the weight of two people, but they had enough to get them to the next waypoint before they reached the mountains and had to trade out the dogs for mules or horses anyway. That included emergency supplies, though hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

Once the dogs were settled, cheerfully burrowing into the snow and wrapping themselves into tight circles to stay warm, Desmond collapsed on his bedroll in front of the fire Chass had gotten going. "That's the best thing I've seen all day. I cannot wait to be truly warm again, as much as I love winter."

"I will not miss it, I'm afraid. Winter back home just means more rain, and occasionally it gets cold enough to mist our breath, but only for a smattering of hours the whole season. Out on the open sea is colder, of course, but I don't think the fishermen notice; they generally have more important things on their mind. Holy Denala provides us with much, but she is an unbending and unforgiving god. The ocean has its own rules, and woe betide the fool who chooses hubris over humility when in Holy Denala's domain."

"You love the ocean deeply." The reverence and love with which Chass spoke of it made Desmond love it, or want to love it, and he'd never cared about the ocean one way or another.



Chass looked at him, then back at the food he was preparing, a packet of dried vegetables and meat added to melted snow. "I do. We are not quite as bonded to the ocean as the Islanders, but Gaulden has always had close ties with her."

"Isn't there an annual festival revolving around the ocean? I cannot remember it exactly. Harken holidays were never my strong point, especially those that aren't celebrated across the whole empire."

Smiling fleetingly, Chass replied, "The Festival of Denala, yes. Gifts are offered to Holy Denala, and many people choose that as the time to cast the ashes of loved ones to the ocean, as it's a holy day and propitious time of year." Sadness briefly filled his face, etched so deeply in that heartbeat of a moment that Desmond ached for him, ached to comfort. It wasn't hard to guess that he was thinking about Prince Darren, whose ashes were probably waiting for the next festival.

Desmond scrambled for a distraction, now that he'd successfully stumbled into making everything depressing. "It's little wonder you looked so at home on the ship. When I first woke up, I remember thinking you looked more like a merchant prince than a royal prince."

Thankfully, that seemed to work, as Chass's sadness turned into soft laughter. "A merchant prince? My mother would give birth to kittens if I took up as a merchant, and she doesn't even have the right parts." He stirred the soup and poured it into their cups. "I think the only thing that would offend her more was if I ran off to be an actor."

"I can only imagine what would have happened to me if I'd tried to flee Highmont to become a farmer or something. Goddess forbid." Desmond rolled his eyes and took the soup Chass held out with a murmured thanks. "What would you have been, if you could have chosen, instead of prince being picked for you?"

Chass lifted one shoulder. "I prefer not to dwell on such questions. I am what I am, and nothing will ever change it. There are many people in the world who were born into lives that will give them nothing but pain and misery. To wish for something different is to be ungrateful for what I have, and that is a level of arrogance that would offend the entirety of the Holy Pantheon."

"Her Most Holy Grace doesn't punish fanciful thoughts and the pondering of what if, only ingratitude and entitlement." Desmond sipped at his soup, grateful for the warmth it offered. "When I was a boy, my dream

was that my father would treat me like a son—an adored son. As I settled more into my life in Highmont, I was happy with my scholarly pursuits and traveling from village to village to assist people however we could. I've always wished to see more of the world, but running away would have been exactly what my father wanted, and I refused to do anything to please him. If he wanted me dead, he was going to have to do the deed himself, not wait for me to do it for him."

"I certainly appreciate wanting to thwart your parent," Chass said dryly. "Why did he finally have you thrown in prison?"

Desmond finished his soup and used nearby snow to clean the cup out. "The fighting was not going his way; people were getting restless and angry. They were looking for new solutions. I was too well liked. I never advertised my identity, but somehow people always came to know it anyway, and word spread further and further of the quiet little monk prince devoting his life to humility and good works. My father wasn't about to tolerate that, but he was too busy with war to have time for me, so off to prison I went. I don't even remember what charges he trumped up." He shrugged. "Imagine my surprise when I was released and informed I was now crown prince, and shortly to be king." It really wasn't a mystery at all why he hadn't been able to hold the throne. No training, no experience, and he'd never wanted the damned thing anyway. "What's it like to have family that's not unbending and borderline cruel?"

Chass's face darkened. "I wouldn't know. My mother has always had very firm ideas for her kingdom, and even firmer plans for how her progeny fit into those ideas. My father and dame stood by her always. Her children obeyed. Defiance was not an option. Larren was the crown. I was the sword. Manda was the shadow. Allen was the jewel."

The jewel to be traded away, was the whole phrase, if Desmond was remembering correctly. In Harken, as in Benta, youngest children were for bartering. "I feel if my father hadn't been a bloodthirsty madman, my lot would have been much the same. Polished up and traded for power or wealth, or more likely both." Desmond finally put his cup away. "I'm sorry, I keep making this conversation depressing. I'm sorry your family is so rigid. We all have our fates, and attempting to avoid that fate is a fool's game, but neither are we meant to stand and do nothing. Her Most Holy Grace weaves a tapestry that only She can see and comprehend, and so our

fates are known, but they are spun and woven, not carved into unyielding stone. There is always room for choice and change."

"We believe much the same," Chass said on a soft sigh that spoke volumes of things he would probably never say, for reasons of faith, sheer stubbornness, or a belief that he simply couldn't.

Stifling his sudden attack of nerves, because honestly, was he a child? Desmond reached into the satchel he'd brought from the sled and pulled out the hooded cowl he'd made, smoothing over the embroidery before offering it. "Here. I thought you could use a bit of additional warmth."

Chass stared blankly, but when Desmond offered it again, slowly set his soup aside and took it in both hands. "This is for me?"

"Yes. Why the puzzled look? Surely you've been given presents before."

Chass didn't reply, just unfolded and smoothed out the cowl, running his thumb over the various sea creatures Desmond had stitched with such care. Desmond had made it so the hood would fall well forward, lending plenty of warmth and blocking wind, but not entirely sacrificing range of vision. It could be worn loosely around the neck and shoulders or secured more tightly, up around the mouth and nose. They were worn frequently in the mountain villages and surrounding valleys, but toward the more populated areas people wore them less. Desmond had always found the alternatives lacking.

He bit back questions, not wanting to sound needy or push for things Chass might not be comfortable doing, given his religious admonishments regarding gifts.

"It's beautiful," Chass said. "To answer your question, no, I'm not accustomed to receiving gifts. Such things aren't given to Penance Beasts. I thank you."

"You're welcome," Desmond said, tamping down on anger that would accomplish nothing. The more he learned of Chass's life, the more apparent it became that he'd been subjected to one misery after another, to cruelties that left him so traumatized just the smell of a raspberry could trigger the awful memories.

There was no place to direct his anger, though, so it was best to let it go. Doing so took some effort, but Desmond was an old hand at dealing with futile anger.

"We should rest," Chass said.

Desmond started to reply, but wound up yawning instead, which was reply enough. He looked over at the dogs, who were all fast asleep, as content in the snow as anyone else would be by a roaring fire.

Bedding down, he pulled his cloak tightly around him and let exhaustion finally have him.

\*~\*~\*

They woke around midday and pressed on for several more hours, stopping for a long rest in late afternoon. "We're making good time," Desmond said. "Those clouds worry me a bit, but we should reach the waypoint before they reach us."

Chass didn't look convinced, but he'd probably kept himself and many others alive over the years by always assuming the worst and preparing for it.

Finishing their hasty meal, they bedded down for a few hours' rest, and woke to... far less moonlight than Desmond had anticipated. Far less than he liked. The clouds he'd noted earlier were much closer than they should be. "We need to move."

Chass said nothing, only helped him get the dogs harnessed to the sled, a job that would have been a good deal easier with a third person, but Desmond was long used to making do.

They sped off, and he let the dogs go as fast as he dared, calling out commands to guide them along a difficult trail of turns, sharp drops, and other hazards.

Unfortunately, the best effort he and the dogs could muster were no match for the weather, which was coming up hard and fast. He called a halt and pulled out the tools strapped to the sled. "We need to dig a shelter."

"I can do that," Chass said. "Tend the sled and dogs."

Desmond did so, securing the dogs first, getting them to a location he could mark to find later no matter how much snow they had to burrow out of, and doing his best to ensure they'd be all right if buried for several hours. Mostly, he would have to trust the dogs to know what they were about, but these were well-trained mushers, so they should be fine.

Next was the sled, where he made certain everything was strapped down tightly before tying it to a nearby tree, also marked so he'd be able to

identify it later. Slinging the satchels of food and water over his shoulders, Desmond returned to Chass, who had built the shelter exactly as he'd said he could.

Chass motioned for Desmond to follow and led the way inside. Once Desmond was in, Chass adjusted the spare blanket he'd used to improvise a door, ensuring just enough air could get in that they could breathe. There were two more holes in the roof, so the air flowed properly without costing them too much of the warmth they'd build up between them.

Setting aside the satchels, Desmond helped arrange the branches and leaves Chass had hastily gathered into a bed and arranged their bedrolls, blankets, and cloaks before finally sitting down. Outside, the wind began to howl, and if they dared to open the door there would probably be nothing but endless white to greet them.

"Ordinarily I love winter," Desmond said, "but right now, all I have to say is: fuck snow."

Chass laughed, open and bright and genuine, such a beautiful sound that all of Desmond's ire melted like ice in the sun. Mouth still quirked in a hint of lingering smile, Chass said, "I certainly won't miss it when we're back on my side of the mountains. Holy Callorni is putting forth her best effort this year; I am grateful I am seldom in her domain."

"Even for those of us who grew up in this weather, it can be a bit much to take at times." For all his complaining, Desmond would miss Benta winters, and he had the feeling he'd never see them again. Better to be alive, though.

They had a long way to go yet, but they had reached the foothills, and once they could get moving again, would be in the mountains proper within a few hours. The journey only got more dangerous from there, but it was progress, and meant they were out of Benta, which meant that those trying to kill him faced much greater penalties if apprehended. Not that he thought Chass would let any of them live long enough to worry about that. Chass was far too efficient for that.

Desmond sighed. "At least I'm not stuck in a shelter with a bunch of people who think bathing is something that only happens in the warm months."

"You should try pirates sometime; most of them smell like a combination of shit, fish, and clothes that have never been washed."

Desmond's stomach churned just thinking about it. He rarely went down to the harbors, but whenever he did, the smell of fish and grime was far from his favorite thing. He could not imagine being trapped on a ship with people who smelled that way day in and day out. "You definitely win."

Chass chuckled briefly. "I don't think anyone wins."

"True enough," Desmond said, climbing onto the makeshift bed and using one of the satchels as a pillow. Chass followed suit with the other satchel, pulling their cloaks and blankets around them, both of them working to ensure the ends were tucked in. Since they couldn't build a fire, body heat and the little shelter were all they'd have to keep from freezing to death until the storm was past.

Despite the fact they'd slept in such proximity before, something about the arrangement caught in his chest, made him aware of every little shift and brush and quiet breath. Maybe because last time they'd barely been conscious and had fallen asleep immediately. Now, Desmond was still too keyed up and anxious to fall asleep, despite the oppressive weight of his exhaustion. Meditation seemed the best solution, but his restlessness made that difficult as well.

When he could simply take no more of the silence, of his acute awareness of every rise and fall of Chass's chest, Desmond scrabbled for conversation. "So I know about the bear claws. What about your other scars? Unless you dislike discussing them."

"They're on my face; it makes them a frequent topic of discussion," Chass said wryly. "The stories are never as exciting as people hope. War seldom is. I lost the portion of eyebrow to a wound that got infected. By the time it was healed up, the hair simply didn't grow there anymore. The cheek is from the very tip of a glaive; much like the claws, I narrowly avoided a killing blow." Chass shifted, and Desmond thought he turned his head, but in the increasingly dark shelter, it was impossible to tell. A pity, because those blue eyes were always worth admiring. "What about you, Your Majesty? What scars do you have tales for?"

"Not many. A few nicks from working in the kitchens. I once got bitten on my upper left arm rather badly by a scared dog, but thankfully it healed well. A small burn on the back of one hand from where an exceptionally hot pan hit it. All the normal hazards of working in a monastery, where everybody does everything, though usually they preferred

to keep my turn in the kitchen to as bare a minimum as they could fairly manage. My cooking is adequate; my coordination is not."

Chass chuckled at that. "I see. Too much going on all at once?"

"Essentially. It's why they gave up teaching me swordsmanship so quickly. I was a glorified practice dummy for everyone else."

Chass replied in Benta, "*You can't find where you fit without learning where you don't fit.*"

It was an old adage, one of the first taught to children in the temple schools that all were required to attend until the age of ten. Scholars, secular and spiritual, loved to debate it, but most people simply took it to mean that failure and change were inevitable parts of life.

Desmond laughed. "Well, I have definitely learned that I don't fit on a throne."

"Time will tell, and there are many thrones," Chass said, and shifted so he was lying on his back, facing away from Desmond.

Whose stupid heart had decided to start racing at the words, for no apparent reason at all. What did Chass mean, many thrones? If they were living their ordinary lives, the words could easily be taken as an indication that marriage negotiations might be in his future. Which... well, that actually wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Marriage had always been an effective tool—an effective weapon, some might say. For years and years, Desmond had anxiously waited to receive word that his father had found someone to marry him off to, some distant prince or princess, even a powerful noble, who would both add to his own power and further remove Desmond from his life.

It was entirely possible he'd be pushed into marriage to help resecure his throne, or at worst offered a different throne if he agreed to surrender Benta once and for all. So many possible negotiations, and every last one of them involved forcing him to go one place or another.

Just once it might be nice to have a say in his own life, to choose what he did and where he did it... but he'd been born a prince, a privilege few enjoyed. Did he really have the right to complain about the duties that came with the post? His people were what mattered now, and he'd marry a goat if that was what it took to establish peace.

If he'd been given a choice in his life, though... he'd have liked to have led a life that would let him meet Chass under ordinary circumstances, where they could meet and become friends... maybe even lovers. If life

were kinder and more fair, he could easily see himself falling for Chass in a way that current circumstances made impossible. If Chass were not now Crown Prince, if Desmond was not deposed and incompetent... yes, the second son of a Harken kingdom would have made for a powerful alliance.

Such thinking had all the substance of fairy floss, however. His feelings for Chass were at best described as complicated, if not futile. He could not even get Chass to be his friend, let alone reach a point where he could consider other possibilities.

Rolling onto his side, turning away to give Chass more of the space he seemed to want, Desmond pulled out the beads Chass had made for him and silently went through his prayers—for gratitude, strength, and finally a quiet, humble plea that She cast her protecting light upon Chass.



## Chapter Ten

When Chass woke, there was enough light in the shelter that it seemed to promise the storm, at least the worst of it, was over. He shifted to sit up and froze as he realized that at some point in the night he'd turned to curl around Desmond, arm draped over him and all. For the body heat, no doubt, but it still made him uncomfortable to act with such familiarity when Desmond had not been awake to consent to it. Even if Chass hadn't been awake either.

Pulling away, immediately missing Desmond's warmth and simple presence more than he liked admitting even to himself, Chass scrubbed at his face in an effort to banish the last of his uncharacteristic grogginess. As awake as he was going to get, he fetched the shovel and other tools, then climbed out of the world's most uncomfortable bed and set to work on getting out of the shelter. It took some doing, as plenty of snow had piled against the improvised door, but after what felt like hours of work, but was probably only a matter of minutes, he was able to climb out and up.

He wasn't remotely surprised to see all eighteen of the dogs already up, moving about and even playing, like they were enjoying a warm summer day with a pleasant breeze, instead of a cold so deep and miserable Chass doubted he would ever feel his fingers or toes again.

Pulling up the front of the cowl Desmond had made him to block the worst of the wind, he went in search of the sled. Thankfully, he was traveling with someone who knew what they were about, and it was easy to pick out the strip of bright red fabric that Desmond had tied to a tree branch.

Maybe after this, Holy Callorni would consider the orders from her father fulfilled and grant them respite from her wintry storms.

It took much digging, and frequent breaks before he managed to uncover just the front of the sled. By the time he managed to get the whole thing out, all he'd be fit for was sleeping wherever he fell.

"Come have breakfast," Desmond called from behind him.

Chass turned sharply, annoyed he'd been so immersed in his work he hadn't heard Desmond moving around, or even noticed the dogs had quieted

some. There was a fire crackling in a cleared space, and the smell of food and tea far outstripped his ire for the moment.

Gladly abandoning the shovel, Chass joined Desmond at the fire and accepted the cup of tea he offered. "Thank you."

"Least I could do, given how much work you've done already. You drink that and eat the porridge when it's ready, and I'll take a turn at the shoveling. I won't make nearly as much progress as you, but any little bit helps, right?"

"Yes," Chass replied fervently. "I cannot wait to never see snow again."

"I'm starting to feel that way myself," Desmond said. "I swear, sometimes it feels like the snow is actively working against us, even though I know that's not true. As the Goddess wills, I suppose." He slung the shovel over his shoulder and headed off, his humming swiftly turning to words Chass would hazard he had not learned at Highmont Monastery.

Chass finished his tea quickly and poured a second cup. By the time he'd finished that, the porridge was ready, tepid and runny and largely flavorless, but it at least put food in his stomach.

After cleaning up his dishes, he relieved Desmond, who was red-faced, wheezing, and clearly ready to just let the rebels have him. Chass waved him off and set to work in earnest, this time not stopping until the sled was sufficiently uncovered that they could get the dogs harnessed.

Easier said than done, given how eager they were to be off, but Desmond's expertise kept them in place just long enough to be certain everyone and everything was properly secured.

Then they were off, rushing across the snow at speeds Chass still vehemently disliked, especially when he had no control of the situation.

He settled for closing his eyes for a bit, getting what rest he could, as there was no telling what they'd face when they reached their destination and began the arduous, perilous trek through Cartha.

Still so far to go, but if he could just reach the Yanari Clan, the journey would be made somewhat easier. There was also Clan Tararen, but he had only a passing acquaintance with them. Their policy was broadly "cause us no trouble, and we'll cause you none." Given all the trouble Chass was likely bringing...

Better to hope they reached Yanari first. Which meant Keeta. Hopefully Keeta was doing well, keeping up with his lessons and not

playing out in the cold so much he fell sick again. Chass would not be able to bring him home on his particular visit, not with all the chaos and danger of getting Desmond to safety, but soon. Hopefully it would be him that kept his promise, but well... Aria would see to his arrival in Harkenesten, and he had faith still that Kamir would find Keeta a good home.

Hopefully, with time, Keeta would forgive him for being one more person he loved who died far too soon on him. He would flourish in Harken, and whatever it took, Chass would see to it Keeta was never forced into anything, that he always, *always* had choices. That 'no' was one of those choices.

If only he could be confident he'd be there to ensure that personally, instead of having to trust it to others, no matter how highly he thought of Aria, Lanora, and Kamir. He had only himself to blame. For being a fool. For breaking. For becoming the monster Bateker had been crafting all along. For being too weak to stand up to him until it was too damned late.

*Penance must be paid in blood and pain.*

Holy Shallana willing, he would finally pay his penance and be granted a new life, a new chance.

He would have preferred to improve upon his current life, but that was not his choice to make.

Chass opened his eyes before his thoughts got even drearier, but the landscape rushing by him wasn't much of an improvement. White, white, splashes of brown, hints of smoke, more white, all set against a dull gray sky. Nothing at all like the soft, soothing gray of Desmond's eyes, and wasn't that an absurd, pathetically maudlin thought.

He would give anything to be home one last time, standing on his balcony, enjoying the scent of hibiscus as he looked out over the water, where fish catchers worked off in the distance and families played along the shore. A few of the children always eagerly waved when they saw someone on the balcony, always so charmingly excited when Chass, or whoever else was out there, waved back. Then mortified parents realized what was happening and made the children stop, as though it was a crime for children to happily wave at the royal family.

Sighing into his cowl, Chass tried yet again to put his mind to productive thoughts. If they managed to reach the Yanari, there was a slim chance they'd have a suitable messenger bird, and he could notify Harken of their location, get them to send assistance to better ensure Desmond made it

the rest of the way home. More than likely though, all they'd have was horses and whatever luck Holy Kinar felt like bestowing upon them.

Closing his eyes again, Chass lapsed into prayer, starting with those he held most dear. They were written and still recited in the original Pemfrost, before war had divided it into three kingdoms and the language underwent drastic shifts, consigning their mother language to history. Gaulden had largely retained the religion of Pemfrost, though: Tallista, from the Pemfrost word for 'life source,' also the name of the primary god of the Tallistan Pantheon.

Eventually, Gaulden religion had largely merged into the dominant religion of Harken, Primanism, Tallista absorbed by Prima, other deities blended with their equivalents. Most prayers these days were in Gaulden and Harken, but a few of the most esoteric, rarely used by any but priests and those like Chass, were in the original Pemfrost. They'd taken him ages to learn, as Pemfrost was rife with things Gaulden had dropped long ago, such as gendered everything and more declensions than one language could possibly need. It also did not rely on inflection the way Gaulden and Carthian did, which had taken him a great deal of practice to get the hang of.

Because unlike Allen, Chass hadn't spent night after night being personally tutored by their mother on Pemfrost. Back then, Chass would have surrendered everything he possessed to be given half the opportunities she had strewn at Allen's feet like gifts owed him.

Instead, Chass had memorized prayers and painfully learned each and every word, the most basic conjugations and declensions. Then he'd tried other languages, lugging around primers and textbooks, buying lessons from anyone in camp willing to give them, making a fool of himself in markets and shops to learn by whatever immersion he could manage.

He would never be a silver tongue, or even close to one, but he could scrape by in several languages and could recite the prayers that meant the most to him in their original language. That was, or at least would have to be, enough.

So he recited, starting with the 'Prayer to the Mother of All' all the way through to the 'Prayer of the Penitent' and ending with the 'Prayer of Final Rest.' Each completed line brought a modicum of peace, granted a measure of control, or released that control to They who saw and understood more than he ever would, They in whom he had faith.

He certainly wasn't calm when he finished the trio of prayers, but he was at least calmer.

He was halfway through prayers to Holy Denali when Desmond called for the dogs to halt, and they took a much-needed break to stretch limbs and empty bladders, an evil necessity in freezing temperatures. Once the dogs were rested, they were off again, and that time Chass was exhausted enough to fall into a light doze.

By the time they stopped again, dusk was falling, and he could just barely see smoke billowing into the air from a chimney. The waypoint, hopefully.

Desmond called out, "Whoa!" and the dogs came to a halt just paces away from the door of what seemed to be little more than a glorified shack. The stable behind it was bigger. Chass climbed out of the sled on legs that almost refused to work, stumbling awkwardly until the worst of the stiffness eased.

The door slammed open, and a man who looked more like a stuffed bear Chass had once seen came tumbling out, reeking of sweat, piss, and cheap liquor. "Who the hell are you and what are you aiming to get from me?"

Chass was not in the mood for this. Striding up the man, repressing the urge to gag at the smell of him, he shoved the man into the rickety wall of the shed-cum-cabin and said, "Is this a waypoint or not?"

"You got no business—"

"I can do this with a knife or without," Chass said. "Your choice. I'll ask one more time: is this a waypoint or not."

"Bluerock Waypoint, yessir," the man replied, finally seeming to comprehend the trouble he was not quite in yet.

"We need horses and supplies to travel the mountains, and we need them yesterday. Understand me, or are you so drunk I need to repeat myself?"

"I'll get yer damn horses," the man said, and made a futile effort to shove Chass off.

Sneering, Chass grabbed him by the scruff of his fur-draped coat and threw him in the direction of the stable. "Get to work then, and make certain you do it with clean hands." He braced for the stench and shoved the door of the shack open, but one solid breath of air immediately drove him back out into the snow. "Don't go in there. A pile of week-old corpses

would smell better that whatever happened in there. None but Holy Tash could cleanse that putrid disaster."

Desmond grimaced. "Just what little the wind caught is more than enough for me. Pray Her Most Holy Grace leaves the reason a mystery. Are we certain we want him touching anything we need to handle later?"

Chass just grunted.

It took the better part of an hour, though Holy Kero alone knew why, but at last the man returned leading two enormous horses, the kind built for hard work and harder weather. They were saddled and had bags that, upon inspection, were adequately filled with all the food and other basic survival tools they'd need for the journey. Chass and Desmond made quick work of transferring their own belongings, whatever they could take without overburdening the horses.

When they were ready, Chass turned his attention back to the stinking refuse pile masquerading as a human. Shoving him back into the wall, Chass drew his dagger that time and pressed the tip to his cheek hard enough to draw blood. "We're leaving the dogs behind. Take care of them, you rancid shit stain, or when I learn otherwise, the only thing the next travelers will find in that cabin is your head on a stick. Am I understood?"

The man gulped, staring at Chass like a rabbit at a wolf. "Y-yes, yessir."

"Good." Chass cut his cheek slightly, to drive the message home, then let the man go and stepped away. After cleaning and sheathing his knife, he swung up into the saddle of the nearest horse, a handsome black and gray beast, and looked to Desmond.

Desmond nodded and flicked the reins of his horse, and off they headed, into the snowy dark bound for the impenetrable, danger-ridden fortress that was the Cartha Mountains.

They hadn't been traveling long, however, when the sound of a racing horse came thundering up behind them. "Back," Chass snarled, wheeling his horse around and surging forward so that he was between Desmond and whoever was coming.

He drew up short to see a woman dressed in the livery of Lord Wessel's household, clothes and hair a mess, face lined with fear and exhaustion so deep the skin beneath her eyes looked bruised. "Your Majesty. Your Highness. I was starting to think I'd never catch up to you."

"What's wrong?" Desmond asked sharply.

"Lord Wessel's home was overtaken by rebels not a day after you left. Most of the staff has been arrested or slain, and Lord Wessel's been taken into custody."

Desmond slammed a fist against his thigh. "Damn it."

"They're taking him to Jameth to face trial for treason. I managed to hide in the stables and snuck away once they all bedded down. I don't know if anyone has revealed your plans, but I came to warn you just in case."

Chass jerked his head toward the mountains. "You did the right thing. Can you still ride? Keep up? You can't stay here, and you can't go back. What's your name?"

"Caroline, Your Highness. I was a chambermaid." For a moment she looked about to burst into tears, but in the end only wiped her eyes and jutted out her chin. "Served for two years so far. I was being considered for promotion."

"I think you've more than earned that promotion," Chass said wryly. "If Lord Wessel does not give you a position worthy of your loyalty and dedication, I will. Now let's move."

He didn't dare push the horses too hard, especially Caroline's, but the sooner they were into the depths of Cartha, the closer to impossible it would be for the rebels to find them. Thankfully, there was still enough moonlight to guide their way as long as they stuck to the bare excuse for a path. In a couple more days, that would no longer be true, and they'd be forced to stick to traveling by daylight.

When they reached the famous wall that Benta had built years ago that made freely crossing between the two countries nearly impossible, he wasn't surprised to find the sole gate was guarded by a sleeping pair of fools who smelled like they'd gone for a swim in a wine barrel. "Can anyone in this Pantheon-forsaken country do their job without getting utterly soused?"

"Apparently not," Desmond said with a sigh. "Imbibing through the cold months is a time-honored tradition, but not to this degree. I'm ashamed of my countrymen, truly."

Chass dismounted and strode up to the nearest guard, where he quickly found a heavy ring of keys that should have been far better guarded. If he caught anyone in Penance Gate being so sloppy and careless, they'd have begged Holy Prima herself to grant them mercy.

Turning back, he beckoned to Caroline. "See if they have a fresh horse and supplies you can commandeer."

"Better clothes too," Desmond said. "It's only going to get colder from here."

Caroline dismounted and led her horse away, vanishing into a guardhouse that was only moderately better than the station shack.

As much as Chass would have loved to put the fear of Holy Shammari into the drunk, lazy guards, they weren't his problem, and there wasn't time to spare. So he left them precisely as they were.

Caroline returned a few minutes later, dressed in a stolen uniform and lugging saddlebags she quickly buckled into place. No weapon, other than a dagger anyone with half a brain carried while traveling through the wilderness, but Chass hadn't expected her to be weapons-trained. Hopefully she wouldn't prove a liability or wind up a casualty.

Unlocking the gate, Chass motioned for them to go through, leading his horse after them. He relocked the gate, then threw the keys up and over it so they landed in the snow right by the guard he'd taken them from. He could do nothing about the piss stain at the waystation who would more than likely report their passage, but at least it would be difficult to tell for certain if they'd come this way or taken a route further east before heading into the mountains.

They traveled steadily, having a care for the treacherous path and patches of ice they wouldn't know about until too late. Eventually, though, the forest around them grew too dense for visibility, and they were forced to halt, resting there in the saddles as best they could, cold and sore. The other two drifted in and out, but Chass permitted himself no such thing, constantly alert for any Carthians coming to investigate their latest unwanted guests.

By the time light began to just barely fill the sky, Chass was exhausted, sore, hungry, and utterly sick of everything. Shoving it all down, he woke the other two, and the journey resumed until they reached a suitable place to make camp, mostly so the horses could eat. He lit a fire, but only long enough to make their food, and then put it out again and made certain it would stay that way.

They were back to traveling within an hour, Chass leading the way, carefully following markers that the untrained would never notice, or understand even if they did.

It was approaching midday, the sunlight doing nothing to soften the sharp, bitter cold, when the first Carthians bothered to come out of hiding to



inspect them more closely. Two men and a woman, all with red-dyed feathers in their hair. Scouts of the Rekkari Clan.

"What are doing here?" the woman asked in Carthian, though her dialect wasn't one Chass knew and so was a little more difficult to follow.

He replied, "We're here to visit friends of mine."

"Friends?" the woman asked scathingly. "Who here would call a Harken bird friend?"

Chass lifted his arms in a show of peace, then slowly removed his left glove and unlaced his sleeve before rolling it back to reveal the tattoo on his forearm: a creature that was an amalgamation of many: the body and head of a hare, the antlers of a deer, the wings of a raptor, and snake-like fangs. A Yanari, one of the many 'mythical' creatures the Carthians revered, not unlike the little spirits that Gauldens believed in. Not quite gods, but neither were they ordinary beings.

They stared in surprise and shared a look before one of the men said, "You're Ossi, the Harken bird who helped them."

Ossi. Bone-breaker. Chass didn't know why they called him that; it was rude to ask, and nobody had ever felt the need to explain. It was the Carthian name for a type of vulture. In Harken, they were called bone-eaters. Traditionally, they were representatives of Holy Shammari, her eyes across all the realms and most trusted messengers. Even in the middle of a mountain, where nobody knew anything about his life back in Harken, he was a harbinger of death. A monster who served the Queen of the Beasts.

"That's me," Chass replied. "We aren't here to cause trouble, but to avoid it, and seek to speak with Chief Yanari."

The three scouts looked at each other, then the second man, silent until then, approached Chass and offered up a single feather, dyed a bright blue. "You have permission to pass, though we can't guarantee your safety once you pass the Painted Cliffs."

"I understand. Thank you." Chass secured the feather to his cowl where it could be easily seen, and they resumed riding as the Carthians faded back into the forest.

They pressed onward, Chass leading the way along paths he'd gone to great lengths to memorize—from travel, maps, and simple conversation. By the time they reached the Painted Cliffs, which demarcated the border between one group of clans and another, he was more exhausted than he could remember being in a long time.

"Shouldn't we stop and rest a few hours?" Desmond asked. "We've been going hard for nearly a whole day, not including the sledding."

Chass pinched his eyes shut, willing away the overwhelming weight of bone-deep exhaustion. "Better to keep going until we're in relatively safe territory. Some Carthians will stop us to ask questions; many others will be just as happy to shoot first. We keep going."

"Yes, Your Highness," Caroline replied.

Desmond clearly was not in agreement, but he said nothing, only rode in silence.

Chass made certain the feather was in place and also kept his tattoo uncovered. It would be hard to see clearly, but every bit helped.

The tattoo and token must have worked, or perhaps Holy Kinar was favoring them with good luck, because they made it to the next border marker without incident.

"It's beautiful," Caroline said, wide-eyed and open-mouthed as she took in the rather gruesomely named Blood of the Ancients, an immense waterfall that spilled down from the top of a cliff Chass had no desire to ever be at the top of. He wasn't afraid of heights, but he wasn't in a hurry to enjoy them either.

The fall spilled out into an enormous lake that stretched on so far and wide that it could almost be mistaken for the ocean. Eventually, it spilled into another fall that formed the start of a major river that cut through most of Harken.

Thankfully, they were on the correct side of the lake for their purposes. Chass was also vastly more familiar with this part of the mountains, given how often he came here to visit the Yanari, especially Keeta. His heart kicked up a notch that he would be seeing Keeta soon. The world might be as dark and dangerous as always, but Keeta was a guiding star. "It's not far now, and then ideally we'll be able to rest all we like."

"Goddess willing," Desmond said, and murmured prayers as they continued on.

Late afternoon was just turning to evening when they finally reached the trees that marked the beginning of Yanari territory: two enormous oaks that had twined together in the branches as they grew, forming a natural archway that was especially beautiful in the fall. Right then, covered in snow, icicles hanging along every branch, it looked like the entrance to a wintry palace out of a child's tale.

They were immediately greeted by a triad of scouts, who all broke into smiles as they registered him. "Ossi!"

Chass dismounted, steadying himself against the horse as he swayed briefly, then strode up to greet them, embracing each in turn. "Kora, Tivi, Harlo. How are you?"

"The mountain has been generous. What of you? What brings you to us in the dead of winter, and with such strange company?"

"A long story," Chass said, and related enough of it to make it clear what they needed and why.

Thankfully, they promptly insisted Chass's group come to the village proper to discuss the matter further with Chief Yanari. Her given name was Anya, but Chiefs were always called after their clan name.

Harlo ran ahead to let everyone know, leaving Kora and Tivi to walk with them. Chass remained dismounted, leading his horse as they walked, listening as they chattered about the various goings on in the clan, gossip from other clans, and a story of some young, drunk Delfastiens who nearly found themselves in a watery grave.

Visiting the Yanari always felt like visiting a home away from home. Chass hated that once he returned to Gaulden and took up his role as crown prince full time, he would probably never see the Yanari again.

"How is Keeta?" he finally asked.

"The same as always," Kora said with a laugh. "That boy is too much energy for our small village. I hope you are taking him soon, before he gets impatient and grows wings."

Chass smiled. "Soon. The moment this latest matter is attended."

"Keeta?" Desmond asked, but before Chass could reply, they were across the bridge over a stream that encircled the whole of the village, nestled in a sprawling valley rimmed by distant cliffs. A boy of about ten years or so came barreling toward them like he was a minnow with a shark close behind. "Ossi! Ossi! You're back!"

Chass let go of his horse and knelt to catch the boy up, barely managing to keep them upright. Standing, he smiled and said, "Keeta, you're getting a bit too big to go charging about. One of these days you're going to knock me over and out."

Keeta laughed and hugged him tightly. "No one could ever knock you over, Ossi. You're here, I can't believe it! You've been gone too long."

"I know. I'm sorry." Chass let him slide back to the ground. "I must speak with your aunt and get some rest, and then we can spend time together, all right?"

"Yes! Do you want me to take your horses?" Keeta stared avidly at Desmond and Caroline, but despite his exuberant greetings, was far too shy to ask about them. Chass motioned for them to dismount and bid farewell to Kora and Tivi before leading the way through the village to the large building in the center, where Chief Yanari lived and important meetings and such took place.

Desmond cast him a sideways glance. "Why do they call you Ossi?"

"I haven't the slightest."

Desmond laughed. "Yes, that sounds like you."

Before Chass could ask what in the world that was supposed to mean, they'd reached Chief Yanari's building and were being ushered inside.

Yanari sat on her usual cushion, faded blue with white flowers, smoking a pipe of fragrant yibba leaves. Her graying brown hair was pulled into a loose knot, secured with glossy wooden sticks, and her clothes were lined and trimmed in black and silver fur. She looked as regal as any queen. Like all Cartha chiefs, she had no family of her own—no spouse, no children, to avoid showing favoritism and other such biases. The whole village called her 'Aunt,' and everyone else used her title. "Ossi, it's been a few months. You don't look well."

"Exhaustion," Chass said, and removed his cumbersome boots before taking a seat. Desmond and Caroline followed suit.

Desmond bowed his head. "An honor to make your acquaintance, Chief Yanari. Thank you for tolerating the presence of two strangers."

Caroline remained silent, clearly not fluent in Carthian, but imitated Desmond's bow.

Yanari smiled faintly. "Friends of Ossi are welcome here until their own behavior changes that. Ossi, tell me who your friends are and the whole of the tale my scout brought me."

"This is Caroline, a recent addition to our party. This is His Royal Majesty King Desmond Stearc of Benta."

"Fallen king, let's be realistic here," Desmond said. "I'm not much more than leverage these days."

Yanari's brows rose sharply. "Intriguing. We've heard plenty of whispers and rumors, but little in the way of facts. Tell me, then."

Chass and Desmond obeyed, taking it in turns, until dark had fallen and Chass was so exhausted he felt nauseous.

Setting her pipe aside, Yanari said, "I think your arrival has solved another riddle for me."

"What is that?" Chass asked.

"There is a Harken encampment about an hour or so south. They've done nothing but bide their time, as though waiting for something. I thought they'd try to get our attention, but they must be waiting for us to make the first move. I've been letting them stew. Now I think they might be here for you. Does this symbol mean anything to you, Ossi?"

Chass watched as she deftly drew a symbol in the dirt, heart speeding up as she finished. A snarling beast rimmed in fire and smoke. "That's the crest of Ruinous Horde, one of our mercenary bands." His shoulders sagged as long-held tension bled from them. "Penance Gate must have managed to get a message to Harkenesten. They're probably hoping to find us and escort us the rest of the way home. I wouldn't doubt there's more than one force spread across the mountains."

"We'll contact them, bring the commanding officer here."

"Captain Valess," Chass replied.

"Get some rest; you are in dire need of it. When you wake up, we'll have this Captain Valess waiting for you."

"I'm grateful. I hope I have not brought trouble to your door yet again."

Yanari retrieved her pipe and refilled it from a pouch at her waist, lighting it deftly and sucking in the smoke with the ease of a lifetime. "The spirits move the mountains and all who dwell here. Last I checked, Ossi, you were no spirit." She clapped her hands, and two figures slipped inside to escort them to where they could rest.

Chass went gladly, remembering little of the brief trip, and didn't even get a chance to remove his winter gear before he collapsed dead asleep on the floor.

## Chapter Eleven

Though they'd assured him that Chass was simply exhausted and this wasn't the first or even third time they'd seen it happen, Desmond still sat fretfully by his bed, watching closely for any signs he was worsening.

He'd slept fitfully himself the whole night, and had finally given up at sunrise, dozing in and out as he kept watch over Chass, who muttered in his sleep, ominously heartbreaking words like 'stop' and 'don't' and 'begging you.' Desmond could do nothing but occasionally hold his hand, which seemed to calm him, though he was loath to touch without permission if even half of what he was starting to suspect of Chass's past was true.

On the other side of the cabin they'd been given, Caroline was still dead to the world, but she'd probably been pushed harder than any of them, completely unused to the arduous travel Desmond and Chass had been doing for years, if for different reasons.

Her presence was a constant reminder that Wessel was yet another casualty of this stupid, desperate hunt for Desmond. He wasn't worth so many lives. Or shouldn't be. But the rebels couldn't confidently take control of Benta without ensuring the royal family was wiped out, and their staunchest allies with them. At least Desmond was all they had to worry about there; he would have gone mad with grief if there'd been sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, and more who were also slaughtered.

Just him. Thanks to Penance Gate, thanks to Chass, Desmond was nearly to safety. Nearly to a place from which he would have power again, could barter and bargain to ensure the safety of his people. He had no illusions about reclaiming the throne, but he would be damned if he let those warmongering bastards have it.

Soon. Help was close, and Harken territory began at the base of the mountains.

He pressed the back of his hand to Chass's forehead, reassuring himself for the hundredth time that Chass didn't have a fever.

The sound of footsteps drew his attention, and he turned in his chair just as one of the Yanari scouts came bursting inside. "Your Majesty, the Harken soldiers have arrived. Captain Valess and five others."

"I'm coming." Desmond pulled on the boots and cloak the Yanari had been kind enough to give him and stepped out of the warm cabin into the chilly air, where snow was falling lazily all around. It was a beautiful morning, the sky still faintly rosy where it peeked from behind the clouds, completely counterpoint to the grim reality he was living. Her Most Holy Grace always stressed that even in the darkest times, there were signs the light would come again. He'd already done his morning prayers, but he silently recited them again as he headed off.

The main portion of the village, which was really more of a town in scale and population, was arranged in a circle, with the chief's cabin right in the middle and plenty of open space so all manner of meetings could be conducted with no one group overcrowding the others.

Currently, it was empty, save for the rather ominous presence standing near Chief Yanari's cabin. They were dressed almost entirely in black, even their infamous brigandines, the gleaming rivets standing out in sharp contrast. Gray thread barely lighter than the black added subtle geometric patterning to the armor, and in stark contrast to everything else, they had sashes dyed to look like flames around their waists, mostly overtaken by their sword belts and other equipment. Stitched to the front, over the left breast, was a panel of silk that displayed their crest: a snarling beast, something between a puma and a wolf, surrounded by smoke and fire. The Ruinous Horde, the name taken from a tale of the Pantheon, like so many of Harken's mercenary bands.

Desmond knew the names and crests of all of Harken's mercenary bands, but he'd never crossed paths with this one, or even heard anything about them.

The tall, broad, imposing woman with the marks of captain on her shoulder turned as Desmond's movements caught her eye. She bowed as she registered him, and the soldiers around her followed suit. In slow, awkward Bentan she said, "Your Majesty, it is good to see you are still living."

"Captain Chass knows his business," Desmond replied in Harken, and before she could ask, added, "He's still asleep. Went without it for most of two days, and his body finally had enough of his nonsense."

Valess and the other soldiers laughed. "That sounds like Chass. Let him rest a bit longer then; he's going to need it. The mountain is starting to crawl with Bentan soldiers, and the Carthians rightfully aren't happy we're using their home as our battlefield for the millionth time." She faced Yanari,

crossing her right arm over her chest in a salute and said in Carthian, "My apologies again for intruding upon you. We will leave and take our problems with us as quickly as possible."

"We are more than happy to repay Ossi for all he's done for us," Yanari replied in informal Harken, clearly struggling with the lack of tonals that Carthian utilized, leaving her words oddly flat and monotone or pitched at strange points. Desmond had struggled with the opposite problem while learning Carthian; it had taken him months and months of practice to manage the most basic tones.

When Valess's brow furrowed in confusion, Desmond said, "Ossi is what they call Chass, though I don't know why."

Yanari chuckled, mouth curving in a fond smile. "Do you know what ossi means?"

Desmond replied, "The diminutive of ossifrage, which is a type of vulture, literally 'bone-breaker.' We call them bearded vultures in Benta. To see one is considered good luck. In Harken, they're considered a symbol of the God of Death, I think."

"Yes, they are messengers, and often spies, for Shammari," Valess said. "To see one is to know that something is ended, or will end soon, and the bone-eaters have come to carry away the last remnants." She hesitated, then added, "More than a few people back home call Chass a bone-eater, some as a compliment, but most as an insult."

Yanari clucked her tongue. "That is unfortunate, for to be regarded as an ossifrage is an honor in Cartha. They cleanse the earth, consume what no other creature can, resort to violence only when they must—but will do so with ruthless skill. They're guardians, signs of luck and good fortune. So far as we're concerned, most of you squabbling children can rot, always dragging your problems into our mountains. But Ossi saved us, sacrificed his own goals to do so, and made reparations in the aftermath. Without him, we likely would not be here, and that is not something we enjoy having to say about any Harken bird."

"Chass is wholly unique," Desmond said softly.

That got him a look from Yanari, glittering eyes that saw too much, but thankfully she said nothing.

"Quite," Valess replied briskly. "Now that we've gossiped like old men at the fish market, shall we bestir our vulture and begin making plans?"

"Must we wake him already?" Desmond replied. "He needs *rest*."



Yanari snorted and gave him that look again.

Valess laughed. "You're adorable. Chass could use more people like you. Nevertheless, we are short on time, and his presence is required." She strode off before he could reply, vanishing into the cabin Desmond had come from.

A few minutes later, she reemerged, followed by a rumpled, cranky, and unfairly attractive Chass. He hadn't bothered to pull on any sort of head covering, baring his golden hair, which seemed determined to go in every direction at once, just long enough now the curl was beginning to reveal itself.

Desmond's fingers twitched with the need to comb through that hair, sort the tangles and smooth the curls. Never in his life had he wanted so badly to touch another person's hair.

He also wanted to drag Chass right back to bed and give him every possible reason to stay there.

Ignoring the sudden rush of images *that* thought brought on, hoping his suddenly heated cheeks could be attributed to the cold, Desmond said, "You should still be resting."

Chass grunted in that way of his that said a hundred things at once, all of them scathing, dismissive, and bossy. "We have things to do. Where are the rest of your people?" He scraped his fingers through his hair, sadly banishing the charming dishevelment, though a couple of stubborn bits of curl defied the attempts.

Desmond ached to do some touching of his own, and he silently called himself a damned fool in every language he knew.

"On their way. The Yanari granted us permission to move our encampment closer, though I doubt we'll be staying long. It all depends on the weather. If this snow worsens, we're not going anywhere. Otherwise, I don't see why we can't leave at first light. We've horses and supplies aplenty for the three of you, and even those fucking rebels and their precious claws will be hard pressed to stop us once we're in full motion. We can be home in a matter of days."

"Sounds too easy," Chass said. "Did you bring a map? What route are we taking? What are your numbers? Who else is on the mountain? Do we have an idea of Bentan numbers and if any Carthians are assisting them?"

Desmond tried to pay attention as they fell into hammering out the plan to the last detail, but the truth was that he was completely superfluous. Even when he'd been king, his job had largely entailed trusting his generals to know what they were doing and approving funds and more where needed. He knew nothing of war, not really. His only act of war had been to surrender and sign the peace treaties.

A peace he hadn't been good enough to maintain, in the end. Some king. He stepped out of the conversation bit by bit, until he was able to slip away completely unnoticed. Sleep sounded like a wonderful idea, but he wasn't going to be the spoiled brat who went off to nap while everyone else worked on a plan to keep him alive and get him to safety.

Instead, he walked around the village, letting his thoughts wander. Once he was in Harken, he would have to be king again, at least long enough to sort this mess out once and for all. He had ideas, but there were too many variables right now for him to know if any of them were worth anything. Frustrating, to have his hands tied so, but there was nothing for it, so best not to dwell.

Laughter and easy conversation drew his attention, and he looked up to see a trio, two men and a woman, settled in front of a couple of cabins preparing tubs of mustard stems for pickling. It was a dish that had origins in the Tricemore-Cartha region, but had spread out across the whole continent. Benta preferred saltier pickles, whereas Cartha and Harken predictably preferred to have their mouths set on fire.

"Do you need an extra set of hands?" he asked.

They eyed him warily but eventually conceded, as they had what looked like six tubs to get through, and the more people who helped, the faster the work got done.

It was easy, familiar work, the kind he'd done a thousand times at Highmont and the prison: ripping away the leaves that could be eaten but were more often used to feed livestock, then trimming the remaining stems, which would then get a final washing before they were taken elsewhere to begin the pickling process.

The group was silent at first, not certain what to talk about with a foreigner in their midst, but Desmond was as good at getting people to talk comfortably as he was at preparing endless piles of fruits and vegetables. It took only an introduction, a couple stories of his own, and some gentle

prodding, and they were once more chatting and laughing, a bright spot in an otherwise grim, frosty day.

He let the conversation wash over him, smiling and laughing occasionally, attention flitting between his work and the pair of wide, curious eyes watching him from behind a nearby cabin, with all the charming failed attempt of a child desperately trying to be stealthy.

One of the other workers noticed his gaze, and following it, called out, "Keeta! What are you doing there? Stop gawking and come out here, behave properly."

Keeta ducked back, but after a moment, slunk around the edge of the cabin and approached them.

Desmond smiled, heart picking up pace for no good reason. The boy looked nothing like Chass, so probably no blood relation, but he didn't think he was wrong in thinking that Chass was very much like a father to this boy. Certainly Keeta worshiped the ground that Chass walked on. Desmond would love to hear the tale of how they'd become so close; maybe one day he'd be that lucky. "Hello, my name is Desmond. We both seem to be acquainted with Chass—Ossi, I mean."

At the mention of Chass, Keeta's face lit up like the sun coming out after a rainstorm. "You came with Ossi! You don't look Harken, though. You look like a bear."

"Keeta!" the man next to Desmond hissed. "You're being rude."

Desmond only laughed. "I am indeed a Bentan bear, but I am moving to Harken, so I guess we'll see if a bear can turn into a bird."

"I want to be a bird," Keeta said, real, aching wistfulness in his voice. "Ossi promised he'd take me one day, when he no longer had to be a monster, but whenever he shows up, he's still fighting."

"Well, he is very nearly done fighting, I can promise you that. He cannot take you home this visit, with so much danger at our backs, but I have faith the next time he comes here, it will be to take you home."

Keeta brightened. "Really?"

"On my word." Desmond didn't know any such thing, but given Chass was crown prince now and shouldn't even be tangled up in this mess... he thought it was a safe promise to make.

"I can't wait!" Keeta said, and that seemed all he needed to ramble at length about Chass, what he knew of Harken, and everything he wanted to

see and do and learn. Desmond didn't even try to keep up, just made encouraging noises whenever Keeta paused for breath.

Eventually, the woman in the group cut him off and said, "Keeta, you're supposed to be helping with the goats now. Hurry along. You can talk all about your lofty designs on Harken later over supper."

Keeta groaned but took off running. Desmond had yet to meet a child that bothered to walk if they could at all avoid it.

Once he was out of sight, Desmond returned his attention to the others. "He seems like a good kid."

"Yes, especially with all he's lost. Most of us would not retain our sunny dispositions, but Keeta does," the woman said, tossing a finished stem into a half-full bin and pulling a new one from the bucket on her right. "When the Bentans attacked, set the fires, Keeta's father was amongst the dead. He went quickly, at least, unlike some of those who lingered from their burns for days."

The man next to Desmond continued, "Keeta and his mother survived, thanks to Ossi. He dragged them from their burning cabin and killed a few of the soldiers who'd lingered to ensure the whole village went up in flames. Ossi took quite a few wounds from it, and Keeta wouldn't leave his side, save when ordered by his mother. He's determined to go to Harken, and after the way his mother died while out hunting two seasons ago, the spirits certainly seem to agree that he should."

"I see," Desmond replied, completely unsurprised that Chass had left out so many details in his own recounting of the events that had made him a friend of the Yanari. What else had Chass done, what else did he continue to do, that he refused to take credit for? He was certainly a credit to his faith, his empire and kingdom, and his people. If Desmond was half as competent, Benta wouldn't be locked in war yet again.

Chuckling drew him from his thoughts, and he stared at the group looking back at him, amusement in their eyes and smirks curving their mouths. "What?"

The woman who'd spoken before chuckled again and said, "I think Keeta might have a challenger for Chass's attention."

Desmond didn't bother hoping he could hide his flushed cheeks behind the cold that time. "I in no way regard Chass as a father figure, or —" he sighed as they laughed, "—anything but a friend. He saved my life. I owe him greatly. I pray Her Most Holy Grace sees him safely home; his

people need him, and I've borrowed him long enough." He threw a prepared stem in the bin and reached for a new one to peel.

"His people?" the second man, mostly quiet until then, asked. "You mean Penance Gate?"

Of course Chass had never told them. "Penance Gate, or at least the majority of them, were killed when the ships we were on were attacked. That's why Chass and I are traveling alone right now. But no, I mean his people as in his kingdom. He's the crown prince of Gaulden."

All three dropped the stems and knives they were holding, swearing as they retrieved them from the steadily deepening snow.

"Are you messing with us, bear?" the woman asked.

Desmond shook his head. It really should have occurred to him before he spoke that Chass had never bothered to tell anyone here of his true status in Harken. "No, I would not jest about something so important. Did he really not tell you?"

"No, he most certainly did not. Spirits preserve." All three made the sign of the owl, the most revered of the many spirits worshipped by Carthians. The woman added, "A damned Harken royal this whole time, and he never said a word..."

"In his defense, it's Harken custom that you only go by your military rank when serving, be it in the imperial army, the mercenary forces, or the navy. It's to mitigate things like favoritism, special treatment, and so forth. His being a prince had no relevance here, so he never brought it up."

They simply sighed and settled back to work, eventually resuming their earlier conversation about the latest village scandal.

Desmond smiled ever so faintly. Chass refused to ask why they called him Ossi. He had carefully not told the Yanari he was royalty. He was cagey in the most endearing way. He would wager... well, he had nothing to wager... but all the same, Chass likely had many more such secrets tucked away, ways he'd helped that no one would ever know. People who did not know a royal prince of Harken had been their savior.

Chass was exasperating and endearing all at once, the harshness and the beauty of winter, inescapably entwined. Or perhaps more like the ocean he loved so much, strong, beautiful, and unfathomable. Close enough to touch and hopelessly out of reach.

When they'd finished prepping the stems, Desmond helped carry them to a nearby washing station, and then on to the cabin where they were

taken by the group that would do the pickling.

After that, he was dismissed with their thanks, and once again found himself wandering aimlessly. In the village center, tables, maps, and more had appeared, Chass and the others deep into their war session. It shouldn't be a war session, but Desmond had the sinking feeling that as long as Kettermane was involved, and Desmond's head remained attached, everything would devolve into war eventually.

From the center, the village spread out and up—and up, many of the cabins butting right up against sharp drop-offs. A dangerous way to live, but he wasn't certain there was a safe way to live in the Cartha Mountains. Cartha meant 'remorseless,' after all.

Desmond steadily climbed the main set of steps that cut through the village, up and up until the cabins thinned out, then vanished, but the laboriously carved steps continued. Eventually, he came to a place where the path opened up to a wide, deep space. A lookout, likely for special ceremonies and to simply enjoy the breathtaking view of the mountains and valleys beyond. As stunning as they were in winter white, he could only imagine the view during the rest of the year.

Stone benches had been placed against the mountain where it had been carved out in a crescent shape, ensuring everyone who sat enjoyed the view.

It was also unbelievably cold, like so many days and nights at Highmont, when they had to break ice to get at the water they needed in the barrels where it was stored during winter. Where hot water thrown into the air was frozen solid by the time it hit the ground, and on the rare, tragic occasion someone froze to death, their body could not be retrieved until the thaw.

Bentans excelled at surviving the cold, even if they didn't do it quite the same way the Carthians did. Just one of the many reasons they were called 'bears.' The infamous claws they fought with were another, and the list went on, the reasons increasingly unflattering. Desmond couldn't really argue the epithet was undeserved.

He settled on one of the benches, despite how much colder it would eventually make him even through the layers he wore, and tried to block everything from his mind, focusing on his breathing, the beautiful view, enjoy these few precious minutes where he didn't have to worry about anything.

When he finally heard footsteps, Desmond had no idea how much time had passed. To judge by the accumulated snow, perhaps an hour or so, but with the clouds blotting out the sun, it was impossible to say for sure.

He dragged his eyes from the mountains as the footsteps drew close, though the familiar tread told him who he'd see.

"Why did you wander off?" Chass asked. "At the very least, you damn well should have told me where you were going."

Desmond sat up, surprise rippling through him. "You and the others were immersed in your planning. My presence wasn't needed. So I went exploring the village and found my way here. I apologize; I didn't realize I would cause you concern. A village like this, everyone tends to know where to find one another, and they especially keep an eye on strangers."

Chass didn't seem entirely pleased by the apology and explanation, but he said nothing, only moved to sit next to him on the bench, wrapped in black and gray, Gauden colors of mourning, at least when certain garments were worn.

"Do you think we'll make it?" Desmond asked.

"The plan is sound, but life is always a variable beyond human control. I'd have preferred to leave tonight, but there simply won't be enough moonlight, and we'll need the whole day and most of the night to make ready, anyway. So we'll leave at dawn. You'll be well-guarded, so even if the worst comes to pass, there are sufficient soldiers to get you to Harken."

"I've been well-guarded all along," Desmond replied. "That was never my concern. What concerns me is that so many people have to die, and continue risking death, for a single fallen king. My one life is not worth all the lives that have been lost."

"You're not stupid," Chass said scathingly, "so why do you keep saying such stupid things?"

Desmond flinched from the words. "I beg your pardon?"

"One: it's not your place to dismiss the sacrifice of others. *They* thought you were worth dying for, and to say otherwise insults the choice they made. If you want to honor their sacrifice, start by not devaluing it. *Live*. They died so you could do that, so fucking do it."

Desmond opened his mouth, then closed it again, the words setting his heart to hammering.

Before he could figure out what to say, though, Chass barreled on. "Two: you brought peace to a country that's been at war for years. More than that, you made an ally of one of Benta's oldest enemies and were ever strengthening that alliance. The vast majority of Benta was happy with you, and you're smart enough to know that when you're not wallowing in guilt or recrimination or whatever stupid waste of energy is going on inside your head. You've been so busy punishing yourself for crimes you didn't commit, have you really stopped to think about who benefits most from all of this? Who might have incited the rebels from the start, sowed a discord that put Harken and Benta at odds again, which was exactly what they wanted?"

Shame washed over Desmond and settled in his stomach like a bad meal threatening to come back up. Chass was right: Desmond had been so focused on himself, he hadn't once stopped to look at the bigger picture the way he should have. The way a *king* should have. Because the answer was stupidly, pathetically obvious. One country, and one alone, would go back to flourishing if their only real rivals on the world stage once more got locked in war.

"Trey Mencee. I knew they helped in the assassination of Prince Larren, and they would use the resulting chaos to their benefit, but it never occurred to me they might have been masterminding everything right from the start." War would completely alter trade routes, supply demands, and a hundred other little things that would all circle back to benefiting Trey Mencee. There was also that if Harken and Benta were once more bickering, they'd have to withdraw the attention they'd turned toward pressuring Trey Mencee to give up their slave trading. "I'm really not made for these games," Desmond said. "I'd be better off as the consort who takes care of social obligations for my spouse." He snickered. "Or maybe some monarch or noble's illicit lover. That would have my father crawling out of his grave."

Beside him, Chass made some indecipherable noise, like he'd swallowed a bit of food wrong, but when Desmond looked at him, his face was as closed off as ever. "I'm sure either option can be arranged," he said dryly. "The High Court of Harken is the domain of Holy Kero, which the court should have more respect for but doesn't. Anything is possible, Your Majesty."

Desmond laughed. "I should probably attend my duties before I run away to Kin del Kar with some Duchess's heir. Or maybe an Earl's youngest



son; shouldn't set my ambitions too high. One should always be practical. Or perhaps forsake practicality entirely and run off with both, make it extra scandalous. From monk to shameless hussy, what a story that would be."

Chass gave him a withering look that set Desmond to laughing so hard he doubled over.

"Your face! All we've been through, Captain, and it's a jest about running off in a scandalous love affair that has you offended by my very existence?" He sat up as his laughter eased, though it still tried to get the better of him, and wiped tears from the corners of his eyes. "Come on, it was a little funny."

That earned him another disgusted look, but Desmond took it as the victory it was. Everyone liked to compare Chass to bone-eating vultures, but to Desmond, he often seemed more like a feral cat who wanted to be a housecat, but struggled constantly with letting go of all the things that had kept him alive that he no longer needed.

Or maybe Desmond was a fool who saw what he wanted in the hopes that would be good enough to *get* what he wanted. But Chass had made his feelings clear on the matter. They were friendly while they worked together to get to Harken, but they would never be friends. Never be... all the things beginning to whisper and tease at the back of his mind, things he could not acknowledge because to admit they were there only to face he'd never have them... He'd been hurt enough in life. He wasn't going to invite more pain on himself. Chass had drawn a very firm line, and Desmond would abide by his wishes, no matter how much he hated it.

Probably for the best, given Desmond didn't even know where he'd be tomorrow, let alone in a week, a month, or year. "So what are you going to do once we reach Harkenesten, and you're finally finished with this whole mess?"

"Burn and honor my fallen," Chass replied. "Begin the process of closing down my life in Harkenesten and preparing to return to Gaulden. My mother will want me home in time for the Festival of Denala, and preferably sooner. Holy Prima herself will not be able to spare my life if I arrive any later."

Desmond smiled in commiseration. "Your mother, what little I've heard about her anyway, reminds me greatly of Abbot Thaddeus. He ran Highmont for more than fifty years, though I was only there for the last four or five. There were ways he expected things to be done, and if they were

not done that way then it was public chastisement and a punishment that always outweighed the crime. He wasn't abusive the way most people think of that word. He never beat us or left us to stand outside naked in the snow for hours, or anything like that. It was abuse all the same, though, forcing us to always live the way he wanted us to, with little to no exception, never really allowing us to make our own choices in even the smallest matters. When he finally passed, and Mikael, a monk we all greatly admired, took his place, the entire atmosphere at Highmont changed. Not to speak ill of your mother, it's not my place to pass judgement, but she does sound like people breathe more easily when she's not in the room."

"That describes my mother rather aptly," Chass said. The words seemed to carry a hint of bitterness, so old and worn that it would be easy to miss if Desmond wasn't paying such close attention. Wasn't so acutely attuned to everything Chass said and did. "Especially in that we are expected to do everything her way and her way only." His face clouded, as though his mind had been overtaken by unhappy thoughts. "She has always been a good queen, though, and our first and greatest duty is to the people."

"My understanding has always been that nobody has to choose to be a good parent or a good leader. They aren't mutually exclusive," Desmond replied. "It's always possible to be both. My father chose not to be, and so did your mother. Some days, it's hard not to be bitter about how different my life might have been if my father had not locked me away in a monastery."

"I prefer not to dwell," Chass said. "I am what I am, as the Pantheon wills."

"By Her Most Holy Grace," Desmond replied reflexively. "I don't remember my mother, and I try my best to forget my father ever existed."

Chass gave a short laugh. "I would too, in your position."

"So... what is it like having essentially three parents? How does that change the dynamic of things in Harken?"

"Depends on the family. Some, the contracting of a dame or sire is more akin to a business arrangement than a personal relationship. Back in what the history books so coyly call the 'dark times,' people would just hire prostitutes, or others of the struggling class, and take them off to have the matter done in 'secret.' Then they were sent on their way again. Nowadays, though... business arrangement is really the most apt description. Some have more lasting relationships, and then it's often like having a favored

aunt or uncle stay on indefinitely. They often are called that, whether they're actually a relative or not, which is rare. My mother was looked at somewhat askance for contracting her own sister-in-law to be their dame. Even now, long after they've ceased having children, there is talk."

"I can only imagine the rumors."

Chass laughed slightly. Not the beautiful one that was so hard to win, but a laugh all the same. "They were everything you imagine and worse."

"I think it's a far healthier way of handling such things that torrid affairs and orphans obtained at poorhouses or bought outright from desperate women eager to be rid of an unwanted burden." It had been on his list of far-flung plans to bring more of the Harken mindset on the matter to Benta, maybe something he could have started with his own inevitable marriage. Another plan lost forever; another matter that would soon be someone else's problem.

"Still, Harken loves to turn around and call Islanders nasty names for doing essentially the same thing, just more elaborately," Chass replied. "They do not appreciate when the contradiction is pointed out to them, but more and more of them are shutting up about it, so that's something."

"If there is one trait that unites humanity, it's hypocrisy," Desmond said dryly, far too pleased with himself when that earned him another laugh.

The wind kicked up, sharp and brutally frigid, leaving Desmond shivering. Beside him, Chass seemed unbothered, even though Desmond was the one accustomed to freezing weather. It would be so easy to lean against him, absorb some of that warmth, some of that iron resolve Chass projected so effortlessly it was like he wore armor that bore no flaws, no cracks, no weak points. Even if he'd much rather see Chass without all that impenetrable armor.

If bombarding Chass with raspberries was the only way to remove that armor, though, Desmond would rather it stay in place.

Desmond covered the lower half of his freezing face with his gloved hands to warm it a bit, maybe using it as a way to stall as he gathered his courage for the question that wouldn't stop picking away at him. When his face was relatively warm, and the silence had stretched on long enough he feared Chass would take it as a cue to leave, he finally asked, "Do you think, when all this is finally over, that I could—"

"Captain! Captain!" A Ruinous Horde soldier came flying around the corner, sliding on ice and nearly sending himself right over the balustrade. Chass surged forward and caught him, yanking him back and all but throwing him into the seat Chass had just been occupying. It was all done so quickly, Desmond wasn't entirely certain he hadn't missed something.

The soldier immediately stood and saluted. "Captain, you must come at once. Bentan forces are marching here, and Captain Valess says we have thirty minutes at best. She and Chief Yanari have sent people out to slow them down, but the numbers are too great for battle to be wise."

Chass said something guttural and harsh, a Gaulden phrase that Desmond didn't recognize. He dismissed the soldier, then grabbed Desmond's arm and dragged him off down the stairs.

"I can walk by myself."

Chass let him go, but it was clear the move was reflexive, his mind focused on other things, which seemed reasonable, given the circumstances.

Desmond bolted for their cabin, where he hastily pulled on clothes better suited to hard travel, shoving whatever supplies were near to hand into his satchel before slinging it over one shoulder.

Outside, soldiers were organizing in the village center, though it didn't look like they were preparing to fight, but rather to flee.

Hurrying to join them, Desmond approached one of the women standing close to Chief Yanari. "Will the Yanari be all right?"

"Yes," she replied. "After the last time, we devised new plans. The village may not survive, but the people will."

"Good. I am sorry to have brought this upon you."

Chief Yanari started to reply but was dragged away by someone else.

"Your Majesty!"

Desmond turned, and immediately took the reins held out by a Horde soldier. It wasn't the horse he'd ridden to the village, meant for long, steady travel, but a courser, bred for speed and endurance. The best kind of horse to have when the only hope of survival was being faster than your pursuers. That they'd given him a courser was an ominous sign of how they expected this nasty surprise to play out.

A group of ten soldiers approached him, half already mounted, half still leading their horses. The woman at the head of the group bore the

marks of a First Lieutenant, meaning she was second in command of Ruinous Horde. "Your Majesty, my name is Heron. We've been assigned as your protection detail."

"Where is Chass?" Desmond asked, hating the way his voice cracked ever so faintly.

Before they could reply, a familiar tread came from behind him, and Desmond turned just as Chass reached him. "Why aren't you escorting me? You have been so far."

"I'll be part of the larger group, where I am of greater use," Chass replied.

"You can't! You are crown—"

"There's no time to debate the matter, and it's already settled anyway," Chass said, and thrust something into Desmond's hands.

Desmond stared, dread knotting in his chest. Chass's torc. He'd unwrapped it, baring the gold and jewels once more. The dread spread through the rest of Desmond's body. He swallowed the bile that tried to rise up as he met Chass's eyes. "Why are you giving me this?"

"Make certain it gets back to Gaulden."

"You can make sure of it, you stupid bastard!"

Chass ignored him, instead reaching beneath the brigandine someone had lent him, and Desmond's heart shattered completely as Chass removed and held out the teardrop sapphire he always wore. Desmond had no idea what significance it held, but it had always been clear the necklace was important to Chass. Precious.

Desmond's eyes stung. "Chass, don't do this to me, not after all we've come through together."

"If anything happens to me, give that to Allen. Tell him I'm sorry: for hurting him, letting him down, wrongly blaming him. For everything. Promise me."

"Fuck you," Desmond said shakily, eyes stinging, slipping the sapphire necklace over his own head, the torc clutched tightly in his other trembling hand. "I promise, you worthless, piece of shit Harken. Just promise me all this stupid drama will ultimately prove unnecessary."

Chass made a noise that almost could have been a laugh, and slowly reached up to rest one of his hands, large and warm and comforting, against the side of Desmond's face. His voice was unusually soft, even gentle, as he said, "Get going, *laleshaa*. Whole worlds need you right now."

"I'm going to be angry with you for a *long* time," Desmond snarled, but placed the torc around his own neck before swinging up into the saddle. "Stay alive or else."

Chass didn't reply, only turned and stormed off to where his own horse waited. Unlike Desmond's, it was a destrier, a warhorse trained for battle since practically birth, thick and heavily muscled, able to carry a fully armored soldier and wade through the chaos of battle with ease. Desmond prayed to Her Most Holy Grace that armor, horse, and Chass's deadly skills would be sufficient to keep him alive. Bring him home safe and sound.

Captain Valess roared out a battle cry that Desmond didn't entirely catch, only that it had something to do with blood. The Carthians responded with their own, and then everything devolved into the carefully managed chaos of looming battle.

"We need to go," Heron said, and with a last look at Chass, Desmond turned away and followed her out of the village, settling into the center of the protective circle his escort quickly formed—as best they could, anyway, given the narrowness of the path and the dense forest.

Thankfully, it widened out after several minutes, and tens of mercenaries, Chass among them, surged forward to surround them. Desmond took a deep breath, let it out slowly through his nostrils.

Then everything went wrong.

Horses screamed. Soldiers cried out before going abruptly silent, toppling from their horses. Others were felled as their horses went down, crushing the riders beneath.

A flood of soldiers in the blue uniform of Bitter Frost and the gray of the Bentan army came rushing from the woods. An ambush. How had they managed it?

"Keep going!" Heron snarled, and slapped his horse's rear, sending it bolting off with a scream of protest. Desmond held on for dear life, trusting his horse to keep with Heron and the other three soldiers still with them.

He looked over his shoulder, but it did no good; there was too much chaos, too much forest, too much movement. If Chass was still alive in that mess...

Desmond turned his head back around and kept low as his bodyguards had once taught him, though he wasn't sure he should still be trusting the instructions of a bunch of craven, backstabbing bastards.

On they ran, so fast that branches whipped his head and face, leaving him with scratches reminiscent of those he'd gotten when they'd first fled through the woods after escaping the ship. Desmond was fucking tired of running. Hiding. Like he was the one who'd done something wrong.

So he held fast and recited every last single prayer he knew.

Until a cry of pain, an awful, wet gurgling noise, drew his head sharply up—just in time to halt his horse before he crashed into Heron's.

Who, unfortunately, was dead of an arrow to the throat. Desmond reared back, barely keeping his horse steady—and cried out as he was shoved from his horse, pushed to the ground, covered by a heavy body with armor that jabbed at his skin.

Then the figure rolled away, and before Desmond could get his breath back, the man who'd clearly saved him from something was fighting the soldiers that had managed to catch up to them, or possibly been waiting, a secondary ambush in case the first failed.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and Desmond turned, ducking away as the woman coming at him swung out with the claws on her right hand, sword at the ready in her left. He didn't move fast enough, though, and the claws raked along the bottom of the right side of his face and managed to get his shoulder as well, shredding through layers of fabric like they were paper, cutting him open halfway down his upper arm. Desmond blocked out the pain as best he could, regaining his balance before throwing himself up and forward, ramming into her side and somehow succeeding in knocking her to the ground. Grabbing up her dropped sword, he swung blindly, screaming hysterically. It sliced into her neck like butter, and the sound she made before dying left Desmond heaving up what remained of his breakfast.

A bellow, more footsteps. Desmond grabbed up the sword again, raising it as he turned—and stared in horror as the soldier who'd been coming after him ran right into it, like some nightmarish skewer intended for a giant's supper.

Desmond let go and backed away as the man toppled. His stomach threatened to rebel again, even though it had thoroughly emptied the first time.

The soldier who'd saved him came rushing up, covered in blood pouring from a headwound, his left arm held close against his chest as though injured. "On your horse. Now."

Desmond obeyed, and the soldier took Heron's horse, the only other one still there and alive, and they once again raced off through the woods. Everything hurt. His face and shoulder felt like they were on fire, and the continued abuse from the trees as they blew by didn't help.

His mind would not stop replaying the way he'd hacked that woman's throat open. The way he'd accidentally skewered that soldier. Goddess, he never wanted to sleep again; he'd never endure the nightmares sure to plague him.

So many people dead. Chass... Desmond's heart felt like it was going to burst, between the fear, the rush of energy from the ambush, the anguish over all the needless death.

On they raced, throughout the day and the swiftly descending night and the sunrise that followed what felt like years later. The biting cold of Cartha gave way to the pleasant cool of a Harken winter, but Desmond's attention was only for the horizon and the sprawling palace that eventually came into view.

By the time they reached it, thundering through the gates, the world was tilting, he could bring nothing into focus, and he could hear voices but make no sense of the words. "Chass," he managed to gasp out. "You have to —"

The last thing he remembered was falling.



## Chapter Twelve

"You can't do this to me!"

Chass stopped, turned back to face the man he'd hated and feared for more years than he could stand to count.

Once, this man had looked handsome. Dashing. He'd smiled and complimented and done so many other things that no one else in Chass's life ever really had. Certainly not his parents; they were all too busy molding Darren or fawning over Allen. No one had time for the dull middle child meant only to go off to war.

Not his peers, who only saw him as a steppingstone to Darren, or the consolation prize when that inevitably failed. Not his fellow soldiers, intimidated by his royal status when they inevitably learned of it, or later on too scared of him and his ties to Bateker to come anywhere near him.

Bateker had. Bateker had made him feel like he mattered.

Until Chass had woken up in Bateker's tent, the taste of too-sweet liquor and worse in his mouth, and a head too fuzzy to remember why his body suffered so many aches and pains.

He'd been a fool. Ruled by loneliness, desperation, pathetic eagerness. Then shame and misery. Then fear and desperation.

Chass kicked Bateker's legs out from under him. Not that it was hard, given how thoroughly he was bound. Bateker could hobble along; that was about it.

"You can't do this," Bateker said again, but this time the words sounded more afraid than angry, despite the glare on his face.

Looming over him, planting a heavy boot in the middle of his chest, Chass stared down at him. "You know better than anyone that I *can* do this. The problem with making a monster, Captain, is that invariably it will turn on you. That's what it was taught to do."

Bateker's eyes were full of hate. They were also full of fear. Chass couldn't deny that was gratifying, after all the years of fear and torment, shame and humiliation, that Bateker had piled upon him. It had taken him a long time, and too many mistakes, to finally break free of Bateker's chains.

The day had come, though, and Chass would have his vengeance. More importantly, Bateker would never abuse, rape, and torture anyone

else. Not in this life. Not in any other.

Chass hauled him to his feet again and shoved him forward, keeping him upright as the terrain grew more difficult, but never really letting him get his balance, enough sure footing that he'd think to try something stupid.

They walked in silence for several minutes, most of Chass's attention on the rocky terrain, all that was waiting for him at their destination. How long he'd been waiting for this moment.

"Where are we going?" Bateker finally asked. It had probably been bothering him from the moment Chass used his own tricks against him, drugged him and bound him and waited for that delightful moment when Bateker woke up and realized he was not where he'd last been. Had no idea where he was at all. That he was wholly, fully, helplessly at Chass's mercy.

"To your execution."

"You can't execute me!" Bateker snarled, but the attempt at anger didn't hide the tremble in his voice.

Because Bateker knew full well the monster he'd made.

Bateker fell silent, which was wise, because if he'd opened his mouth one more time, Chass would have skipped a gag and simply cut out his tongue.

When they reached Chass's destination, he threw Bateker to the ground and staked him there.

"W-what are you doing?" Bateker asked. "Why did you bring me all the way out here? Where are we?"

"What I'm doing is giving you what you deserve," Chass replied. "At least, all that I can here on the Mortal Plane. When I have reached my limits, I have faith the Penance Realms will finish what I start, Holy Shammari willing."

Bateker laughed then, in that cold, sneering, dismissive way of his whenever Chass dared to say anything religious. "Do you ever listen to yourself? You profess to be so educated, so smart, but you talk about gods like some inbred farmer from a village so small the census takers don't even bother with it. Like you actually think some God of Death is going to punish me. For what? Giving you what you wanted?"

Once, Chass would have fallen apart at those words. Either collapsed into shame, convinced they were true, or erupted in rage and blindly lashed out.

No more. He was done making mistakes. He would walk the Penitent Path, find and earn his way back to being a person. Cease to be Bateker's beast.

Not bothering to reply to the pathetic attempt at goading, Chass further secured Bateker by attaching an additional lead to a tree, ensuring he was relatively comfortable so the fool would relax, grow cocky. Think he still stood a chance of not dying. That his tricks might work one last time on his prize beast.

Next he made camp, well away from Bateker so there was no chance he'd get hold of anything. It would be impressive if he did, given his arms were shackled to the tree, but wharf rats were good at getting into things they shouldn't, and Bateker was a rat king.

When that was done, and his supper was simmering, Chass stripped down to trousers and boots, leaving the rest of him bare for the arduous work ahead. He wrapped cloth around his head, leaving the ends to drape so they would protect the back of his neck, and headed for the bank of the large creek he'd settled on.

He'd hauled all the supplies he would need several days ago, protected by a tarp until the time came to use them. Chass folded the tarp and stowed it with his belongings.

The first order of business was clearing the creek bed as best he could. Easier said than done when the water came up to his waist, but it was hardly the first time he'd endured that sort of thing—everything from rescuing foolish children who'd just wanted to swim to Bateker's brutal training.

When the creek bed was relatively clear where he was working, Chass took a quick break for food and drink. Bateker continued to talk, starting with honey but already progressing on toward vinegar. He'd be into full on heated, screaming fury well before the sun was down, and that was several hours away yet.

Fed and rested, Chass resumed his work. This time he set to work on the timber sheet piles, beginning with the wall that would be holding foremost against the current. Once that wall was up, the rest went relatively quickly.

After that he took another break, sweaty but also soaked through with water, hot and sore and exhausted. The small coffer dam was done though, and he'd managed it alone. Knowing he could was one thing; seeing

it quite another. Normally in the military at least four soldiers were put to work on one of this size, and it wasn't large.

Rested enough for the next part, he climbed down and emptied the dam of water, one bucket at a time. When it was as emptied as it was going to get, he climbed in with a shovel and dug a hole roughly in the center.

He filled the bottom of the hole with gravel, set the post in position and braced it, and set to work packing it tightly in with clay-rich dirt. Such labor wasn't normally what he did, but everybody in the mercenaries started at the bottom, and there was always work that needed to be done.

By the time he was finished, his arms felt like noodles, and the rest of him wasn't much better. The effort was worth it, though, looking at the results. Chass seldom allowed himself to feel pleased with his own actions, as he didn't deserve any sort of praise, but he couldn't deny a bit of pride that this was going so well.

"At least I get to enjoy the view," Bateker said in a voice that Chass had once foolishly taken for sultry. Sexy. In reality, Bateker just sounded pathetic. Nor was there any hiding the violence beneath his words, the promise that the moment he got free, Chass would suffer horrifically before Bateker finally put him out of his misery.

He moved upstream, removed his filthy clothes, and cleaned up. Trudging over to the camp when he was clean and dry, he dressed quickly in fresh trousers and the clothes he'd discarded earlier, but put on soft, sturdy slippers instead of his filthy boots. Then he sat down and enjoyed his dinner with a jug of beer he'd brought along.

"Prisoners don't get food?" Bateker asked mockingly.

Chass continued to ignore him.

Eventually, after he'd run out of threats and bribes and other nonsense, Bateker said with something approaching honesty in his voice, "You'll have to release me eventually to let me piss."

"Piss your pants for all I care. Isn't that what you're always telling the 'weakling' recruits?" Chass replied, enjoying the way that Bateker startled that he'd finally gotten a reply.

"What are you doing, Chass?" he wheedled. "Just tell me what's wrong and we'll work it out."

Chass laughed and refilled his bowl. It was nothing but a simple lentil soup, the sort he'd loved to go into the city and eat whenever he could get away from his unbearable mother and courtly life. Easy to make over a

campfire too, as the contents largely just had to be thrown in the pot and left to themselves.

It was spicy, a level of heat that Bateker would hate. The petty part of him wanted to say that was entirely in keeping with Bateker's spineless personality, but it was an unkind judgement and just plain stupid anyway. Plenty of people, of all shapes and sizes, detested spicy food. They weren't less for hating it; Chass wasn't more for liking it.

"Come now, my pretty little beast, tell me what's wrong."

*Pretty little prince.* That was what Bateker had started with, saying the words softly, with an oily fondness that Chass, lonely and miserable and desperate for someone to *see* him, had fallen for with pathetic ease.

By the time he'd opened his eyes, it was too late. Bateker had broken him.

*Do you know how to make a man brutal?*

Chass was still a long way from putting the pieces of himself back together. Some parts of his life, like his relationship with Allen... that was gone. There was no coming back from that. He would never forgive Bateker for what he'd done. He would not be a hypocrite and expect forgiveness from Allen.

He changed out his slippers for the muddy boots, and went to take care of the last part of his preparations. When he'd first obtained the post, he'd had lashing rings affixed, large enough that chain could be threaded through them. Now it was time for the chains.

It took a few minutes, since the topmost ring was just slightly too high to easily reach, even for him in his working boots. Once it was done, he headed back up the steep bank—and paused as he saw Bateker watching him with genuine fear in his face. Chass had never seen Bateker so openly terrified in his life.

"Have you begun to perceive your fate? A pity you have no faith; the gods are all that might save you now."

Gathering himself, Bateker replied, "You won't do it."

Chass laughed, low and mean. "Think you what you like. You have the night to find faith or a way out. Come sunrise, your atonement begins."

Bateker smiled in that way Chass had once mistaken for charming. "Do I not get a last meal?"

"You got a last meal and a last fuck already. That's how I drugged you, remember? Just like you did so often to me."

Bateker replied, but Chass went back to ignoring him. He went to his packs and pulled a small, dark green glass bottle from one of the side pockets of his satchel. It glinted in the sunlight, sending shards of light across the grass.

It had taken him months to reach this point. Years, even, depending on how one viewed the matter. Definitely months to work up the courage, to really and truly realize he could do this.

Still, he hadn't believed it would work until Bateker passed out at his feet, victim of the very drug he'd used to rape Chass and so many people before him. No one after, though.

"Stay away from me!" Bateker snarled as he saw what Chass held. "Don't you fucking dare!"

Chass knelt, forced his mouth open, and made him drink the tonic, covering his mouth and nose until he had no choice but to swallow if he wanted to breathe. "Good boy," he said, echoing the way Bateker had spoken to him so many times.

It didn't take long for Bateker to pass out after that. Chass looked over his bindings to ensure there'd be no escape and added bells for good measure, should Bateker somehow both wake up from the heavy dosing *and* manage to get out of his chains. Unlikely, but Chass had not made it this far by being careless.

Stupid, yes. Angry, definitely. Pathetic, spineless, attention-starved coward turned heartless monster, for certain. But not careless.

Satisfied that Bateker would not be escaping in the night, Chass made up his own bed and at last went to sleep.

\*~\*~\*

Chass woke screaming. Pain. Battle. Bateker. Desmond. So much fucking pain.

He turned. Threw up.

Someone said his name, but he couldn't tell if the speaker was a real person, a memory, or a delusion.

More noise. Talking. He felt like he was on fire.

Always pain. He was so fucking tired of pain. He whimpered, tried to speak but failed miserably and could only try to make sense of the noise around him.

"...never get... moun...good as dead..."

"Find a way."

"Captain—"

"Do it!"

Chass passed out again while the voices were still arguing.

\*~\*~\*

Bateker was still rather heavily doped come dawn. That was both easier in that Chass didn't have to deal with his struggling or, far worse, his talking, but harder in that it was exhausting moving and lifting what was essentially dead weight.

He finally managed by affixing the chains to Bateker's wrists, and then simply hauling him to a standing position like cargo being lifted from a hold. Once he was up, it was the work of minutes to secure his feet as well.

Bateker could struggle all he liked once he was fully cognizant again. It would get him nowhere. He would be trapped in a nightmare no matter how much he struggled and pleaded. Unlike Chass, however, his nightmare would only end in death, and therefore an even greater nightmare.

While Bateker still hung there doped and dazed, Chass set to work undoing the small coffer dam, removing the sheet piles one by one, working opposite the way he'd gone building it. They'd passed more than one farm on their way here—plenty of farmers who would be more than happy to take good timber off his hands, no questions asked.

By the time he was done, wet and filthy all over again, Bateker was beginning to truly stir. By the time Chass was cleaned up and had made himself a pot of tea and set some rice to cooking for porridge, Bateker had regained his senses enough to immediately lose them again to panic.

He screamed and screamed, until not just spittle but blood coated his mouth and even parts of his face where it had landed in his thrashing. "You can't do this to me, Chass."

Sipping at his tea, sweet, spicy, and creamy, precisely the way he liked it, Chass said, "I can. I have. Now I'm going to sit here and watch you slowly die."

"You can't! You can't! Not to me! Not to me, Chass, not after all—"

"It's 'Your Highness,' Bateker. Not that it matters. Being polite won't save you."

Bateker shut up at that, though even Chass couldn't say what exactly in his words provoked it.

Chass went back to enjoying his tea.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"If you have to ask, you're even stupider than I thought," Chass said. "For the beatings. The torture. The rape. The unnecessary deaths. Do you want a more detailed list? If I could do worse to you, I would, but of all my ideas, this was the most balanced in terms of closure and practicality."

Bateker opened and closed his mouth several times, like some sort of fish, but finally settled on silence. Probably scheming behind those deceptively pretty eyes, a shade of silvery-green that Chass had never seen anywhere else.

When he'd finished his first cup of tea, he tended the porridge, adding spices and milk, stirring thoroughly before leaving it to finish cooking.

Throughout, Bateker remained silent, which meant he must be truly working hard on how he was going to wheedle himself out of this predicament.

Predictably, he started with all the 'good' he'd done for Chass, all that 'they had together' like it wasn't entirely the product of an abusive asshole taking advantage of a vulnerable young man, using everything Chass had and was against him to get what Bateker wanted.

It had taken Chass a long, long time, and a great deal of help, to realize he was not to blame for what had been done to him. What he'd done to others, yes, but not all the monstrous things Bateker had done to him. All the things his mother had done first, that had left him vulnerable to the likes of Bateker, though Chass had never looked at it that way until Lanora had gently presented it over many of their conversations.

When Bateker's incessant rambling finally began to get on his nerves, Chass cut him off with a sharp motion and asked, "Tell me this, Bateker, this one thing."

Bateker stared at him a moment, then with pathetic eagerness simpered, "What?"

"Do you know how to make a man brutal?"



Whatever color Bateker's pink-toned white skin had still retained drained away.

It was one of the first questions Bateker had ever asked him, asked the group of new recruits Chass had been part of. Several of them had died beneath Bateker's 'training.' Still more had fled in the night, because whatever punishment they faced for desertion would still be more bearable than what they endured under Bateker.

"That's what I thought," Chass replied, and went to eat his porridge and enjoy a second cup of tea.

He watched Bateker's face as the bastard slowly considered every nuance of his predicament and realized just how nasty Chass's death sentence really was.

Bateker wouldn't overheat because the water would keep him cool. The water, however, wasn't cold enough for that to get him. Nor would the sun be able to get him: too much shade throughout the day for that. He was trapped in water that reached his waist, but had no way to drink it.

So mostly it was a race of time between whether the submersion would get to him first or the dehydration.

There was also the possibility the fish would get started early on their snacking, though the chance of that was minimal. The few fish that swam in these waters that might attack humans usually had better options. Time would tell.

When he was finished eating, Chass tidied up the campsite and packed away the coffer dam materials to be easily offloaded once he found someone who wanted them. After that, he went hunting, because he definitely had the time and inclination to prepare meat for dinner.

\*~\*~\*

"—stirring."

"Check...bandages...the tonic and..."

Chass pinched his eyes shut as they were assaulted by light, then opened them again more slowly. He stared up blearily at a multitude of colors. After a moment, he registered it was a ceiling. A beautiful, ornate ceiling of multiple small domes, covered with mosaics that depicted several stories of the Pantheon. Chass knew them all by heart.

He also knew this ceiling, knew it far too well. He was in the main healing hall of the Harkenesten Imperial Palace. He was home. He was alive.

There was always a faint rush of disappointment with that realization. Lanora always assured him that was normal, but that he should always fight against it. Which Chass did. He'd tried suicide once, and it hadn't worked. War hadn't killed him. At some point he had to concede that either Holy Prima wanted him alive, or Holy Shammari simply didn't want him.

So alive he remained, even now, when he knew he'd taken damage that should have killed him.

"He's awake!"

A face appeared over Chass, a healer who'd tended him before, but Chass simply couldn't recall their name right then. He could scarcely recall his own.

"Your Highness, how are you feeling?"

Chass tried to speak, or thought he did, but whatever sound he actually made did not seem to reassure them.

For a moment, he swore he heard Allen's voice, followed by Keeta's. Keeta was here? Was he hurt?

Before Chass could make another attempt at speaking, he was gone again.

\*~\*~\*

It took Bateker a little over three days to die, which was almost impressive; Chass hadn't thought he'd live past two.

He started going delirious in the midst of day two. By evening, completely out of his mind, he had quite a few interesting things to say.

By dawn of the third day, he was barely even conscious. He passed out shortly thereafter and didn't wake again.

When it was well and truly over, Chass pulled the body down, dismembered it, and scattered the pieces throughout the creek. The fish and other creatures would make quick work of the remains.

In the end, there hadn't actually been much to it. Killing was always easy, though. It was living that was difficult.

Especially when he had such a long, hard, lonely road ahead of him. No one but him had carved his path, though, and so he would walk it. Maybe someday there'd be an end to it, and someone who didn't see him as a monster.

Chass broke camp, packed everything up and loaded it on the horses and headed out.

He didn't feel better, exactly. Better wasn't the word. Relieved, maybe. Whatever he did going forward, he never had to worry about Bateker creeping out of the shadows to hurt him again. Bateker wouldn't hurt anyone anymore.

It was only hours later when he realized that what he felt was safe.

\*~\*~\*

Everything was dark.

As his eyes adjusted, he proved to still be in the healing hall. The general numbness and fuzziness of his head said he was being kept heavily sedated, probably so he wouldn't thrash in his sleep and reopen wounds.

Just once he'd like to wake up without feeling pain. That was as impossible as not being a monster, though. He would always be feared. He would always be in pain.

Chass closed his eyes again, until the pathetic, useless tears falling from the corners of his eyes subsided.

He was alive. He was in Harkenesten. Hopefully that meant Desmond had made it to safety. Chass would not be able to live with himself if he had failed to do the only thing that Allen had ever asked of him.

Keeta. He'd been sent with the others who were unable to fight, so he should be safe. Had Chass heard his voice earlier? Probably more dreaming. Hopefully he was safe and well. Once he could move, or at least speak, Chass was damn well going to bring him home.

Bracing himself, Chass tried to sit up—and failed immediately, in no small part because it would seem they'd tied him down. Panic tried to well up, but Chass focused on his breathing, his prayers. They'd only tied him down to keep him from hurting himself. It had happened before when he was wounded. He would be all right. Nobody was going to hurt him.

Slowly but surely the breathing and the reassurances worked. Better than they had on the fucking raspberries.

Chass shuddered and tried to think of something else. It was hard to focus his thoughts, though, between the bindings and the drugging. Two things he detested.

Thankfully, the sound of footsteps caught his attention then and captured it wholly as they drew closer.

He could have cried all over again to see Aria appear in his line of sight. "A—"

"You know better than to try to talk, numb-nuts." Aria sat on the edge of his bed and rested a hand on his chest, warm and reassuring. "You really like to turn my hair gray. King Desmond is here, pretty banged up but alive and in no danger of that changing. Well, not from his injuries. I can't speak to assassins."

Chass tried to glare.

Aria gently tousled his hair. "I'll spare you the details on Penance Gate for now. We lost a lot, leave it at that."

Anguish tore through Chass, but he tucked it away to deal with later.

"You should be dead, no lie," Aria said. "I'm not surprised you pulled through, as stubborn as you are. Even your precious Tash would be impressed."

He tried to glare again, but that only got him laughter.

"Your *Holy* Tash then," Aria replied, and smiled softly as her laughter faded. "I think all your gods would be impressed with you. Would you like an accounting of your wounds?"

Chass grunted.

"You got a rather nice stab in the gut. Looks like your borrowed armor failed. Sloppy, sloppy, Ruinous Horde." She grimaced, and then just looked sad. "They lost most of their numbers. Benta and Cartha came for you, and it wasn't pretty. It really is one of your Pantheon-granted miracles that you survived. The stabbing missed anything vital. You got some nice new slashes across the chest and one arm, a gash on your leg and some cracked ribs, they think."

"Yes," Chass managed, the word coming out dry and cracked. He could feel it when he breathed, now that he was awake enough to sort out the different pains he was feeling.

"Everything else is minor scrapes and bruises. It's the stab wound and the chest wounds that really had them concerned. Not a single person thought you'd pull through, to be honest. Even I was starting to get stressed there at the end. Their Majesties have been in to see you every day. I think King Desmond had to be practically dragged away."

"Their?" Chass managed.

"Stop trying to talk. There's no need when I'm fluent in your glares." Aria combed through his hair, then shifted on the bed so she could tangle their fingers together. That simple touch, from one of the few people in the world he trusted absolutely, did much to quell the panic that had never entirely gone away. "Yes, *their*. The High King and the High Consort. They were both quite distressed, especially the High Consort. Guess maybe you're having an impact after all. King Desmond woke a few hours after they patched him up and gave the High Consort your belongings. I do not know what's become of them since."

Chass grimaced. He'd wanted Allen to have his Tear, but he'd also expected to be dead. The inevitable rejection, and quite likely the literal throwing it in his face, was not something he would be able to endure. He deserved it, no matter how hard he'd worked or how far he'd come, but he could only handle so much rejection before he finally snapped.

"Chief Yanari and the rest of her clan chose to stay in their mountains. What remained of Ruinous Horde assured me they are being helped in rebuilding their village and replenishing their ruined stores, and I've sent some of our own to further assist. Keeta is here, though, and we've had as hard a time prying him from your side as we did Desmond. He is currently being distracted by Lord Kamir, though, who has promised to look after him until you're able."

Hearing that nearly made Chass cry again. He would have to find a way to properly thank Kamir.

Aria smiled gently. "Get some rest, Chass. I'll stay here until Riker comes to relieve me." She laughed, eyes glittering. "Or King Desmond does."

Chass tried to reply to that, but staying awake as long as he had, and immediately having to stave off a panic attack, had drained what little energy he had. He fell back asleep, to Aria softly humming one of his favorite hymns and her calloused fingers stroking his hair.

## Chapter Thirteen

Desmond woke with a splitting headache, but he seemed to wake up that way all the time now, even when he just took a nap—which he also seemed to do a lot now. The healers assured him that was standard during recovery, but he still felt like a pathetic wastrel sleeping away his days while everyone else worked.

Sighing, he sat up enough in bed to take his morning tonics, then settled into the blankets again until the worst of his headache eased. When he could stand without wanting to throw up, he slowly crossed the short distance to his dressing room. Thankfully, his clothes didn't require assistance at the moment. All of that would invariably come later. For the moment, though, they'd been kind enough to give him clothes he could manage on his own.

The injuries he'd taken had required shaving his head, which he hated, but better to be alive with a nearly bald head than dead with pretty hair. He hadn't even known he'd gotten a head wound. Then again, he didn't remember much of anything. Pain. Killing. More pain. He hazily remembered waking up while the healers were working on him and lots of shouting before they'd sedated him.

That had been a few days ago. He'd only been declared sufficient to heal elsewhere the day before, and still had to check in regularly to ensure his wounds were healing well. Especially the stitches. So many stitches.

He paused before the floor-length mirror in his dressing room to look them over, check for the warning signs of infection. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any. There was redness, but only because there was still a lot of healing to do. None of it was spreading the way it would for infection.

The stitches, the wounds, were lurid though. The bear claws had gotten him right at the cheek and slashed all the way down—thankfully missing his neck, somehow, but getting his shoulder and down his arm, just finger-lengths away from his elbow. He doubted his right arm and shoulder would ever be the same.

He tried not to succumb to vanity, but he couldn't deny the wounds were a blow. His shorn hair didn't help.

He was alive, though.

More importantly, so was Chass. At least, he'd still been holding on the previous night, before Aria and Riker had forced Desmond to go to bed.

Dressing slowly, far more slowly than he would have liked, Desmond pushed his feet into slippers and finally headed out.

A breakfast tray was waiting in the front room of his suite, but his stomach churned at the idea of food. Maybe after he'd been awake for a couple of hours.

Heading out, nodding to the guards outside who immediately fell in alongside and behind him, Desmond slowly made his way through the confusing maze that was Harkenesten Palace. He couldn't find his way anywhere else, yet, but he knew the route between his room and the healing ward.

People stared and whispered as he walked, some not even having the barest courtesy to wait until he was past them. Desmond ignored it. Compared to the treatment he'd received from his father, from people he had literally trusted with his life, the noise of gossiping nobles was little more than the buzz of flies.

When he finally reached the healing ward, it was to find it thrumming with activity in a way it only did when the High Throne was around. The thrum of people doing their job to the very letter for fear of being caught doing it wrong by the most powerful people in the empire. Desmond had always tried to send messengers, guards, and clerks to tend matters for him for that very reason. He hated that his mere presence could induce so much stress in people who were just trying to do jobs he would never understand.

His heart started pounding as he drew closer to the room where Chass had been settled. Had he taken a bad turn in the night? The healers had seemed cautiously optimistic that he was stable and would continue to improve, but Chass had come so close to dying on so many occasions that it hurt to let his hopes rise again.

Desmond stepped into the room—and froze as several heads turned toward him. Sarrica, Allen, Jader, Aria, Riker, and Kamir, who'd agreed to take care of Keeta until Chass could do so. He had a small child fast asleep against his chest, secured with a sling. They filled the small room, and Desmond wondered if he should really be inserting himself. Whatever he and Chass had been through together, these people were all vastly more

important to him. Desmond was a duty—a duty to Allen, which he knew was vitally important to Chass. Important enough to die for.

Even his 'final' request had been about Allen.

"My apologies, I did not mean to interrupt," he said. "Should I go?"

"No, of course not," Allen said, and squeezed past Sarrica to take Desmond's hand and pull him into the room. "It's gotten crowded, but there's always room for you. Without you—"

"He wouldn't be lying in that bed still far too close to dying," Desmond said bitterly. Chass would have been here, safe in Harken, all along, where he should have been from the start.

"Without you, he would definitely be dead," Sarrica replied. "I doubt you remember, given the condition you were in, but you told us where they were, even a bit of what happened. That saved a great deal of time, which made all the difference in the world."

Desmond nodded. "How is he doing?"

Aria, sitting next to the bed and holding Chass's hand, said, "He woke up for a little while last night. Couldn't really talk, but he kept trying anyway. He knows you and Keeta are safe and that we took heavy losses. The healers were in a short time ago to remove his straps, thank the Pantheon."

"What do you mean?" Allen asked. "Was there something wrong with them? Well, other than the obvious."

Aria hesitated, then looked at Chass and sighed. "He can't stand being tied up in any way. It sets off what he calls his panic fits."

"I see," Allen said quietly. "I'll make sure it's noted in his healer files. How are you feeling this morning? I was going to come see you after I checked in on Chass."

"I'm fine, all things considered. Nothing but time will finish healing me up."

"Also being careful," Sarrica said with a faint smile. "I know because I wasn't nearly as careful as I should have been when young. I'm paying the price now."

Allen smiled at him. "You seem to manage well enough."

"Well enough?" Sarrica drawled. "We'll see about *well enough* later."

That elicited laughs around the room and won Sarrica a kiss.



Desmond swallowed, tamping down his envy. He'd always been perfectly happy with his life at Highmont, even if he had often been lonely for no reason he could name. Now was not the time to start longing for what may as well be impossible, when he couldn't even stay alive without the assistance of his kingdom's oldest enemy.

"Here, Your Majesty, take my seat," Aria said. "I have to report for duty soon, anyway." She rose and somehow Desmond found himself sitting before he could voice a polite protest. "He appreciates touch when it's someone he knows, so feel free to hold his hand or fix his mess of a hair or whatever."

"All right." Desmond had no intention of being so forward, but as Aria all but glared at him, he reached out and dutifully held Chass's hand the way she'd been. He swore, for a moment, that Chass's fingers tightened. Likely he was just imagining things, or it was simply a reflex. "He really is doing better?"

"Yes," Sarrica said, folding his arms across his broad chest. He seemed to take up most of the room all on his own, between his size and sheer presence, but it wasn't oppressive or smothering, the way Desmond's father and brothers had been. No, Sarrica had a comforting, protective presence. It wasn't hard to see why Allen loved him so deeply. "He's got a long way to go, given just about every part of him was broken or bleeding, but he *is* recovering. The fever is gone, and none of his wounds show signs of infection by Pantheon's Grace. As long as he doesn't do something stupid, as we soldierly types are so often inclined, he will be mostly functional in a few months and back to himself in a year or so."

Desmond ducked his head and blinked his eyes rapidly to ward off the sudden tears. He hadn't actually thought he'd get to hear such good news. Chass would live. Closing his eyes, he recited prayers of gratitude to the Goddess. Then he offered a few to Chass's Pantheon.

His eyes snapped open as the fingers in his twitched, and he stared anxiously as Chass seemed to speak, the words distressed, broken—and hauntingly familiar. "Do you know how..." Chass trailed off with a sigh and went still again, though his suddenly-tight grip on Desmond's hand didn't ease.

Tears stung his eyes anew. "Why does he always say that? It's horrible, like a curse."

"Say what?" Sarrica asked.

Desmond looked up, angrily wiping away the couple of tears that had escaped. "It's a question he repeats whenever he's distressed or having a nightmare: Do you know how to make a man brutal?"

"You brutalize him," Sarrica, Jader, Riker, and Kamir all said, their voices cold and flat.

Jader immediately snapped his gaze to Kamir. "How did you know that?"

Kamir gave him a look. "I don't know whatever your source is, clearly something military, but I know abuse when I hear it. My parents, my siblings... they're all abusers, but they were also abused. All too often, monsters make more monsters, in a tragic, nasty cycle."

"That phrase should be long dead, but every now and then it still crops up," Jader said. "Especially amongst mercenaries and sailors. That question is only the last bit of it, there was a whole poem or whatever once. It went something like 'Cowardly men die/Weak men lose/Strong men survive/Brutal men rule. How do you make a man brutal? You brutalize him.' If you want to know why the Harken Army was once more greatly feared than our good friend Treya Mencee, there you are."

"Precisely," Sarrica said, voice still cold as he recalled clearly unpleasant things. "It's a long-outlawed training method. The belief was that in order to create soldiers who could endure the worst in battle, you subjected them to that worst in training. You make a man a brutal fighting and killing machine by brutalizing him in every way you can think up. The weak break, the strong survive and go on to spread their carefully honed brutality across battlefields. It's abuse. It always was, no matter how soldiers tried to spin it as 'necessary evil' and whatever else they came up with. My great-grandmother outlawed it in the royal army, and the mercenaries swiftly followed suit. No one should even still know that phrase, beyond academically, let alone..."

"Recite it like some sort of dark mantra," Allen said. "Why would he do that?"

"After all he's done?" Sarrica asked.

"It doesn't sound like something he... lauds or agrees with," Desmond said quietly, staring at Chass's too pale face, the cuts and bruises that covered it. "He says it like it haunts him. He... he had one of those panic attacks Lieutenant Aria mentioned. A smell triggered it. He fled out into the snow, like he wanted to freeze to death. The way he asked the

question, was like it was carved into him, some terrible reminder. Every time he says it, I hate it more."

"Bateker," Riker said grimly. "He was before my time. I didn't join up until well after he was gone, and Chass was in charge. Aria has told me a little bit about him, though, some of the things he did to his soldiers. Beatings. Torture. Rape. Aria says she still can't stand the smell of certain liquors because they were what he used to dope his victims before... using them. I didn't know there were smells that triggered a similar reaction in Chass, but it doesn't surprise me. You're a soldier long enough, you always gain at least a couple. I can't stand eggs or gruel; I'll throw them both up if you make me eat them."

"Bateker... he was a keen follower of that training method you mentioned. Knew full well it was illegal and didn't care. Inflicted it on everyone, but was especially brutal with what he called his 'pets.' Aria and Chass have never said, but I think Chass was one of those pets. If you want details, you'd have to ask them. I normally wouldn't say even this much, but Chass... Chass has suffered enough. He's not the villain everyone thinks, whatever his past mistakes. If you'll excuse me." Riker hastened from the room, not even bowing as she technically should have, and it was clear she was trying to hold back tears of her own.

"Pantheon," Sarrica said. "If all that is true, which it must be, how did such abuse go unnoticed by the entire fucking rest of the army and mercenaries? Somebody, somewhere would have known what was happening and spoken up."

Kamir huffed a sad, tired laugh. "That's not how it works. Plenty of people knew the way my parents treated me. The way my despicable ex treated me. No one was ever willing to help me, not until I hired Velina, and she became the friend and ally I'd never had before. People get uncomfortable and don't know how to handle it, and so just ignore it. Others think, whether they realize it or not, that the victim must have done something to deserve it. If they're really being abused, why don't they just leave? Abuse is ugly and complicated and impossible to understand wholly if you've not been a victim yourself."

"Too often, people also simply refuse to believe the abuse is even happening, and that the abuser is somebody they respect and admire, because many abusers are very good at making certain of that." He turned to look at Chass, smiling softly. "He came to see me, not long after Sarrica

issued his imperial ban, to reassure me all would be well, and that he understood me. Which he very much did; it was in his eyes. I don't know what exactly Chass has been through, but I know it broke him, and he regrets many things he did in that time. Whoever this Bateker was, I hope he's dead."

"He's a royal prince of Gaulden! Of the Harken Empire! Nobody should have been abusing him," Allen said, anger and dismay and pain filling his features. "No, that's stupid. It wouldn't matter if he was a homeless man on the streets. Nobody should ever endure abuse. I can't—" He abruptly turned and stormed out, and Sarrica went after him.

Jader sighed. "I think we've gossiped about His Highness while standing around his sickbed enough for one day. I've work to do, anyway, and somebody should be returning to our rooms to rest."

"After I go to the office," Kamir said, but smiled as Jader offered an arm and led him from the room.

Leaving Desmond alone with Chass, and lonelier than ever.

He remained, softly singing hymns or telling stories, until hunger got the better of him and healers came to change Chass's dressings and urged him out.

He hadn't gone far, though, when one of the many palace runners approached him. "Your Majesty, High Consort Allen requests you come see him when you have a chance and feel up to it. He stresses the matter isn't urgent, and you're to come at your leisure."

"It's not like I'm doing anything else right now, though I would like some food. Something light and easy on the stomach, if possible."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Your Majesty. Desmond hadn't even been accustomed to 'Your Highness' when he'd abruptly found himself shifted from crown prince to king. Everyone in his daily life, a life that seemed further and further away, had used his name or addressed him as 'Brother.' Despite the fact he'd been on the throne for a few years now, 'Your Majesty' still didn't sit right. He doubted it ever would.

"Could I prevail upon you to guide me?" Desmond asked. "I am still learning my way around the palace; I'm told mastering it takes time."

The messenger laughed and bowed. "My honor to serve, and yes, it does take months, if not years, to completely memorize Harkenesten Palace. Given the architects and engineers are getting ready to do some large

renovation projects, soon we might all have to start over. This way, Your Majesty."

At one point they paused ever so briefly so the messenger could speak with another servant, speaking what Desmond recognized as Selemean, but that was where his knowledge of the language ended.

A few minutes later, they reached what could only be the imperial offices, where a clerk manning the desk waived them on through. Inside, five hundred things seemed to be happening at once, with Allen and Sarrica right in the middle of the chaos.

The messenger bowed and left him, and Desmond stood back and waited for a break in the storm, loath to interrupt. He knew full well how difficult it could be to get anything done when there were always hundreds of things that were all marked urgent and needed to be finished two days ago. He both missed and didn't miss that chaos. At least he hadn't felt useless, a feeling that had been encroaching more and more with every day Highmont was behind him.

A feeling that seemed justified, in the aftermath of his people trying to kill him.

Several more minutes passed before Allen looked up to speak to someone and noticed him. "Desmond!" He handed off the papers he was holding to a nearby secretary, a handsome man who looked to be Soldonir. This must be the secretary he'd heard so much about, the one that had been kidnapped and was the reason Soldonir was now a probational member of the Harken Empire. "I'm so sorry, have you been waiting long?"

"Not at all," Desmond replied. "I did not want to interrupt you."

"There will always be paperwork," Allen said with a laugh, and linked their arms before leading him across the room to a private office. It was such a *Harken* thing to do, Desmond smiled. "Sit, sit."

Instead of sitting behind the massive desk that took up most of the room, Allen sat in the remaining chair in front of it. "Is there anything you need?"

"To finally eat, but I think food is on the way," Desmond replied. "It can wait a bit longer. This is what I get for having a stomach that didn't want to cooperate with my breakfast. What did you need?"

Allen frowned, brow furrowing, but nodded slightly and said, "The necklace you gave me, from Chass... I have been meaning to ask if he said

anything when he gave it to you. I would imagine not, given the circumstances, but on the chance..."

"He did, actually," Desmond replied. "I'm sorry, if I'd realized I hadn't conveyed his message I would have done so by now. My memories of that day are hazy at best."

"I understand completely," Allen said with a small laugh. "When Rene and I were captured..." He shuddered. "I remember almost none of it clearly, and for that I'm grateful."

Desmond nodded, then gestured to the necklace that Allen had pulled out, the lamplight catching in the sapphire teardrop and making it glitter like a distant star. "It's beautiful, whatever it is, and I know it's deeply important to Chass, though he never explained what it is or why. I never asked; it seemed a personal matter not to be intruded upon." He cleared his throat and sat up straighter, ignoring the pull of his stitches. "He wanted me to tell you this: that he's sorry for hurting you, for letting you down, for wrongly blaming you. For everything."

"I see," Allen said, voice breaking slightly as he caught up the necklace in his hand and closed it in a fist, head bowing as he was lost in thought or grief or whatever it was that weighed so heavily upon him.

After a few minutes, he looked up again, and once more displayed the necklace. "It's called a Tear of the Penitent. It's a very old Gaulden tradition that we carried over when we took up worshipping the Pantheon instead. There are stages of them, as the wearer walks what is called the Penitent Path. When you start, you wear a black Tear. The material doesn't matter, it can be a jewel or a painted rock or made from cloth. The first part of the Path is Forgiveness of the Gods. Over the years, the Path has been distilled down to simply visiting the temple, saying you're sorry, and doing whatever punishment they issue to make up for your transgression. Usually it takes the form of work in the community or paying a fine that goes to the injured party. Sometimes it's more severe, but rarely.

"In the original Path, however, it was merely the first step. It still typically included doing good works that are religious in nature, centric to the temple and its various roles, but the scale of them is commiserate with the offender's status. As Chass is a prince... he must have done significant works, like having temples built or restored, things like that. I wouldn't be surprised if he does them still. I don't know much about my own brother, but I know he is deeply devout."

"He is," Desmond said softly. "It's one of the things we have in common, even if we have different gods. So how does one accomplish, or finish, or whatever, these paths?"

"That is up to whomever oversees the current tear being worked toward. Forgiveness of the Gods is overseen by the temple. When they feel the Penitent has earned their forgiveness, they take the black Tear and give the next one, which is Forgiveness of the Crown. I assume our brother Larren was responsible for that, as I can't see him going to our mother. Chass hates her, for reasons I never understood before but now... now I wonder just how much I missed, too focused on myself and my own problems to see the others right in front of my face."

"I will not insult your mother in front of you, but my impression from Chass is that she is... difficult at best. I wonder if he would have suffered as he did under Bateker if he'd not first had to suffer your mother."

Allen stared at him, wide eyed and pale, then pressed his lips together in a flat line. "I would like to defend my mother, for she's been kind to me in her own way, but... but that would be ignoring a problem that I was made aware of far too late as it is. I fear you are correct." His face said there was much still on his mind, but before Desmond could gently prod him, Allen drew a breath and let it out on a shuddering sigh. "The Tear for Forgiveness of the Crown is red, and when forgiveness is granted a green one is granted in its place."

"Forgiveness of...I can't guess."

"The people. The Penitent Path narrows as it goes: the gods, the state, the people, and finally Forgiveness of the Wronged." Allen dangled the Tear so it caught the light again. "This is blue, which means he is at that last stage: Forgiveness of the Wronged. My forgiveness. I never even knew he was doing this, and part of the Penitent Path is declaring to relevant parties that you walk it. I don't know why he never said anything."

"I haven't known Chass long, but I can say with absolute certainty that he felt like he didn't have the right to tell you," Desmond replied. "I don't know what he did, what happened between the two of you. It's not my business to know. I don't know if he can or should be forgiven, that's not my place and I would never presume anyway. What I can tell you is that his sorrow and regret are genuine. That he loves you dearly. Everything he did for me, he did for *you*."

Allen nodded, head bowed as he struggled with whatever thoughts and emotions had overtaken him. "Thank you for telling me—for delivering his message. I wish things had been different between us growing up. That I had not been so locked away... That little matters now though."

"The past is fired and set, but the future is clay waiting to be shaped," Desmond recited.

Allen bobbed his head slightly and finally looked up again, eyes overly bright. "The past is closed to us, but the future is open, is how we say it. Thank you, it's good to be reminded."

Desmond smiled faintly. "I'm a former monk. When I wasn't working or praying, I was helping people who came to us for solace and sanctuary."

Allen's expression turned thoughtful. "I'm starting to think such skills should be required—" He broke off at a knock at the door

Sarrica slipped his head in. "You need to come out here. There's something very peculiar going on, and I think you need to be involved."

"What in the Pantheon..." Allen shook his head, tucked the Tear away, and rose. "Did anyone come with food for Desmond?"

"It's waiting, along with food for *you*."

Allen laughed. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Desmond followed him out of the office and all but ran to the tray of food waiting for him across the room. At least his stomach seemed to want to cooperate now. After this, maybe he'd go visit Chass again, if he woke up while Desmond was there. His heart lurched, gave a funny flip, and Desmond drank his near-scalding tea for the desperately-needed distraction.

Drat it, that reminded him he'd forgotten *again* to ask Allen about that word Chass had used, had called him. *Laleshaa*. It wasn't a Gaulden word he knew, though of course his Gaulden was still a long way from full fluency. Still, it was odd he didn't recognize any part of it, not even the root noun, *Lale*. Obviously declined with the *shaa* ending, but he couldn't sort out what the nominative should...

Oh, nevermind.

He looked up at the sound of someone other than Allen or Sarrica saying Chass's name, to see a distressed looking priest talking to Allen, clinging to his hands and crying. Food immediately forgotten, Desmond rose and went to see what was wrong. "Is he all right?"



"Yes," Allen said. "Apparently this is Chass's priest. His name is Lanora. He thought Chass was dead. In fact, a great number of people thought the same thing. They've all come to ask after him and offer condolences. There's so many, Sarrica had them put in a separate room where I can speak to them all at once. He made certain Lanora got to speak to me first, though. Come, I'll have someone take you to see Chass for yourself." He immediately beckoned to the secretary from earlier. "Myra, would you see he is escorted?"

"I'll do it myself," Myra replied, and offered his arm to Lanora, who immediately took it with several stumbling thank yous, and let Myra lead him away.

When he was gone Allen pulled himself together, his mind clearly in turmoil, though his face gave nothing away, save for the tightness around his eyes, which were darker than usual.

"I do not know if I can be of much use, but I'm happy to keep you company if you like," Desmond replied. "Unless His Majesty was going to do so."

"Sarrica's already been dragged away to deal with a problem in the barracks," Allen said. "I would appreciate the company, thank you."

They left the office, passed through the antechamber, and went down the hall to what proved to be some sort of large salon, likely a waiting area outside for some other space, like a private throne room or meeting room.

Roughly thirty people filled it, from fishermen and farmers all the way up to academics and nobles. It was such an unusual swath of people to be gathered in one place, he was baffled as to what they could all have in common that tied back to Chass.

"Your Majesty!" said one of the women in academic robes. As one, all the people in the room turned and bowed, murmuring various greetings and honorifics. The academic woman rose as Allen bid them do so and drew close, clearly the leader of the strange group. "We're honored you would speak with us personally. Is it... is it true His Highness is dead?"

"No," Allen said. "He very nearly did die, but Chass has unmatched strength and fortitude. He is currently sleeping in the healing ward, lightly sedated so he doesn't stress his wounds overmuch until they're a bit more healed up. I am sorry that such horrible rumors reached you."

All around the room was a mixture of cheering and sobbing, such a show of abject relief that Desmond was awed. Who were all these people?

Clearly just as confused, Allen asked, "Might I ask who all of you are?"

"Of course!" the woman said. "Forgive me my rudeness, it was not intentional, Your Majesty. I am Professor Mortya, head of the College of History at Harkenesten University. Prince Chass has always generously donated funds, and most recently he fully funded our expedition to salvage a sunken ship off the coast of Delfaste that is of significant historic value."

"I remember the most recent article about that," Allen said. "I had no idea Chass was involved."

"He funded our expedition too," said an old man with long white hair and an even longer white beard, dressed in rough clothes that spoke of hard travel. "Our latest attempt to map the great north. No expedition has ever made it three years, let alone the full five, but my team has already lasted a few months longer than the last time, largely because of His Highness's generosity. We were able to buy supplies and equipment we never could before and provide the latest training."

One by one, the other people in the room came forward, each with a story to tell of Chass's generosity. More people arrived as they spoke, until the room was nearly packed. Allen listened to each and every one of them, until the stories at last seemed to run out.

"Chass isn't up to visitors right now," Allen said, "but if you will each leave your address, and the best way to contact you, with the clerk in the office antechamber, I promise that the moment he is receiving guests you will all be notified. I'm sure he'd like to see you. I will also let him know that every one of you came by to ask after him. I think that will hearten him greatly while he heals. Thank you for coming, and for caring so much about my brother."

Bit by bit the visitors trickled out, many lingering to express personal thanks to Allen, who returned them warmly. Desmond's father would have never spent time on such a thing, just delegated it to an already overworked secretary and moved on to more interesting things, like drinking or finding ways to start more wars.

Eventually, only Professor Mortya remained. "I am deeply grateful, Your Majesty, for the time you've spent speaking with us. I hate to trouble you further..."

"Please," Allen said. "What do you need?"

"I was hoping you might advise me, or even assist me, on a matter regarding His Highness. He has contributed funds well in excess of all our other donors combined. Many of them have halls, libraries, and more named after them in honor of what they've done for the university. His Highness will not let us do any such thing for him, no matter how we try to convince him that we would very much like to honor all he's done for us."

"I can see where Chass would never allow that," Desmond said with a smile. "That goes against everything he believes in."

"The Admonitions of Jenn." Mortya sighed. "Only the oldest, most unbending priests adhere to that tiresome old thing. Most of us have long since realized that many people desperately want to be able to thank, or at least acknowledge, those who have helped them. You can be rewarded for a good deed without it marring the goodness of that deed."

Desmond laughed. "The Chass I know is far more stubborn than you and deeply devout. He would be hurt to have his efforts undermined so. If you really want to thank him for all he's done, I suggest paying it forward. A scholarship to help those who would not ordinarily be able to attend such a fine school. A library that focuses on his favorite topic, named for an historical figure he admires. It does not have to bear his name to be for and because of him. You know why, and I have no doubt he'll figure it out. Would that not suffice?"

"I could not have said it better myself," Allen said.

Mortya nodded. "You do have a point. Thank you..."

"Desmond, please."

Her eyes widened as she registered who he must be, and she bowed low to both of them. "You've been generous and helpful, Your Majesties. I am forever grateful. I will bid you good day now, as I'm sure you've much more important things to be doing."

She departed, and when they were alone, Allen sat down in one of the nearest chairs—dropped into it, really, looking exhausted and troubled. He looked up with a wan smile. "I think you know my brother better than I do. No doubt part of that is how deeply devout you both are, aside from the whole struggling across a continent together. I did not know his ran so deep he clung to such outdated ways of thinking. He does not usually present himself as the humble sort."

"Nobody wants to see humility in a soldier," Desmond said quietly. "They're practically paid to be anything but that. Chass does what is expected of him, for better and worse."

Allen grimaced. "True enough. Still, the man I am coming to know is very different from the one I thought I did."

Desmond tilted his head slightly to one side. "Does that trouble you?"

"I don't know, to be honest," Allen said, looking briefly sad. "As I said before, I wish things had been different back then. They weren't though, and all this—" He motioned to the empty room, all that had recently transpired, "is something to think about. For now, I have duties requiring my attention, and we both need to eat before my husband ties us down and feeds us himself."

Smiling, Desmond followed him out of the meeting room and back to the imperial offices.

## Chapter Fourteen

Chass woke in agonizing pain, but habit kept him from crying out. He gritted his teeth and focused on his breathing until he had it under control, could see past the pain.

Though which part of him hurt, he had no idea. Every part of him, really. His head. His torso. Legs and arm. He doubted there was a single part of him that wasn't black and blue, if not far worse. Had Aria said something about his ribs when they'd spoken? Or was that a different time?

Whatever. He could tell some ribs were cracked. Stiches pulled in several places.

Footsteps drew his attention, and he stared as a healer came into view, her face unknown but her uniform painfully familiar.

"Your Highness, it's good to see you awake!"

Chass grunted, not quite able to manage a better reply.

"I'll get you some suitable sustenance, if you think you're up to trying it?"

That meant broth or gruel. Chass vehemently hated both, but there was no point in arguing with healers on the matter. "I'll try. Help me sit up?"

She bobbed in acknowledgement and moved in to help him sit up, arranging the pillows behind him to provide suitable support. "Is there anyone I should have brought to see you?"

"No, not at the moment, thank you," Chass replied, already exhausted all over again. He was also hot, itchy, and grungy. If he could complain about all those things, though, he must truly be on the mend.

"Lieutenant Aria will be mad she just missed you waking up again."

"Lieutenant Aria has better things to be doing with her time than fuss over me," Chass said.

Laughing, clearly one of those rare types who never seemed affected by the scathing demeanor Chass affected around most people, she walked briskly off to see about his food and no doubt report to whichever master healer had been assigned to his care. Usually Grimari got that unenviable task.

Chass leaned back against his pillows and closed his eyes, tried to focus on calm, on soothing, on anything but the tumult trying to rise up in

him. So many problems to face. So many dead to honor and mourn. So much healing to do, inside and out.

So much. Always so much to do. At the end of it all, if he ever even reached the end, he would still only be a monster.

Dying in battle would have been a kinder fate, so far as he could see. Holy Prima had decided otherwise, though, and he could only trust in Her judgement.

He opened his eyes at the sound of footsteps and hated himself for the disappointment that swept through him as the latest arrival proved only to be a master healer. Not Grimari, though, but Farrtaala, who attended the imperial family and their closest associates. What in the world was she doing here?

Smiling gently, in that way most healers seemed to possess, she pulled up a nearby stool and sat beside him. "Good afternoon, Your Highness. It's good to see you properly awake and aware. You were very come-and-go for some time there. We feared the worst, for all you're the most stubborn person any of us knows." She laughed. "I've sent word to Their Majesties that you are awake."

Chass had no idea how to reply to that. He was sure Allen was relieved he was alive, as that solved a potential difficult problem about who would inherit the Gaulden throne, but past that... past that they were probably already counting down the days until he was gone.

He closed his eyes and endured as he was poked and prodded. "What is the full extent?" he asked when the torture ended, when he was no longer being touched in ways he didn't want. He opened his eyes and almost closed them again, hating the sympathy-bordering-on-pity in Farrtaala's gaze.

Farrtaala sat back slightly and said, "You have at least four cracked ribs, a couple of them very close to broken, and the rest heavily bruised. I'm sure you know how careful you need to be until they heal up, but I'm reminding you anyway. You took a pretty nasty stab wound to the gut. It missed doing any damage we couldn't repair, Pantheon alone knows how, but you lost a great deal of blood, and I wouldn't be surprised if some long-term issues show up at some point.

"A small measure of your liver was lost, and it nearly did your intestines in for good. So have a care. Some nasty slashes across your chest, though thankfully not so deep they were an instant kill. Nearly, though.

There's a long slash on your left thigh, stitched up, but I'd be careful with the walking when you're allowed to do so again—which won't be until the stitches in your gut can be removed, which won't be for several days yet. You were thrashing badly, and getting you off the mountain was a challenge all its own, so we had to do them three different times. I apologize we had to strap you down; I am told you do not react well to that. I don't know why it wasn't noted in your files."

"If it's necessary, it's necessary," Chass said. "How I feel about it is irrelevant if my health matters more."

That got him an admonishing look, but she only replied, "Be that as it may, we'll have more care in the future. Though ideally it's not something we'll have to worry about anymore, Your Highness."

"I would like that, believe me. Anything else?"

"You took a pretty hard knock to the head, but seem to be recovering just fine from it. Some other minor cuts and bruises, all pretty standard battle wounds. Stitched up a couple of the larger ones, on your right forearm and the back of your left upper arm, but more precaution than anything. Your right ankle was swollen for a bit, but we've been watching it the past few days, and it seems to be well on the mend. You also broke the small finger on your left hand, but it was a clean break and should heal up fine. Might be some stiffness from now on, but still usable. Overall? You should have died, Your Highness, I'm not going to lie. The blood loss alone should have killed you, never mind the pain, the shock, the time it took for real help to reach you. The gut wound alone... I don't know who or what is responsible for your still being alive, but they must really love you."

"The Pantheon sees what we cannot, and work according to that view and design," Chass said. "I can only assume they still have use for me here. Thank you for all you've done, Mistress Farartaala. I owe you a great debt."

"Work harder at not dying; that is all the repayment we healers ever want. I hear your food coming, so I will leave you to rest."

Chass nodded and thanked her again, and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as the latest footsteps drew closer. It was only as his latest visitor came into view that he registered the tread was familiar.

Lanora, his priest, bearing a tray of food he must have taken from the servant who'd been bringing it. He'd found Chass when he was at his absolute lowest, when he'd finally snapped, realized how far he'd fallen,

how awful he'd become, how much he desperately did not want to keep on living. He'd sliced his wrists and sat there in the rain hoping that would speed the process.

Ignoring him would have been easier, but Lanora had taken him in, talked to him, listened as Chass spilled every last sordid, ugly detail, from Bateker's first insidious word to when Chass had broken and blamed Allen for everything, to that night when he'd gone beyond too far, when he and Manda had nearly killed Allen.

Who'd never done anything wrong. Had never been to blame. Whose only crimes were being their mother's favorite and getting to do and be everything Chass had ever wanted. Which weren't crimes at all. If he'd been less of a fucking fool, he'd have seen Allen for the friend and ally, the brother, he could have been, instead of resenting him for everything Bateker had done. For everything his mother had done—and not done.

"You've looked better," Lanora said as he sat down. "You've also looked worse."

Chass managed a faint laugh. "Sorry, but there are some records I don't want to break."

"I suppose that's reasonable." He arranged a bed table that had been set nearby and placed the tray of food on it. Chass set to work on the bland meal with little enthusiasm, but only because he would not heal—or get better food—if he did not eat the bland stuff first.

Lanora pulled a chair close, sat down, and set a wooden box in his lap, roughly the size of a book and about as deep as the sort of volume that was good for curing insomnia. It was carved all over the sides and edges of the lid with flowers, birds, and butterflies, each one delicately painted, some covered in gold leaf. The lid had been carved with a prayer in the center as well, one of the many meant specifically for priests and the duties they were supposed to carry out. Inside was the full set of prayer cards that priests learned to use through their years of training. "I thought you were dead. That is the news that reached us in the city. I am embarrassed to admit I cried all over your brother. It was the greatest gift indeed, Grace of Holy Shammari, when His Majesty told me that you were in fact alive."

Chass had no idea how to respond to that. He would have expected Lanora, some of the Yanari, and many in Penance Gate to be sad at his passing, but to cry in front of Allen about it? Allen must have been beyond aggravated to have his time wasted so. "Grace of Holy Shammari," he



finally echoed. "I guess even the Penance Realms don't want me quite yet. Have I missed anything important? I haven't seen anyone else since waking up a short time ago, and Aria wouldn't tell me anything last time."

"I'm performing the Rites for the fallen soldiers of Penance Gate and Ruinous Horde this evening. The pyres were finished this morning; now they're arranging the bodies."

Chass pinched his eyes shut. "How many?"

"Two hundred Penance, a little less than that for Ruinous Horde. There's even more injured, though most of them thankfully minor. About thirty are here in the healing ward recovering, and five of those we're not yet certain will survive. Three are Penance."

"Their names," Chass said, using the heel of his hand to wipe away tears that slipped free.

"Anya, Timith, Brey." The rustle of paper drove Chass to open his eyes, and he took the folded sheet that Lanora offered. "The dead. I'm sorry, Chass. I know death is all but guaranteed in your line of work, but that does not make the losses easier. I will see them honored properly."

"You always do," Chass said. "Thank you. What about the Carthians? Riker? Captain Charlaine?"

"Captain Charlaine is alive and well, nothing worse than banged up. Riker is unscathed. As to the Carthians, many have been brought here to help tend their wounds. Chief Yanari and her people opted to stay in their home. She lost part of her left arm, from about the elbow down, but the last word we received she is recovering fine. She did wish me to convey to you, though, that there were no casualties amongst her people. Her plans, and the efforts of Ruinous Horde, ensured that. She thanks you for showing the care you promised, and for Harken's assistance in the aftermath. I think you've done more to build relationships between our two countries than the last several generations combined."

Relief swept through Chass. Charlaine was fine. The Yanari were fine. Thank Holy Prima. "Aria said Keeta is here. How is he doing?"

"He's doing fine. Comes to see you every morning and night, and sometimes in the middle of the day. He's being taken care of by Lord Kamir, and is quite taken with the palace—and even more so with the ocean. He's even more charming than you've always said." Lanora laughed. "Let me tell you the faces of everyone when they realized how close you are to Keeta, and when Desmond was able to confirm that you do indeed

plan on adopting him. Even the High King could find no words, and everyone knows he doesn't usually struggle for something to say. Anyway, Keeta will be delighted to hear you are well and truly awake, once anyone can figure out where he's run off to this time."

Chass smiled briefly. "Wherever he is most not supposed to be."

"That sounds accurate," Lanora said with a chuckle. "Speaking of Keeta, why do the Carthians call you Ossi?"

"I never asked."

Lanora chuckled. "I suppose not. Anything I can bring you? Do for you? I did bring my cards, as you probably noticed, if you'd like a reading."

"I would appreciate that, yes," Chass said, comforted immediately simply by the idea of a ritual that had always brought him comfort, steadiness, when life so rarely offered either of those things.

They began with a prayer, requesting the time and guidance of the Pantheon, of his patron, Holy Shallana.

When the prayer was complete, Lanora removed the food tray and set it by the door to be taken away, and then retrieved his ornate box. He slid the top off and withdrew the full set of prayer cards. They'd been a gift from Chass, to replace the worn set he'd inherited from a previous Brother. Chass's cards had been painted in an ornate, colorful style common to Gaulden. This set was watercolor, more common to Selemea, where Lanora was from, though he hadn't lived there for decades now.

Lanora shuffled the cards, then arranged them in four decks at the very edge of the table closest to him. From there, he slowly drew card after card, in a pattern that would make little sense to most, but was typical for the spread he was doing, called the sunburst, Chass's favorite.

There were twenty-seven cards in all, with Lanora drawing twenty-six of them and Chass drawing the one that went in the very center, the 'heart' of the sun.

When they were all laid out, Lanora turned them over one by one, working from the outside in until the full sunburst was revealed.

Unlike the simple guidance readings Chass did with his basic deck, this reading was far more intricate and involved: past, present, future, new, old. It was an in-depth examination of where he stood, what he could leave behind, and what he should focus on going forward. In addition to all the major deities in Rising, Falling, and Peak, there were Heart cards, and then

lesser cards that displayed minor deities or important stories of the Pantheon.

Always, the center card in Chass's readings was Shammari, or Tash, or some story or minor deity card of the Penance Realms. Tens, even hundreds of readings over the years, and that remained unchanged.

Until today. He stared, confused and wary, at the very last card he'd ever expected to see in one of his readings, let alone in the most important place: Prima of the Heart. God of Life, ruler of the Divine Fields, prayed to when facing the worst moments in one's life. Be it grief, betrayal, strife, or anything in between, one prayed to Holy Prima for the strength to face the turmoil and keep going.

In this context, though, it meant that he should focus on life, on living, or perhaps draw strength from the living, generally meaning family, friends, other forms of support.

The next ring of cards were the four anchor cards, at each of the compass points, and between them supplemental cards to add detail. Around them was a ring of tertiary cards, and at the very outer edge were four more compass point cards that advised what was coming to an end, what he should leave behind or put to rest.

It was not the place he'd expected to see Tash of the Heart.

Patron of Penance Gate, First Beast, the one to suggest the Penance Gate. Prayed to for strength against violence and pain, other forms of torment and suffering. In this context, there at the southern compass point, the card suggested that it was time to put pain and violence behind him.

"One of your more interesting readings," Lanora said, rubbing his chin with one finger thoughtfully. "The most obvious element is a new beginning. That's good. I would say it's also indicating that it is time to put Penance Gate behind you once and for all, which is what you were doing anyway, since you must take up as heir properly. I see Denala Rising, and given Her proximity to Jenn in the Peak and Prima's twin daughters... I would say the gods are urging you to appreciate the new life you've been granted, to pray for guidance on this unfamiliar and no doubt intimidating path, accept those who would help and support you, and leave behind all that you have been thus far."

It was a reading too good to be true. A promise that he could be something other than a monster.

Chass tried always to trust and obey the gods, but right then he struggled greatly. Once a monster, always a monster. Even the Beasts of the Penance Gate had remained Beasts in the end, changing only in the way they executed their purpose.

"I see," he finally said.

"Chass," Lanora said gently, compelling him to look up, meet his gaze. "You are more than the wrongs you've committed. You know that. Now that you are home and will not have to go to war again, try working harder at *believing* it."

"I am. I will. I promise I'll do my best," Chass said.

Lanora stared at him a moment longer, then nodded and slowly gathered up the cards. "I'm sorry your cards were lost. They brought in what they could locate of your belongings, but the cards were beyond saving. I'll have a new set made for you."

"You need not. I'll buy another before I leave, or on my way home."

Lanora rolled his eyes but said nothing. "Anything else I can do for you? Or would you like to get some more rest?"

"I think rest is going to get me whether I want it or not," Chass said. He hated this part of healing, when all his body wanted to do was shut down. Leaving him helpless against all the nightmares, all the horrid memories, that never missed a chance to pounce him.

Lanora put the table and cards away and resumed his seat, bending over briefly and coming back up with a book. "Well, rest then, my stubborn friend. I'll read to you until you fall asleep. There are some letters here from grateful patrons that you should hear. There are also many people who have come to ask about you, and a few of them said that the High Consort promised they could visit once you were well enough to receive visitors."

Chass groaned but didn't waste his time arguing. It was fruitless. The entire point of donating money and such was the doing, but people insisted on trying to thank and reward him anyway. He *hated* it.

Lanora only laughed some more and opened up the first of the letters, which proved to be yet another from the university, no matter how many times...

\*~\*~\*

When he woke again, it was to lamplight from stained glass lamps far too fine for a healing ward. Other additions had been made—rugs, tapestries, a small bookshelf that had only a couple of books in it.

Why was all this here? Who had arranged it? Such things weren't Aria's style, or Riker's. Desmond? No, he wouldn't want someone else to pay for such things on his behalf. Lanora wouldn't have the funds, and it wasn't really his style either. Had Desmond and Lanora met yet? They would get along well.

The books had likely been Lanora's contribution, since few others knew how much Chass enjoyed historical and scientific tomes, and that he could read them in a few languages. The rest of the room, though, remained a complete mystery.

Certainly not Allen. Chass could think of no one else who would go to so much trouble and expense for him. Maybe his mother, but the chance was so slight it was laughable. Perhaps someone he'd helped in the past? Lanora had mentioned there were people who wanted to see him. Perhaps one or more of them had done this. Maybe they'd finally leave off wanting to show their gratitude for his doing what he should.

What time was it?

That question was answered by a beautiful clock on the table beside his bed, another costly addition, to judge by the quality of the wood, the intricate carvings of flora and fauna.

The clock was the true masterpiece, though, the type given as a gift for important occasions, like weddings or retirement. It was made of vibrant red marble with white and gold veins, carved into the shape of a raptor perched on a tree branch, its talons covered in gold leaf. The clockwork was set in its breast; it had a white face, red numbers, and gold hands.

A slip of paper was folded and tucked under one corner. Finally, somebody felt like communicating, instead of leaving him with a pile of questions.

He unfolded it, and nearly cried as his eyes fell immediately on the signature. *Kamir*.

Chass could still remember the day he'd gone to see Kamir at his home in the city. It had required more courage than needed to go into battle. He'd seen Kamir around before, seen his haunted eyes, the shadows of a fellow victim of abuse. After hearing about the imperial ban, all he could

think was that Kamir needed not just a friend, but someone who truly understood what he'd been through, what he probably still lived with.

It would seem his timid attempt at extending a hand had come full circle.

Wiping his eyes, he finally read the whole note.

*Chass,*

*I'll never forget the support and understanding you once gave me when you had no reason at all to even know of my existence. I hope I can do the same for you now.*

*When I was largely on my own, I earned money making clocks. I bought the art from a carver I've worked with several times. The clock I did myself. It's accurate to within ten minutes.*

*As to your room, that is entirely Sarrica. He gave orders you weren't to know, but I think it's important you do know.*

*Keeta is charming. We were all surprised to learn you more or less had a son, and Carthian at that, but he adores you as much as my children adore me—when they're not mad at me for being so very unreasonable, anyway. He will be a fine and worthy prince of Gaulden, and you will be far better a parent than either mine or yours were, if you will forgive the presumption of that statement. I will happily care for him until you're in better health, so let that be one less thing for you to worry about.*

*Rest, get well. When you're healed, we'll do lunch.*

*All my best,*

*Kamir*

Chass always hated when he cried. Tears were useless. All they did was redden his face and leave his eyes sore. They'd never convinced anyone to help him, or eased the pain, or anything else. They just advertised to the world that he should be pitied.

Wiping his face, he tucked the note back where he'd found it, until he could have Aria take it to his room and put it in his memory chest.

High King Sarrica. Why would *he* fancy up Chass's room? That made even less sense than all the other possibilities. His Majesty had punched Chass when he'd found out about the lashings. The abuse. Chass had never blamed him for that. Sarrica had done the right thing. Pantheon, he should have thrown Chass out of Harkenesten for good.

He hadn't, though, because Chass was also an excellent monster, and all empires needed monsters.

None of that explained why he was seeing Chass's room was decked out in fancy furniture and expensive baubles. Apology? Gratitude? Neither of those made sense. Chass had done what he always did. He'd just somehow managed to survive yet again.

Whatever. A question for later. For the present, he reached out and rang the bell on the table, and when a healer came along, endured the tiresome process of getting out of bed and to a chamber pot and back. By the time he was finished, he was exhausted again, but only asked for one of the books on his fancy new shelves.

This one was historical, written in Outlander but about Islanders, co-written by an Islander and an Outlander. He recognized the Outlander name, but not the Islander. He'd have to see if the woman had written anything else.

Opening to the first page, ignoring his own yawning, Chass settled in to read.

He hadn't been reading long when footsteps drew his attention—and his stupid, futile hopes immediately dashed when he saw only an imperial clerk bearing something that Chass wouldn't enjoy reading.

"Beg pardon, Your Highness, for interrupting you during your recovery, but I was bid deliver this promptly."

"Of course," Chass said, and signed off he'd received it as the clerk held out the acknowledgement slip.

Once she'd gone, Chass broke the imperial seal and pulled out the documents within. Not much in the end, for all the fancy wording spread over three pages of legalese.

He was being forced into retirement, discharged from military service with highest honor and commendation.

Like he hadn't been planning on retiring anyway. Chass sighed and threw the papers on the table. That explained the furniture. Not some gesture of kindness or whatever, not that he'd been stupid enough to think such a thing, but a way to soften the blow of the order. Sarrica wanted him out of harm's way once and for all, with no way of being able to dive back into it.

Ordered out of the only thing he was good for like some sort of recalcitrant child, like he wasn't lying in this bed because of imperial orders.

He'd been an obedient monster what felt like his whole life, and this was what he got: kicked out and given some pretty lamps to soften the

blow.

"You're awake! And upright!"

Chass's head snapped up at the sound of Aria's voice, relief sweeping through him. "Shouldn't you be working?"

"Tomorrow is soon enough to take up being Captain full time," Aria said. "I'm guessing from your grouchy demeanor that you've been officially discharged."

"Yes," Chass said. "You needn't sound so cheerful about it."

"Oh, no, how dare I be happy that you'll no longer have to worry about getting killed every day of your life like the rest of us."

Chass's hands curled into fists. "Tell that to Larren."

Aria flinched. "I'm sorry. That was stupid. I didn't think."

"It's fine," Chass said. "Did you come with some other purpose, miscreant?"

She smiled as she sat on the edge of his bed and leaned in slowly to give him a soft but thorough kiss. "I see you're well and truly on the mend."

He stole a second one, comforted as always by her touch, the softness of her lips and the sureness in her kiss. "The bastards are always the hardest to kill. Lanora told me about Penance Gate and the others. Have you seen or heard about Keeta?"

"He's around somewhere doesn't really hold still long enough for anyone to grab him up. He comes to sit with you morning and night, so he'll turn up again. Last I saw him, though, he was in the swimming pool asking a million questions of the Islanders who understand his Carthian."

Chass smiled. Keeta could be shy, but once he got going, very little slowed him down. He'd always known Keeta would take well to Harkenesten, to Harken as a whole, but it made happy hearing to have his predictions confirmed. "Good. Now tell me whatever bad news is putting those lines in your face and making you look like some old hag who eats children."

"Fuck you," Aria said with a weak laugh. "You're *really* not going to like it."

"I already knew that, so stop stalling and just tell me already, damn it."

Aria sighed. "After I left yesterday, Riker lingered. Their Majesties, King Desmond, Commander Jader, and Lord Kamir were also here. Much of our miserable history with Bateker came up. I'm not entirely sure how, I



think it had something to do with Bateker's precious fucking credo, but Riker said there was no way to dodge out of elaborating. So... it's safe to say they have a general idea of everything that happened to you, if not a near-complete picture."

Chass was going to throw up.

Thankfully, Aria knew him well and fetched the chamber pot in time for him to do so.

When she'd taken it away again and poured some water to rinse out his mouth, she took his hand and squeezed it tightly. "I'm sorry. I'd have told them all to shut the fuck up and get out if I'd still been here. I never imagined it would come up, or I would not have left in the first place."

"Stop wasting time on pointless apologies—how many times do I have to tell you that?" Chass replied. "It's fine. Well, it's not, but there's nothing I can do about it now."

Great, just great. Allen, the High King, Commander Jader... everyone knew he'd been beaten. Tortured. Raped. Tormented for years by a man too contemptible for even the Beasts of the Penance Realms.

Maybe that was why Sarrica had decked out his room. Pity. What was worse: apology or pity? Maybe it was both, which was definitely worse.

"Chass..."

"Aria, please... I think I just need to be alone right now."

Aria looked like she very much wanted to argue, but with a last squeeze of his hand and a kiss to his cheek, she left him.

Chass slammed his book shut, threw it on top of the papers, and once more retreated to the dubious oblivion of sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

The worst part of being adrift, of being a fallen king, was that the work never really went away. Neither did all the tedious little details of the day. In fact, right then, there were more details than usual, given that he'd fled Benta with nothing but the clothes on his back, and had been making do with what he and Chass could scavenge ever since.

So right now, his days were largely filled with reacquiring all the bits and pieces a person needed to get by in the day to day. Given he was still officially king, if utterly useless in practice, there were more of those bits and pieces than usual, nearly all of them expensive to buy and time-consuming to acquire.

He was sincerely tired of being measured, poked, prodded, and fussed over, but the clothes couldn't be made any other way, and he couldn't keep borrowing from the people around him.

As the tailors removed the latest round of pinned fabric, Desmond called for a break and went to the seating area off to one side of the room. He dropped onto a settee and reached for his tea. It had gone cold but was still refreshing. Nothing at all like tea back home, but he rather thought he liked it better. Nothing would ever beat a good cup of coffee, though.

By the time he'd finished a second cup of tea and a few of the flaky, nutty treats slathered in honey on the plate of goodies, he felt ready to endure the last hour or two before him.

They'd only been back at it a few minutes, though, when the door flew open and a harried looking secretary with a pin designating her as working for the imperial office bowed low before saying, "His Majesty Consort Allen requests you come see him, Your Majesty, as soon as possible."

"Of course. Let me get dressed and I'll be right there."

His heart pounded as he dismissed the tailors and let one of them help him back into his clothes, one of the outfits they'd finished recently, with close-tailored pants and a long dress-tunic thing that opened on either side from the bottom up clear to the hips, dyed a beautiful pink ombre starting pale at the top. Sadly, his shaved hair was still so short there was

nothing to be done about it. He looked like the world's most incompetent soldier trying to play at royalty.

"Thank you," he said to the tailor who'd helped him, and slipped into soft slippers before heading off. The shoes drove him mad, not even remotely sturdy, clearly for show rather than function. This time of year in Benta, wearing such shoes was all but guaranteed to get the wearer killed.

Whispers and curious stares chased him as he walked, but Desmond ignored them all, keeping his head up and his expression contained, as calm and indifferent as a monk on the way to afternoon prayers.

He desperately missed the simplicity of that life, how much easier it had been to have a purpose, to do good, to feel needed.

Moping wouldn't help anything, though, so he turned his attention and energy to what Allen could possibly need him for so urgently. Something related to Benta. Perhaps delegates had arrived with demands, or someone had escaped and was seeking refuge.

At least something was happening. Movement of any sort was better than sitting around stagnating while his kingdom suffered.

So much for not moping.

Thankfully, he reached the office then and was admitted immediately to the inner chambers, where Allen immediately rose from the sitting area and strode across the room to him. He was as beautiful and flawless as ever, the very epitome of a consort, a ruler. The world over called him the High King's Golden Tongue, and no epithet could possibly be more apropos.

"What's wrong?" Desmond asked as Allen took his hands in greeting before linking their arms and leading him to the sofas. Desmond would never get used to all the *touching* Harkens did. If someone just went about grabbing him back home, they'd be slapped if they were lucky, and worse if they weren't.

"It's good news, actually," Allen said as they sat down. He poured them tea and handed a cup to Desmond. "We just received word that the Earl of Nettle is expected to reach our shores by tomorrow, day after at the latest."

"Lord Wessel is alive?" Desmond blinked back tears. "I feared the worst when one of his servants managed to reach us and reported he'd been overtaken. I'm so relieved to hear he's all right. In this entire mess, he's one of the few true good hearts. Without him, we would not have made it this

far." He shook his head. "The servant, the woman who got away and helped us—where is she?"

"She is well-recovered and has been taken in by a Bantan household until Lord Wessel arrives."

"I'm glad she's safe. I still can't believe *Wessel* is alive."

"Very much so according to the letters I've received, despite rebel efforts to kill him, and he'll be delighted, I'm sure, to know that you're safe and sound as well. We don't have much information about the ship he's on, which is good, because it means no one else does either, but given his arrival date, we've narrowed it down to a few and have the navy cruising to be near to hand in case of trouble. We're already preparing suitable rooms for him in the imperial wing."

"That's kind and generous of you."

Allen gave him a look. "It's practical. You and he are the only reliable sources from Benta we have right now. If we don't find a way to help you stop this rebellion, the whole continent is in danger. Of course he needs the best protection Harken can provide."

"I'm ashamed we must lean so heavily on you, but whatever it takes, I'll do. Thank you."

"All will be well," Allen said, gripping Desmond's hands where they were curled together tightly in his lap. "You could have continued fighting us, years ago, but you have fought for peace and alliance all this time. You freed Soldonir. You've done a lot of good. Don't let anyone undermine that."

Desmond nodded. "You really are kind, especially for a person in your position."

"So are you."

Desmond laughed. "Enough, enough. How is Chass doing?"

"He woke this morning and was able to keep down breakfast. I have not been to see him yet, though I am hoping to after lunch. We'll see." He sighed, but said nothing further, only dealt with the secretaries who approached then with questions and papers.

When they departed, Desmond said, "Speaking of Chass reminds that I have been meaning to ask you about something he said."

Allen's brows rose. "Oh?"

"When he gave me his necklace and torc. He called me *laleshaa*." That's not a Gaulden term I've ever heard before, and none of my attempts to find it have succeeded."

"They wouldn't. The word isn't Gaulden. It's a Pemfrost word adopted whole cloth into Gaulden, and rarely used outside of a religious setting. I doubt most Gauldens know it. As to what it means, there is no direct translation for it in any language. Every silver tongue translates it differently, and it varies still further depending on context. What exactly did he say to you?"

Desmond closed his eyes, haunted all over again by that terrible moment when he'd thought he'd never see Chass again. "Get going, *laleshaa*. Whole worlds need you right now." He opened his eyes. "Chass gives me far too much credit."

"If that was true, there wouldn't be people clamoring desperately for your head. But to answer your question properly, finally, in this context *laleshaa* would mean something like 'the vital heartbeat.' Gaulden believes there is a living essence, or spirit, in every single thing on the planet. The *laleshaa* is one of those many spirits, the 'song' or 'beat' of life that brings vitality to barren places. It's hard to explain."

"I understand as well as any foreigner can, I think," Desmond said. "It's quite humbling. Chass seems to be good at that."

Allen gave him a look, vexed and bemused all at once. "The Chass you know is nothing at all like the Chass I know."

"He did seem quite certain you hated him and that would never change and he absolutely deserved that."

"He beat me," Allen said quietly, looking away briefly. "Tied me to a post and whipped me to 'toughen' me up and the like. It was only when Manda helped him, though, that I could have very well died. After that, it stopped. I always assumed because Larren found out and put an end to it, but now..." He sighed softly and added quietly, "Now I just don't know."

Desmond wasn't certain what to say. The words weren't wholly surprising, given what little Chass had said, the self-loathing and recrimination with which he always spoke about the matter. It was hard to reconcile the man he knew with a man who would chain and whip his own brother. No wonder Chass hated himself so much. "I'm sorry. There's nothing more complicated than family, and that includes world politics."

Allen gave a slight laugh at that. "World politics are easy, comparatively. At least I'm trained to deal with that. No one ever really teaches you how to deal with family strife, strangely. You're just expected to have figured it out at some point. For much of my life, I looked up to my

mother greatly. I don't think I could ever entirely stop loving her, but... but the more aware I become of what she did—and did not do—to my siblings, the harder I find it to like her. I do not think Chass likes or loves her at all, which is understandable. Like you and I know different sides of Chass, he and I saw completely different versions of our mother. It's... difficult. I am sorry to sweep you up in our family drama."

"No apologies are necessary," Desmond said. "All I really do is listen, and sometimes that is the best thing anyone can offer. I also commiserate. I tried to love my family, and maybe in some small way I did, at least insofar as the Goddess decrees we should all love one another. I also despised my father my entire life. My brothers were more like strangers to me, and my mother..." Desmond spread his hands and shrugged. "For all intents and purposes, I was more orphan than not, despite being one of the wealthiest and most powerful people—theoretically—in the kingdom. Dealing with family is never easy, and it only gets more difficult as we get older. I hope you and Chass can work matters out in a way that brings you both happiness. For what it's worth, I know he loves you deeply and would die to protect and serve you."

"He nearly did," Allen said bitterly. "It would have been my fault, and I cannot overlook that. First, though, he needs to heal from his battle wounds. Everything else can come later. Which reminds me that I also wanted to tell you he is being moved to the imperial wing as well."

Desmond didn't know much about Chass, but he was absolutely certain that Chass would not like being moved, especially when he couldn't be present to oversee the moving. "I see."

Allen laughed. "He's been informed, or at least, I told Captain Aria, who said she would convey it to him, so accommodations can be made. I do know that much about him. Enough of this for now, though. How was your morning with the tailors?"

"Excruciating, but it will be nice to have my own clothes again," Desmond said with a sigh. "I am grateful for the clothes, the room, and everything else. It's a bit pathetic that a king can't pay for his own wardrobe and lodgings."

"You'll be billed, never fear," Allen said with a wink. "Are you up to dining in the hall tonight?"

"Yes," Desmond said, even though he'd sooner eat with the cattle. He wasn't going to be that selfish and rude, however. "I even have clothes I

don't have to borrow."

Allen laughed. "That's good, because that's a greater offense than being ousted from your throne for some people." He rolled his eyes. "On that note, I will let you get on with your day."

"Majesty," Desmond said, and rose. He bowed and departed, but rather than return to the tailors or his room, he headed for the healing ward.

When he arrived, however, it was to find that Chass's room was fit to bursting with visitors. Whatever fanciful notions he'd had about a quiet visit where he got Chass all to himself, they'd been firmly left to the sky.

If anything, it was a reminder that Desmond was—had been—a duty. An obligation. Part of a greater apology to Allen. However much he wanted to be Chass's friend...

Desmond turned on his heel and headed back the way he'd come, hurt and adrift for no good reason at all. Perhaps he'd finally see if there was a Bentan temple in the palace or city. Restoring that small bit of routine and comfort to his life would go a long way toward helping him feel grounded and less alone.

He hadn't gone far, though, when someone called out to him. "Your Majesty!" the voice came again as Desmond stopped and turned. Captain Aria. "Your Majesty, sorry to interrupt you."

"What is there to interrupt?" Desmond asked with a laugh. "I've never been so at loose ends in my life. What did you need, Captain?"

"I wanted to beg your assistance with a matter, Your Majesty."

"You can call me Desmond. After all you've done for me, and lost because of me, formality seems a touch silly. It's not like I'm really a king anymore, not really."

"King enough, but as you wish. Chass is being moved to a new room, at the insistence of Their Majesties."

"Allen just told me a few minutes ago. I would imagine Chass is not remotely happy that his space is going to be invaded that way."

Aria smiled faintly. "Just so. He's asked me to move some of his things myself, and when I asked, said it would be all right if you helped. If you do not mind, that is."

Desmond's heart sped up. "Me? He wants me to help? Of course I don't mind."

"I just sent someone to speak with His Majesty, since the High Consort gave orders he was to be present during all moving activities. He

has to be the one to unlock the door anyway. I have a spare key that Chass trusted to me, but formal matters like this, better to let you higher ups do it." She winked and rolled her head in a silent indication to follow.

"So how does it feel to be Captain?" Desmond asked.

"Strange and unremarkable all at once," Aria replied with a laugh. "How are you enjoying Harken? Looks like your bear claw wound is healing up nicely. Those can be really difficult to keep clear of infection."

"Their Majesties have put the best healers in the empire to work on me, for which I'm grateful. It still feels strange not to have all my hair." He scrubbed a hand carefully over his head, avoiding the healing scar. "It'll be interesting to see how it grows back in with the scar in the way. At least I'm alive to find out. How is Penance Gate?"

"As well as can be expected." Aria sighed. "Hardly the first time we've suffered heavy losses. Won't be the last. At least we've been ordered to stand down until further notice."

"I'm surprised you're not going to return to Gaulden with Chass."

Aria just smirked, and then they were turning down a hall that was even more beautiful than those they'd already traveled through, decorated in purple, green, and gold. She stopped about halfway down, where a tall, largely built woman in Penance Gate colors saluted her. A bit further down the hall, several people in palace livery were clustered, speaking softly in what sounded like Selemean.

"Good afternoon, Captain," the guard at the door said.

"Falli. How are things?"

"Boring, thank the Pantheon. Who is this, then?"

Aria snorted as Desmond laughed. "This is His Majesty King Desmond, the very one we hauled out of Benta."

Laughing sheepishly, Falli replied, "Sorry, Your Majesty. You, uh, look quite a bit different. I thought you were from another group."

"If I was at all qualified to be a soldier, I'd probably still have my hair," Desmond replied, pleased when they laughed.

"That's not true," Aria said. "We're all damned good in a fight, but we're still scarred enough to terrify children."

Falli snorted. "You haven't been ugly a day in your life." When Aria shot her a look, she drolly added, "Captain."

"Shut up, Sergeant."

Falli just laughed.



The sound of footsteps drew their attention before the bantering could continue, and everyone in the hall drew up sharply to attention even as Desmond turned and saw Allen and his secretary Myra walking toward them. They all bowed as Allen reached them, and Aria greeted. "Hello again, Your Majesty."

"Captain. My husband wanted me to tell you that he received your petition."

"I see. Thank you."

Desmond didn't bother to ask, since it was clear from the way they were acting that both of them would remain cagey. It likely had something to do with Penance Gate, though, and probably Aria's earlier smirk.

"Shall we?" Allen asked, and stepped forward as Falli moved out of the way. He removed a key from his ornate orange and blue jacket and unlocked the door, tucking the key away again before pushing the door open and stepping inside.

The room was cool and dark, and smelled of oranges and cinnamon. As curtains were thrown open and colorful lamps of stained glass were lit... well, the front room of Chass's private quarters were not at all what Desmond had expected.

By the same token, they weren't wholly surprising either, not with the glimpses of Chass he'd gotten on their journey through Benta and Cartha. Nearly every single wall of the front room had been converted to bookshelves, and those shelves had not a bit of bare space left to them. Still more books were on tables, even the floors, waiting patiently for a proper space. An enormous leatherbound ledger on a heavy pedestal indicated the books had been properly catalogued. There was a large desk, an even larger worktable, a cabinet meant for storing ink, paper, and other writing miscellany...

It was the room of a scholar, and a dedicated one at that. The room of a silver tongue who constantly insisted he wasn't one. Desmond's heart wanted to break, and he couldn't entirely say why.

At one end of the room, in one of the only spaces not devoted to books, was an altar. The god that seemed to feature was familiar... Shallana, Queen of the Beasts, that was it. How could he have forgotten? Chass had been particularly reverent when speaking of her while showing Desmond his prayer cards. She must be his patron god. How like him not to mention that.

Dragging himself away from his ridiculous curiosity, Desmond turned to Aria. "Was there something in particular he wanted my help with?"

"The altar," Aria said quietly. "He hoped you'd be willing to move his altar for him."

"Of course." Desmond swallowed, chest giving a sudden, sharp ache. Friendly, but never friends, and yet Chass trusted Desmond to move his altar. Desmond wanted to go shake him. Hug him. Kiss him. All of the above. How could he do things like this and *not* expect Desmond to fall so helplessly...

"There are at least five languages spread across these books," Allen said, jerking him from his thoughts. "Why?"

Desmond looked at him, somewhat surprised. "I know you two aren't close, but surely even you knew he was a silver tongue, given your own skills."

"Chass a silver tongue? No. To my knowledge he knows much the same as any noble or royal in Harken; he knows his own language, Harken, and maybe a smattering of others picked up along the way."

"At the very least he also knows Bentan and Carthian." A memory stirred, faint and faded, while he was on the ship and still in so much pain... Chass conversing, but not in Harken or Bentan like he would have expected, but in... "Outlander. He also speaks Outlander." Which meant he knew four languages in addition to his native, which exceeded the minimum qualifications for silver tongue status. "I'm fairly certain he knows more than that, though he always insisted he was no silver tongue. I thought it was just his usual humility speaking."

Aria sighed. "He knows seven languages, and I think he is attempting to learn a couple more, though he's always cagey about that kind of thing, even with me. I'm always nagging him to take the tests, but he refuses, because that's Chass."

"Because his mother forbid him follow such pursuits," Desmond said. "He never said it in precisely those words, but he did say that Larren was the crown, he was the sword, Manda the shadow, and Allen the jewel. He wasn't meant to do scholarly things, so it doesn't surprise me remotely that he still treats it like something forbidden to him."

"That sounds like my mother, though I hadn't known she'd been *that* severe," Allen said, and drew closer to one of the shelves. "She was strict

with me as well. Every hour of every day was allotted to lessons of some sort. I was never outright forbidden anything, though. I suppose because I never asked for anything that strayed from my 'jewel' training, and I was her favorite. Son, I always thought, but more and more I wonder if I was simply her favorite project." He went over to the shelves and pulled down one of the books, paging delicately through beautifully illuminated pages.

Nearby, Myra was setting to work on whatever he'd been brought along to do—cataloguing, or something similar, by the way he was looking, writing, looking, writing.

Allen put the book back and pulled out another, looking sad as he stared at the page he'd randomly opened it to. "Even when we were children, Chass always knew the most random tidbits about seemingly everything. I'd forgotten about that until now. Excuse me, please." Allen snapped the book shut and replaced it before striding abruptly from the room, a breach in protocol, as he was meant to be supervising things by his own order, but neither Desmond nor Aria stopped him. Even Myra simply kept going, working steadily on his task.

Desmond looked at Aria. "Can I ask where in the Goddess's names his father and dame were in all this? Chass never said very much, only that they obeyed his mother unfailingly."

Aria's brows rose. "I'm amazed he said anything to you at all. Getting Chass to open up is like prying open a particularly stubborn oyster: if you don't know what you're doing, you're only going to damage the oyster and yourself. As to his father and dame... yes, they obeyed. That is the way they were raised, where they came from. She is the matriarch; she makes the decisions. They support her. I personally would like to toss all three of them into an abyss, but Chass insists it's not worth the trouble." She shrugged. "If they give me one good excuse, though..."

"I see," Desmond said, another crack lancing through his heart. He didn't know much about Chass's particular version of difficult parents, but he knew the broad strokes all too well. He sighed softly, wishing there was something he could do, but what right did he have? Chass had suffered so much because of him, and he'd done it for Allen.

On the other hand, Chass had requested Desmond move his altar. That had to mean *something*.

He went to the altar and examined it. Like most Harken private altars, it featured one god in the center—in this case, the god Shallana—and

smaller ikons of other gods arrayed in a crescent behind her. A few of them he knew, but others he could only guess at, as the way they were depicted varied wildly from kingdom to kingdom, and even region to region. The Abbot of Highmont had been fond of saying that all gods had a thousand faces, one for each person who loved them.

The orange and cinnamon smell was from incense that someone had left recently on the altar. Desmond glanced at Aria, who shrugged one shoulder and looked away. Smiling faintly, Desmond took a closer look at the altar and everything around it, finally spying a wooden box beneath the table, hidden by the drape around it. Opening the box revealed padded velvet lining clearly meant for the ikons. One by one, Desmond packed everything up, reciting silent prayers of his own that he hoped would be accepted since he didn't know the proper ones. He finished by waving the incense over them before placing the lid. With the main part done, he used a satchel that was also stored beneath the table to pack up the remaining miscellany: the incense burner, box of incense, altar cloth, and candles.

"You could take that to him in the healers wing," Aria said from where she was going through the desk and carefully packing up papers and journals. "He keeps insisting he doesn't care, but you know Chass."

Desmond laughed softly. "Not as well as people seem to think, but yes, I know him that well. Reminds me of toddlers who insist they're not tired, they're not tired, they want to stay up and play and not go to sleep... and ten minutes later they're out cold in their pile of toy blocks."

To his astonishment, Aria burst into laughter so hard that she dropped the papers she was holding. After a few minutes, she wiped tears from her eyes and managed, "You better hope I don't tell him you said that."

"I mean, Benta would definitely thank you for doing their job for them," Desmond said dryly, which sent her into another fit of laughter. "Glad I can be amusing, Captain."

Aria sent him a look full of mischief as her laughter eased again. "You get exactly what you deserve for comparing Chass to a cranky, tired toddler."

"Can you just tell me your demands now, instead of springing the blackmail on me at some unknown later date?"

"Where is the fun in that?" Aria asked as she retrieved the dropped papers and got back to work. "Go deliver the altar to Prince Toddler."

Heaving a dramatic sigh, resigned to his fate, Desmond slung the satchel across his chest, picked up the box, and headed out. Aria motioned one of the servants packing stuff to take the table and follow him.

Thankfully, Desmond managed to make it back to the healing ward without getting lost. Hopefully he'd have the same luck when he attended dinner that night.

When he arrived, it was to find the room empty and quiet, so completely opposite his visit a short time ago that it was jarring. Desmond stepped slowly into the room and paused when he realized there were two people fast asleep in the bed. Chass and Keeta. Poor thing, he'd been in and out of the room any number of times, but never when Chass was awake. They must have finally matched up. To judge by the dried tear tracks on Keeta's face, he'd been far more scared than he'd let on to the rest of them. Like father, like son already.

Desmond silently bid the servant to set the table in a corner where Chass would be able to see it clearly, then thanked him with a smile and motioned he could go.

Placing the box and satchel on the ground, he set to work reassembling the altar. Most of it went easily enough, but when he came to the crescent, he faltered on the exact order they should be in. He really should have studied the Harken Pantheon a bit more earnestly. Or made notes before he packed everything, which was the simplest and most obvious solution. He rolled his eyes at himself as he continued to make a complete mess of the matter, trying to recall the arrangement from Chass's rooms. He remembered Shallana, of course, and some of the others, but there were three in particular he just could not get right. Well, hopefully he wouldn't cause serious offense by getting it wrong.

He placed one of the three, a handsome man with dark skin and long, long hair between two figures all the way to the left. Two to go.

"Almost right," said a soft voice.

Desmond looked up and stared blankly a moment before he figured out why the man looked familiar. "Your Chass's priest. Lanora, right? Is there an honorific?"

"None necessary; you're free to use my name. Most would simply address me as 'Priest.' We don't have quite the same rigid guidelines as Bentan tradition dictates, or at least, we have rigidities in different places."

"It does drive Bentans quite mad that Harkens are not as... strict as we are in forms of address." Uptight and unbending was more like it, but Desmond bit his tongue against the unkind words.

Lanora laughed. "That is one of the things Bentan immigrants struggle with most, after all the touching." He winked and drew closer, taking the ikons when Desmond held them out and deftly putting them all in their proper places. "Most sets actually have them numbered on the bottom, because even most Harkens can't remember the order, especially when that order varies widely depending on which god takes center."

"Numbers would have been nice," Desmond said with a laugh. "But it's not my altar, so it hardly matters. Thank you for the help. How is Chass doing?"

"Rather well, all things considered. I think he'll be happy to know you've come to visit."

"Considering I'm the reason he's trapped in that bed... I am not nearly so confident."

Lanora gave him a gently admonishing look. "Chass makes his own decisions. Only the people who hurt him are responsible for his present condition. Do not take on blame that is not yours. Admonition seventeen, I believe?"

Desmond laughed softly. "Yes, Priest, seventeen. You know the Admonitions of the Goddess?"

"Living in Harkenesten, it's easy to pick up pieces of a lot of things, but I have always been an ardent student of religion, my own and others. I'm particularly fond of the admonitions; I think they would be useful to a lot of people, regardless of belief."

"That was the intent of the woman credited with the creation of them in the first place, and many that were added after the initial twenty. She never meant for them to become so secular they ceased to reach the people she most wanted to help."

"That's a theme I know well," Lanora replied. "If you have the time, Your Majesty, there's something I can show you that I think you'd like to see."

"Of course, thank you."

Desmond cast Chass and Keeta a last glance, wishing he had any excuse to stay, then followed Lanora from the room and back through the mazelike palace halls. They did not return to the parts of the palace he

knew, however, but to parts unknown, entering sections that had just as many servants and soldiers as fancy nobility and select staff and personnel.

He nearly drew up short as he caught a scent he hadn't expected to find in the heart of Harken: Wistaria, flower of the Goddess, symbol of immortality. The scent was strong, like there was a garden full of it somewhere.

As they turned the corner, he proved to be somewhat right. Not a garden, but an enormous pergola that formed a roof and walls across a beautiful pale gray stone bridge. Across the bridge was the unmistakable archway that fronted all temples of the Goddess, carved to resemble branches of wistaria with birds and insects scattered among them, each an avatar.

The temple was small, perhaps a quarter what a temple would normally be, but it had been meticulously built and decorated. There was a distinct Harken flare to it all, in color and style, but that by no means lessened its value or impressiveness. The east and west walls had recesses in which intricate tapestries were set, each one telling a popular story of the Goddess and her earliest followers. The tiled floor was an abstract mosaic of blues, purples, and greens, echoing the wistaria pergola.

Back home, there would be seating in the back half of the temple, and the front half left open for those who preferred to stand, liked to bring their own seating, or used a wheeled-chair or similar such. Here, the whole floor was open, which was keeping with Harken practice and made sense in such a small space. Along the back wall was a series of shelves and cubbies with cushions and prayer rugs for public use.

The centerpiece, of course, was the altar: the wall behind it of elaborate stained glass, in this instance forming a rainbow, with the moon and sun in the upper corners, and roses and wistaria in the bottom corners. In front of that was a statue that only bore vague resemblance to a woman in a draping gown, as no one was capable of knowing the visage of Her Most Holy Grace. Her arms were spread as if in welcome, and beneath the statue was a table set with an altar cloth in winter colors of black, blue, white, and silver. It was set with four candles for the seasons, with only winter lit, and smaller ones of red wax, lit one by one through the day with each of the twelve daily prayers.

Off to the right side, tucked beneath one of the scroll recesses, was a smaller table, set with a metal bowl on a special pedestal. In many temples,

the candle beneath the bowl was kept lit at all times, carefully maintained by priests, changed out when necessary. Here, as was common in smaller temples, the bowl was lit by the user as needed. There were also slips of papers, pencils, and a jar of dried wistaria petals. Prayers, requests, and more were written, then offered with a petal to the flame, that the Goddess might hear.

"It's beautiful," he said. "Like a piece of home." His real home, the monastery where he'd spent the majority of his life, before being yanked back into the world his father had cast him out of, and which Desmond had never really missed. "Thank you."

"I am surprised no one else has shown it to you; one of the many Bentan residents at the very least."

Desmond smiled sourly. "It's best I do not interact with my countrymen at this time."

"Of course, my apologies. I'm surprised you don't have bodyguards."

"I eschewed them. I will probably take them up later, but not right now." Not after the way Bitter Frost had betrayed him. He couldn't stomach the idea. He'd rather they have to come for him, than pretend to protect him and get him from behind again.

No, right now the only person he trusted that much was Chass, and he would never put Chass in that kind of danger ever again. Chass was safe now and no longer had to fight, and Desmond hoped it stayed that way.

"I'll leave you to it," Lanora said with a smile. "You should definitely pay Chass a visit, though, when you have the time. After all the two of you endured, I think he'd like to see for himself that you are alive and well."

Desmond flinched, because he should have thought of that. He'd been too focused on Chass's insistence that they were friendly, but never friends, especially once the journey was over. Desmond liked to think they'd moved past that, that they'd been through too much together for Chass to still believe that... but what if he was wrong? Still, Lanora had a point, and hiding away had never done him any good. "Of course. Thank you again, Lanora. I deeply appreciate you bringing me here."

"Your Majesty." Lanora bowed and swept elegantly from the temple.

Sighing softly, Desmond wrote out a plea and set it to burn, then went to the altar to attend his prayers.



## Chapter Sixteen

The worst part of healing wasn't the pain, though Chass could really do without it. No, the worst part was the way he was so bedbound at first, he needed help with every last little thing, including taking a piss. He *hated* it.

Thankfully, after about a week of lying around useless and aggravated, the healers approved him to start getting up and moving about in small increments. Frustratingly small, but it was better than being wholly confined to his bed for one more hour.

When brief little circuits around his room proved a success, he was able to fight successfully for a chair and, with a little more work and stubbornness, a desk. Having real work to do was a massive relief, and a merciful distraction from the relentless turnings of his broken brain.

Though he'd simply asked for any spare desk to be brought, what he got was a desk at least as ornate as the rest of his room, if not more so. It was fit for the imperial offices, and glaringly out of place in a simple healing room, but if it really was from the High King, that didn't surprise Chass. High King Sarrica was far smarter and wiser than he was ever credited, but he had no comprehension of money on the day-to-day scale. Chass could only imagine the orders he'd given that had led to this ridiculously ornate desk being found and delivered with such short notice. Somebody, somewhere in the city had just been informed their desk was going to be delayed and wasn't remotely happy about it.

Nothing Chass could do about it at this point, though, so he simply had a private from Penance Gate, since he was still their sponsor if not their Captain, send word to his secretaries to bring whatever they could and prepare to report at length.

He'd just settled into a nice cup of proper tea, instead of one of the tiresome tisanes healers loved so much, when his secretaries arrived, along with six clerks carrying a truly impressive amount of paperwork, ledgers, supplies, and more.

Chass's head secretary was Andalori. They hailed from Delfaste, but had spent most of their life in Harkenesten, as their parents were scholars of no small repute at the imperial university.

Taking the seat that a servant had brought in at their request, Andalori sat on the opposite side of Chass's desk and settled a stack of papers in their lap. "It's good to see you up and about, Your Highness, even though I'm fairly certain you shouldn't be getting back to work."

"It's the better of precious few options. Enough. What do we have?"

"The most pressing matter is a meeting with Lord Gornov regarding the upcoming council meeting. The matter with Soldonir delayed the meeting, but it is expected to take place within the next couple of weeks, once all councilors are back in the palace."

"I'll meet with him as soon as we're done here, if he can be brought."

Andalori motioned to one of the clerks working steadily at organizing all the papers they'd brought and bid him deliver the message to Lord Gornov. "There's a letter from your mother I've not opened, and a stack of correspondence I've attended to but which you should read. Financial reports and a list of matters Prince Larren was handling from his secretaries."

"What has become of them?"

"Two are choosing to retire early, with generous settlements your mother has already approved. Another has been hired elsewhere, and the last was hoping you would take her on."

"Your opinion?"

"Yes."

"Do it. Next."

"Events you need to send representatives for since you'll be unable to attend yourself. Some early plans for the harvest celebration you'll need to approve, as well as some for you to look over for the Festival of Denala. I've had some speeches drafted for you to consider."

"No. I'll handle that myself."

"As you wish, Your Highness." Andalori didn't look up from where they were writing, marking out, and changing various things in their ledger. "There are some royal petitions awaiting your availability."

"Schedule them for next week."

Andalori looked up, briefly startled. "Next week? Isn't that a little soon?" At Chass's glare, they rolled their eyes and went back to their work without further comment. "A multitude of gifts and further health-wishes have arrived in the office. I've had to borrow an extra room to store it all until you can look it over, save the plants and flowers, which I've had taken

either to your private garden or to various of the public gardens. The Temple of Tides has sent another request—"

"No. The same goes for any other such requests."

"I'll be sure to write strongly worded notes about their audacity in requesting a way to honor all you've done for them, the ingrates."

"Shut up, Lori."

Snickering softly, Andalori continued, "The remaining to-dos are all the usual, with a huge pile of further mundane to-dos taken over from His Late Highness. I'm still organizing it all, with the assistance of Tye, the secretary who's been hoping you'd take her on. I'll get her paperwork started today and bring her for introduction when things are a little less busy. The tailors delivered your new wardrobe, and the High Consort had your torc delivered this morning to your new quarters. Which reminds me..." They reached into their tunic and withdrew a key attached to a gold and silver fob shaped like lotus flowers, from which further dangled a brilliant blue tassel. "Your key, and the High Consort assures me that nothing untoward happened in the moving of your belongings, and since your new room was put in order, no one has stepped inside it."

Since when did Allen know or care about how much Chass *hated* anyone in his personal space, especially when he wasn't present? Whatever, yet another mystery that would have to be solved later, when he could do more than hobble around a single small room and become exhausted from a few minutes of paperwork.

"More immediately, there are various things for you to sign off on, mostly contracts, payments, and the like," Andalori said, and briskly set to arranging various stacks of paper for Chass to read through and sign. A clerk came forward to arrange the pens, ink, seal, and special ink required for that. "Once I have a schedule drafted for your meetings and appointments, I'll bring it to you. Was there anything else you needed, Your Highness?"

"Yes, actually. I intend to adopt Keeta. I'd like the paperwork started for that."

"Of course, Your Highness. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Lori. I think I've pestered you enough for now. Come see me again this evening after dinner."

"Of course, Your Highness." They rose and bowed, and departed, the rest of the crowd flowing out smoothly behind them.

Chass finished his tea and dragged the first stack of papers close. This was the easy stack, consisting of various bills that needed to be paid, with sums large enough they required his approval first. All the smaller ones his secretaries handled directly. One was for a large order of books he was donating to a library, another for building supplies to rebuild an orphanage, on the condition it offer schooling going forward, which he was also donating supplies for—that was the next bill.

On and on it went, until he'd spent a little more than two hours on them. One stack down, several to go. First, however, he needed to rest his eyes, which were not used to the strain of paperwork after so many months afiel followed by a week of doing little to nothing.

"Your Highness?"

Chass snapped his eyes open and stared blankly for a moment, then registered all at once that a servant was trying to get his attention, the light in the room had shifted slightly, but noticeably, and he was hungry. He'd fallen asleep. Damn it. "Apologies, what did you need?"

"Master Andalori bid me bring you some papers to sign; he said he did not think you'd want to wait on these."

"Of course, thank you. Would you have someone bring me a light meal?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Thank you."

When she'd gone, he scrubbed at his face and tried to focus on what proved to be adoption papers. Andalori had worked fast, even for them.

As if summoned by the paperwork, Keeta came rushing in as though the building was on fire, all boundless, eager energy and a joy for life that Chass would quite literally kill to protect. He couldn't spare Keeta the general hurts of life that all people faced, but he would burn down the entire empire before Keeta endured even a small measure of the nightmares that had broken and scarred Chass.

Especially his mother. He could not throw the woman out of her own palace, but if she tried to do *anything* to Keeta, he would kill her with his bare hands. Whether or not he'd be a good parent, he didn't know, but he'd always wanted to try anyway. Build a family he loved, a family that was more than playing pieces on a gameboard.

"Ossi! Ossi!" Keeta shouted as he came barreling into the office and barely stopped in time to avoid crashing into the desk. He was speaking so

quickly and excitedly, his Carthian took a moment for Chass to keep up with at first. "You will never believe what I saw today!"

"Oh, really? How intriguing," Chass replied. "What did you see that would surprise me?"

"A bird with huge feathers! Its tail was almost as big as me! There were eyes all over the feathers, like it had a thousand of them, and it was the prettiest blues and greens."

Chass smiled. "You saw a peacock? Who let you in the aviary?"

"What's an a-vee-air-ee?" Keeta asked as he carefully sounded the word out.

"A giant room or garden meant for keeping birds. Harkenesten is rather well-known for its aviaries. That's part of the reason the rest of the world calls us 'Harken birds'. I'm surprised you saw only one peacock; last I heard, there were twelve in residence. Sometimes they escape and wander around the palace like visiting nobility."

Keeta's eyes widened. "There's that many? I need to go find them all!"

Chass held up a hand before Keeta could bolt off. "We need to talk first, Keeta."

His excitement abruptly died, anxiety taking it over. "Are you sending me back to Cartha?"

"No, certainly not. I made you a promise, and I am keeping it."

The excitement returned tenfold. "I'm staying? I'm really staying?"

Chass chuckled. "Yes, you are staying with me. Now that I'm feeling better, we'll get you moved into my quarters. Have you enjoyed your time with Lord Kamir?"

"Yes, he's wonderful! I want colored hair like his! You mean it, you really mean it? I can stay with you now, forever? Finally?"

"Yes, finally," Chass echoed softly. "We do have to talk properly about it, though, so bring that chair over here and let us do so."

Keeta made a face, but did as bid, all but vibrating in place. "What is there to talk about? I've always wanted to come here. It's all so different than the mountains. There's so many people, and the colors are different, and the *water*—"

Smiling faintly, Chass let him keep rambling about the wonders of Harkenesten until the food arrived, at which point he distracted Keeta with lamb-stuffed buns. "You know I'm a prince, yes? A crown prince."

"Yes. You're going to be king someday. Lord Kamir explained it all to me. You're like the High King, but for a smaller area. Like Chief Yanari, but for a larger area. Somewhere right between those two."

Chass didn't laugh, but it was a near thing. That comparison worked in only the barest sense; he was nothing remotely like High King Sarrica or Yanari. "Something like that. What it means is that, like them, I must always think of my people before all else."

"The good of the clan is the good of the one," Keeta recited around a mouthful of bun. "These are really tasty."

"Yes, exactly, the good of the clan is the good of the one. If you are going to stay with me, you will be the same someday: first a prince and then a king, if we decide you will be my heir." Which he would be suited for. All he needed was training, and Keeta would be a fine student. That wasn't a decision he was making today, though. Keeta should be part of it, and he had enough going on at present. They all did. "You will have to put Gaulden first, even above Cartha, which you will not see again for a long time, once we go home. Do you understand?"

"I want to see everything," Keeta said. "I know it means saying goodbye. I'm a little sad. I know people will... Things won't be the same if I ever go home again. But I want to do it. I want to be with you, Ossi. I want to be part of Gaulden with you."

*"I've been looking into the Tollar Academy in Girra Sky, they have a course—"*

*"Absolutely not. What sense does it make to have you gallivanting off to Girra Sky?"*

*"The course would have me traveling to several places, and includes martial lessons in addition to academic. It would have me doing what you want, but also following my own pursuits."*

*"Your 'own pursuits' are foolish and a waste of time. You are my second born. Your duty is here, to serve your brother and the kingdom. You can't do that if you're off traipsing about the world like some spoiled wastrel playing at scholar."*

*"But Mother—"*

*"But nothing."*

"As you wish then, Keeta. We'll discuss it more tonight over dinner, and I'll go over these adoption papers with you, but I can see that right now

you're far more interested in hunting down unsuspecting peacocks, so run along for now and let me work."

"Yes, Ossi."

He ruffled Keeta's hair and added, "If you think those stuffed buns are good, you're in for a treat at supper. If there's anything you want back home in Yanari, have someone write it all down and bring me the list."

Keeta nodded, gave him another quick, gentle hug, and then bolted from the room. Chass chuckled, picturing the time Keeta would have when his etiquette lessons began. If he'd run about like that at Keeta's age, his tutors would have killed him, assuming his mother didn't get there first.

If she tried it even *once* with Keeta... Chass balled his hands into fists, then slowly forced them to relax. If she tried even once, he'd throw her out, and he didn't give a damn if she *was* queen. His plan had always been to raise Keeta here in Harkenesten, well away from his worthless parents. That was no longer an option, but he still had no intention of letting them interfere, no matter what it took to ensure that.

He ate the remaining bun that had not been wolfed down by Keeta, along with the slices of fruit that accompanied them, and sipped at the fresh tea, spicy and sweet and perfect.

When he was done, he tackled the next stack of paperwork, which was entirely contracts and other formal documents that needed signing. Most were simple enough, merely the formal agreements for various buildings, renovations, and other projects he'd agreed to donate the funds for. Others were for much the same, but funded by the crown. A few pertained to trade revisions, or revisions to imperial laws that Gaulden needed to sign off on.

He hadn't even finished half of them when he needed to take another break, and he must have drifted off again, because the next thing he knew was Aria calling his name.

Opening his eyes, he looked up at her, and he must be well and truly on the mend to be stirred by how beautiful and sexy she was in formal dress. "What did you do that you have to dress up to make amends?"

"Shut up," Aria said cheerfully, and sat on the edge of his desk, close enough he could do all the touching he liked if he was so inclined. She nudged her leg against him, and he took the invitation-slash-order to run a hand along her calf and then up to her thigh. "I'm dressed up because

I'm treating my darling wife to a fine dinner. We're going to steal your table at the Faded Moon."

"What's the occasion?" he asked. "Bill the meal to me if you like."

Aria snickered. "I'll consider it. The occasion is that I'm Captain, you *bashka*."

Chass rolled his eyes and pinched her calf. "Shouldn't she be the one treating you?"

"Sounds like you're treating us both."

"Ugh, go away."

Laughing, Aria leaned in slowly and brushed a soft kiss across his mouth. "Don't you want my gossip first?"

"No," Chass said.

"It involves your precious monk-king."

"Still no," Chass said, even as his heart gave an unwelcome lurch at the mention of Desmond.

Aria replied in singsong, "You're a little liar."

"Go away if you're just going to keep being irritating."

"Stop pretending you're fooling anyone, and I'll stop being irritating," Aria retorted. "He wants to come see you. Has a few times while you're asleep. Came while you were awake the other day, but got spooked off by your adoring crowd."

"Do not remind me of that." Holy Jenn grant him patience, he hated when he was surrounded by people who insisted on being effusive about him doing what he should. Did nobody except him take the Admonitions of Jenn seriously?

Cheerfully ignoring him as usual, Aria continued, "He was the one who brought your altar here and set it up, though you may have already guessed that. He and Lanora are getting along like they were children together. All kinds of rumors are swirling about what the plans are concerning His Majesty. Is he going to be delivered back to Benta little more than a Harken puppet? Is he going to settle down here and abdicate his throne to the rebels? Borrow the Harken military and send them straight to the Realms? Pick one of the many useless royals flitting about the palace to marry and go from there? No one knows, and everyone is infuriated to not have the gossip. The betting books are overrun, and the holders are having a time of it keeping track of all the money."



"Good to know everyone is working so hard." Chass rolled his eyes. "They'll just have to distract themselves with the latest cheating or blackmail or... I don't know... runaway? Scandal." Chass could play the political game when he had to, like any well-trained prince, but he had little to no patience for the petty antics of bored nobles who had no idea how their lands and people were doing but could tell you down to the third cousin who was fucking who and how best to use that knowledge against them.

"Speaking of marriage..."

Chass groaned. "I can't even leave my room yet, let alone face *that* thorny field. Aria, tell me something I want to hear or go away, I mean it."

Sniffing in mock offense, Aria said, "There are whispers that the longstanding feud between you and His Majesty are over, that by some miracle the two of you have reconciled."

"That isn't funny," Chass hissed.

"I didn't say it to be funny. I said it to give you hope—stop getting defensive and angry," Aria replied sharply. "After all you've done, all you endured to get Desmond here, is it really so hard for you to believe that His Majesty might be willing to forgive you?"

"Yes," Chass said, hating the way his voice cracked. "You know not to do that to me, Aria."

"Have faith, isn't that what you're always saying?"

Chass didn't reply, just glared at the papers on his desk, his hand falling away from Aria's leg. His faith in the divine ran deep, and he worked hard to keep that true. Faith was all that had gotten him through the worst moments of his life. His faith in *people*, however, was quite the opposite, and Aria damned well knew it.

"I don't know why I thought you might not be hopelessly stubborn for once in your life," Aria said with a sigh. "There are rumors that some deeply important Bentan noble is headed here, but no one really knows who or what exactly their goal is. The betting books really are fit to burst. Whoever wins the pots will be set for the rest of their life. Care to give me an edge?" She waggled her eyebrows.

Chass rolled his eyes. "I haven't the slightest, but I hope it's Kettermene, so I can slice him open like a fresh caught bhetki."

Aria chuckled and slid to her feet, then braced her hands on the arms of his chair and leaned into his space. "I'm not sure that's the diplomatic

option, but I'm always happy to help. Now may I have a proper kiss, Prince Cranky?"

"You're so irritating," Chass said on a soft sigh, a smile tugging at his lips before he kissed her. Her lips were soft and warm, and she tasted faintly of sweet wine and honey. She kissed him leisurely at first, lightly tasting and teasing, exploring his lips thoroughly before pushing deeper, tangling their tongues and reaching every curve and crevice. Aria's mouth was one of her worst and best qualities.

As much as Chass would love to avail himself of it fully, however, his many wounds were protesting what little stress they'd already had to endure that day. He drew back slightly, but Aria nipped and sucked at his lips before he could manage to get any words out, and Chass wasn't going to complain about enjoying a second thorough kiss.

Until the sound of movement, a sharp intake of breath, drew them apart. Chass's stomach flipped as he saw Desmond in the doorway.

"My deepest apologies," Desmond said, his cheeks red. Before anyone could reply, he'd turned and fled.

Chass scowled. "Yes, I can tell he really wants to see me."

Aria rolled her eyes and pushed away. "You're being brattier than usual. He's Bentan—a former Bentan monk at that. You know they're much more staid and stiff than us. He's probably mortified half to death he intruded." She grinned and winked before adding, "Even though the door was wide open and he's welcome to join in whenever he likes."

"Oh, go away. Tell your wife to get you so drunk you have to spend three days sleeping it off."

Laughing, Aria kissed his temple before departing with a playful wave.

Chass had just returned his attention to his work, however, when her footsteps returned. He looked up just as she dragged Desmond into view, practically threw him into the room, and pulled the door shut with a bang.

"What in the world was that about?" Desmond asked.

"There's rarely any telling with Aria," Chass replied, setting aside the pen he'd just picked up.

Desmond frowned. "Should you be out of bed already?"

"I'm not the one with claw marks down my neck and what looked like a sword wound on the back of my head."

Wincing, Desmond reached back to touch the still-healing wound. "I don't even remember it happening. The claws nearly took out my entire face; I'm lucky they only got my cheek and arm. I remember that vividly, but I have no memory of anyone nearly slicing my head in two. It's very strange to have a wound you can't account for."

"You get used to it, after a fashion, but hopefully you won't ever need to," Chass said. "Would you like to sit?" It was only as he asked the question that he recalled the second chair was right next to his where Keeta had left it, and not on the opposite side of the desk where it should be.

Thankfully, Desmond didn't seem bothered by the unintentionally bold request, simply took the seat and offered a tentative smile. "It's good to see you're well on the mend. I hate you've suffered so much for me, that my mere existence has caused so many problems for so many. Are you truly feeling better, or simply being stubborn?"

"Simply being stubborn? What is that supposed to mean?"

Desmond gave him a look.

It reminded Chass strongly of Aria. Oh, good, there was two of them now.

His heart lurched at that thought. There *wasn't* two of them. Chass would be returning to Gaulden in a matter of months, and Desmond would return to Benta.

Pushing that devastating thought away, he managed, "How are you finding Harkenesten?"

"I love it," Desmond said. "It's beautiful and so engaging. I miss the snow and my dogs, and other little things, but I'm doing pretty well for a fallen, banished king." He laughed quietly. "How are you, injuries aside? I am sorry for the loss of your soldiers. The ceremony for them was beautiful."

"Thank you. I'm fine." Chass gestured to his desk. "There's always something to do, no matter what condition you're in."

"Of course, I am sorry to intrude. I simply wanted to come by and see you, now that I heard you were awake more. I can leave, though, as I'm certain you've important matters to attend. I did not mean to stroll in here and steal your valuable time." He smiled ruefully and it seemed to Chass, a bit sadly. "I'm sure you've seen more than enough of me to last a lifetime."

He could see Desmond for a hundred lifetimes, and it would still not be enough, but Chass wasn't stupid enough to voice such a hopeless

thought. Someone like Desmond, truly beautiful inside and out, was not meant to dwell amongst monsters. It was a miracle from Holy Prima herself that Desmond still wanted anything to do with him. That could only mean he had not yet heard from Allen how despicable Chass truly was.

*"You make quite the hero..."*

*"How do you make a man brutal?"*

"Is something wrong?" Desmond asked, his smile fading completely. "I'm sorry, I should go, truly I did not mean to barge in and interrupt your moment with Captain Aria or interfere with your work or... or anything else. I'm afraid I seem to have rather a knack for intruding upon your life."

"You don't," Chass said. "Stop apologizing. I hate when people offer unnecessary apologies. It's stupid and irritating. Aria wasn't staying long. She just came to say hello and chatter at me until it was time to take her wife to dinner."

"Her wife?" Desmond stared briefly, mouth slightly ajar. "I always forget that Harken is far more relaxed in matters of relationships and intimacy. Back home, I'd assume the wife didn't know about the two of you, but I'm guessing the very opposite is true here."

Chass laughed. "I see you haven't yet been dragged into the torrid gossip that is the lifeblood of the High Court. There are plenty of secret affairs going on, and the betting books are filled on when those secrets will come out."

"I don't... It can't be much of a secret if it's in Harken's precious betting books. Well, secret from the maligned spouse, I guess. I can see where that would get exciting for certain types of people."

"Welcome to the High Court," Chass drawled. "Back to your questions, though: In our case, yes. Aria and Patici have what people have taken to calling an 'islander relationship.' Aria and I have been lovers for years. Patici and I are less frequent lovers. Patici spends most of her time gardening. I think she loves plants more than people, and frankly I admire her sense."

That gained him a laugh, bright and beautiful, the kind of laugh he wanted to taste. A stupid thought, the kind he'd vowed to avoid, but it had slipped past his defenses all the same. At least he had enough sense not to surrender to such a fruitless impulse. It would only end in humiliation and pain, and Chass could not bear one more instant of that.

"There has been many a day where I was perfectly content to spend the whole day, if not the whole week, in the garden or the herb shed," Desmond reply. "One day I did precisely that, until someone finally showed up to drag me to evening prayers. There are days and times when people are best avoided; even Her Most Holy Grace agrees that sometimes the best thing we can give ourselves and others is distance."

Chass was *tired* of distance. All his life he'd felt distanced from people. Because of his mother. Because of Bateker. Because eventually he didn't know how to be anything else. Lanora had changed that, and Aria. He also had Riker, Andalori. Above all he had Keeta, who had never been afraid of him, for reasons Chass would probably never understand. He might have helped the Yanari, but even many of them had understandably remained wary of him for years. Some probably still were. Never Keeta, though.

He should be content with what—who—he had. Every last one of them was more than he deserved.

Still he could not help but wish he could close the distance between him and Desmond. It was a distance of kingdoms, though, and a distance of a lifetime of mistakes. Perhaps this was his true punishment for all his wrongs.

Desmond smiled up at him, gray eyes nearly silver. "I saw Keeta running about all over, telling anyone who held still long enough that he's going to be part of your family and clan now. Most don't understand his Carthian, but I sense he'll know how to say it in Harken before the month is out, if not before the week is out. Have you formally adopted yet?"

"Yes, it was one of the first things I did once I was out of bed," Chass said gruffly. "He seems happy with the idea, and so am I, and it's nothing that can't be changed later should he decide this is not the life he wants."

Desmond smiled, full and open and sunny. It was a look no one ever gave Chass, outside of his very tiny circles of friends, and even then, they were more the laugh and tease type. No one had ever really looked at him the way Desmond did, and it would just make the moment when Desmond hated him all the more painful.

Chass was nothing if not a Penance-damned fool, though, and so he would soak up the smiles like warm sunlight after a cold storm for as long as he could.

"He certainly is comfortable enough around people, I can't see him doing anything but thriving as a prince," Desmond said. "I hope he's not given too much trouble for his Carthian roots."

"He won't be given any trouble," Chass said.

Desmond laughed softly. "I suppose not. I was wondering...but I don't want to impose..."

"Ask," Chass replied. "What does dithering help? What good is saying you want to ask something and then not asking it? I get enough of this from green recruits."

"All right, all right," Desmond said with a firmer laugh. "I have to dine with Allen tonight, but would you like to have dinner together sometime in the next few days? I do not want to impose upon you, and I know you put certain restrictions in place regarding our relationship, but... well, it would be nice to spend time with you when our lives are not in danger. We could eat here in your room or somewhere close by. Is that... my Harken manners need work, but I do not think that's an inappropriate request, is it?"

"How in the world could it be?" Chass asked. "I'll arrange it and send a messenger with the details. If you are dining in the banquet hall tonight, though, you should probably leave now so you have more than enough time to dress."

Desmond groaned. "I miss the days when 'dressing up' simply meant the nicer of my three monks robes."

Chass laughed. "I don't think I've ever known what it's like to not dress ornately. Even my military regalia requires assistance."

"I suppose I shall bravely endure."

"I have every faith."

"Enjoy the rest of your day and night, Your Highness," Desmond said with a smile and wink. "I will come visit again soon, if I may?"

"Do as you wish."

Desmond didn't roll his eyes, but the urge was there, that wasn't hard to miss. "Stubborn." He rose, hesitated, then simply gave a slight bow and departed.

Chass turned back to his work, but his mind was flitting around far too much now to focus. Giving up, he headed slowly back to his bed to rest until dinner, happy and miserable all at once, because if there was one thing

he knew about things going his way, it was that the world couldn't wait to ruin it.

## Chapter Seventeen

It was time to be a king again. Desmond hadn't missed it. He'd never been meant for leadership, not like this; he'd certainly never wanted it. His role should have been to help his parents, his siblings, be the right hand to his brother, who should have been a good leader. Married off to be a prince consort somewhere, or to be a diplomat abroad in the wider world.

He could not wait for all this to be over with. If there was one thing he actually agreed with the rebels on, it was that it was time for him to go. Time for his family to cease to be Benta's rulers. He wasn't, however, going to hand the throne to a bunch of backstabbing, war-mongering cretins eager for power and blood. Bastards who'd willingly, even eagerly, sided with Treya Mencee. That would not be tolerated. He'd cut off his own head before he permitted that. He'd worked too hard, and people had already suffered far too much, for him to force his kingdom back into that dreary life. They were people, not a war machine.

He stood still as servants fussed over the finishing touches on his clothes. Bentan-style, this time, since he was serving in his official role from here on, until the matter was closed, though he as yet had no clear idea what form 'closed' would take. Only kernels of ideas.

Once, he would have had Captain Mattias to speak with, confide in, but he'd been killed for his loyalty. He could have also spoken with his priest, bishop of the royal temple, and a good friend. Another death at Desmond's feet.

There would be no more, not if he could help it, and despite Kettermane's best efforts, Desmond *was* still king.

As the servants stepped away and bowed, Desmond thanked them and glanced briefly in the mirror. Expensive, ornate, stiff. The very image of a Bentan monarch.

At least this was only to greet Wessel and whoever else had come with him. Weather had delayed them for far longer than anyone had expected, but they were at last in port and would reach the palace shortly.

Taking a deep breath, running a hand over his poor hair, mindful of the glimmering dust that had been rubbed into it, he finally headed out.



He stopped short at the three figures in the hallway, all of them in formal Penance Gate regalia: Black, close-fitted pants and long-sleeved shirt, and over that a long, sleeveless red tunic that was slit up the middle front and back, trimmed in black and gold, emblazoned with the familiar slashes, though they were more elaborately embroidered than usual, with details and shading the more functional tunics lacked. All three had various medals pinned to their breast and a gold pin at their right shoulder, each depicting a different snarling face reminiscent of the faceplates Desmond recalled from his rescue. Around their throats were collars of red leather and gold spikes, harkening to their armor. They were beautiful and fierce.

Desmond would die on the spot to see Chass dressed just so.

Tucking that lovely thought away to torture himself with for later, he said, "I assume I'm no longer allowed to avoid the matter of bodyguards?"

The woman with the marks of a sergeant, who seemed in charge of the three, laughed and said, "No, Your Majesty. High King Sarrica was quite insistent, given the pending guests. He thought you would be most comfortable with Penance Gate to serve you, but Fathoms Deep, the Three-headed Dragons, and Shattered Wind are all at your disposal."

"I am honored, but His Majesty is correct in that my preference is Penance Gate. I am sorry that keeping me alive has cost you so much."

"It's war that costs us lives, and you did your best to stop all further wars," the woman said. "I'm Sergeant Kylie. These are Corporal Ami and Corporal Bettar; in the day to day, we'll rotate, but for this meeting we're all on duty."

"Understood. Thank you. Shall we be off?" They all saluted and fell into place around him.

He'd never entirely grown used to bodyguards, and it was even more difficult now with Bitter Frost's betrayal still a vivid, gutting memory. Still, if he died now, everything was lost for Benta, so his fears would have to be pushed aside. Anyway, it was Penance Gate. They would never betray Chass, even if they didn't care one way or another about Desmond.

He was also grateful to have people who knew where they were going, so he didn't make a fool of himself by getting lost and needing help. Again.

The room they led him to was one of the smaller throne rooms, used exclusively for meetings such as this. It was all pomp and power displays. Desmond vastly preferred when he was invited to their private offices and

treated like a friend. He was so damned tired of all these tense affairs of state. Why would anyone choose war, choose violence, over peace?

Sarrica sat on his throne, and Allen to his left in one that was only just barely less ornate. Amusing when everyone knew that Allen was the true political power in Harken, had been practically from the very moment of his arrival. Sarrica was the military presence, and even here that would be his predominant role, and his secondary role was to be intimidating. They made an impressive pair—an impressive *team*.

Watching them, so obviously close and in love even when all they did was sit next to each other in silence, Desmond felt lonelier than ever. It didn't help that loneliness immediately turned to Chass, but if he was going to fantasize, what was the point in a half effort? Chass had been the first person to make him feel like he was not facing the world alone since being yanked from Highmont. Even there, he'd always felt just a little bit apart, a royal prince shoved out of the way, never there of his own volition even if he'd grown to love it.

Not that traveling across the continent with Chass had been a choice, either, but that was different. Chass had saved him, had blazed through an entire army to sweep him up and carry him away, then fought through a Bentan winter with the tenacity of a wolf. He understood Desmond in ways no one else ever had. He'd trusted Desmond in ways that seemed to surprise Aria, who clearly was closer to Chass than anyone.

He *missed* Chass. His unexpected flashes of humor. His cold, scathing demeanor that hid a heart of melted gold. His knowledge, with a willingness to learn, instead of the usual arrogance that so many scholars seemed to possess. His caring. His faith and understanding in a world where so many sneered at Desmond and looked down on him for his faith.

His simple presence, warm and solid and comforting. Even when he'd been wounded, exhausted beyond all logic, and facing certain death, Chass had cared more about others than himself. It was long past time more people cared about Chass. Desmond wished fervently that privilege might be granted to him, but he may as well wish for the moon. They were leagues apart, a fallen king and a crown prince. A monk from the snowy mountains and a soldier from the briny sea.

He was a royal with neither home nor aim, and Chass was a penitent soldier soon to take up his crown. Desmond had every faith Chass would be dearly loved in no time at all, and well-remembered long after he was dead.

Desmond... well, nobody wanted a former king lingering where he was always a risk for dissent, rebellion, and other problems. If he was lucky, they'd let him return peacefully to his monastery, though the idea depressed him. If he was less lucky, he'd be married off to someone so far away even he forgot he existed. If he was unlucky, he wouldn't live very long after the new monarch took the throne.

There was no chance at all he would be able to travel to Gaulden with Chass and see what it was like to live in a place that was always warm, and close friends with the sea, instead of most often cold where the sea was an afterthought.

Shaking off the gloomy thoughts, turning his focus back to the present, Desmond smiled and went through all the usual greetings before taking his seat to the left of Sarrica, in a throne of his own, decorated in silver rather than gold to indicate he was a foreign guest but of equal standing. Penance Gate took up position around and behind him, perfect imitations of Allen and Sarrica's respective bodyguards. Still more soldiers, all in Fathoms Deep teal, were arrayed along the length of the hall, with regular army behind them. Desmond had no doubt there were soldiers high above them as well, ready to strike from a distance at the slightest hint of threat.

Sarrica had practically prepared for war, even though Wessel was an ally. Desmond wished he could believe it was an overreaction, but though he had faith in Wessel, he had no faith at all in anyone who might have come with him.

All that was missing from the room were translators, but given that he and Allen were present, there was hardly need of them. Maybe at some point everything would quiet down enough they could discuss language again, as they had when Allen had visited Benta to fix the mess the rebels had made of Commander Jader's visit. Just as he seldom had anyone who understood his devotion to his faith, he rarely had people close enough to talk endlessly about languages to. Allen was the only one he had counted a friend who could and did so gladly.

Chass, too, would be fun to speak with, if Desmond could ever get him to open up about it, admit he was indeed a silver tongue. That would require time and patience, though. Desmond had plenty of patience, but not time—that he was swiftly running out of.

Thankfully, they didn't have to wait long for Wessel and whoever had come with him. An imperial clerk came from the door behind them, murmured soundlessly in Sarrica's ear, and slipped away after he gave the barest nod.

A few minutes later, the doors opened, and Wessel was admitted, accompanied by seven other figures: three women, four men. All of them were former royal councilors, a mixture of those who had been against the rebellion and a couple who'd wanted to remain neutral. The other fourteen members of his council had joined Kettermane. Five people out of twenty-one had stood by him. That still stung.

Still, it was promising that seven had come with Wessel and they all had made it, instead of one of them turning traitor and the entire ship being sunk before they reached Harken.

Desmond sat, demeanor cool, as they went through all the requisite platitudes. Around them, arrayed in the seats on either side of the immense halls, nearly the entirety of the imperial council watched in a silent stillness that was highly unusual for 'Harken birds'. Unlike Desmond's comparatively tiny council, the Harken Imperial Council consisted of hundreds of members—three primary for each kingdom, and a whole slew of secondary and tertiary councilors with myriad duties and responsibilities. Ruling an empire took a lot of effort, and even more effort when trying to do it properly, instead of being slave-mongering tyrants like Treya Mencee.

As the formalities finally came to an end, Sarrica said, with the cool demeanor Desmond remembered so well from their first meeting, "While your efforts at helping King Desmond are to be commended, Lord Wessel, I have to ask what all of you are doing here. What did you hope to accomplish by coming to Harken, when the end goal of your pathetic rebellion is to resume the warring we thought well behind us. Especially since it was our understanding that you had been captured."

Some of them had the grace to flinch.

"I was released with the understanding I would return home and stay out of matters, and that if I disobeyed, they would not be so lenient a second time. With the assistance of some of those present, I came here instead. I am here to serve my king," Wessel replied quietly. "He is not his father or his brother. King Desmond was what Benta needed, and I won't be driven to treason by a bunch of greedy, sanctimonious bastards looking for an easy way to clear their debts."

"*You're being harsh*," said Lady Sarah Wintry after Desmond had translated Wessel's Harken.

Desmond translated her reply and said first in Harken and then in Benta, "Everyone in this room knows what those councilors stand to gain by returning to a life of war. The question is, what do the lot of you stand to gain by coming here? What will you receive in return for doing the job Kettermane failed at?"

Another woman, Abigail Harrington, stepped forward, curtsying hastily before saying in Harken, "Your Majesty, I know I was indifferent before, but it was the political ploy I went with, assuming a very different outcome. War helps no one and nothing. I was a fool and thought Kettermane and the others would never go through with it, or at least that they'd fail miserably. I was wrong, and I have to live with that. I am here to help and support you, and right my wrongs as best I'm able."

Desmond wasn't entirely certain he believed her, but she had clearly rehearsed her little speech thoroughly, he'd give her that. He shifted his attention back to Wessel. "Lord Wessel, thank you again for all you did for me and His Highness."

Wessel bowed his head. "As they say here in Harken, Your Majesty, my honor to serve. I hope you and His Highness are well?"

"Prince Chass very nearly wasn't," Desmond said quietly. "It's by the will of Her Most Holy Grace alone he is alive. He is currently recovering in the healing ward, and would likely enjoy a visit from you, Lord Wessel."

"The honor would be mine. I am sorry Prince Chass has suffered so greatly."

"We all are," Desmond replied, and this time Allen translated the exchange, giving Desmond a break.

When they finished, Sarrica said, "You are permitted to remain here in Harkenesten, but that permission is tenuous and will be tightly supervised, councilors. You are not to leave palace grounds without my expression permission, and when you leave your rooms, you are to be accompanied by the guards that will be assigned to you after this meeting concludes. Those guards follow *my* orders, not yours, so do as you are told. You've had a long journey, so by all means go rest and refresh. We will meet again at dinner and have a more serious discussion about what is to be done about Benta."

Allen translated, and in reply everyone in the group but Lady Sarah replied, "Your Majesty," in Harken.

Sarrica dismissed them, and then the council and bodyguards, leaving just the three of them in the room. He sighed. "What is to be done about this mess? I would like to see you reinstated, but even I am aware enough of politics to know that probably won't work."

"No, it won't," Desmond said. "However this ends, it won't be me on the throne. I never wanted it anyway, and that is part of the problem. No one should ever be eager to take up such a role, but neither should one be adverse."

"Did you have an alternate in mind?" Sarrica asked.

"Wessel," Allen and Desmond said at the same time, then laughed. "I see we're thinking along the same lines," Desmond added. "He is the most fit. He's more than proven he is willing to put the people of Benta first. He's been fighting against the rebels from the very start, at great risk to himself and his people. He said himself that if he were to return to Benta this very moment his life is forfeit. He's always sided with me, strongly and loudly, about the importance of peace with Harken. He is suited to the task, and already would have the support of a great many vital persons. More support than me, for certain."

Allen nodded, leaning forward slightly so he could better see Desmond past Sarrica. "He has the proper acumen, and whatever lacks he could learn easily, and I think that would be minimal. I do not know if he would agree, but I have a strong suspicion he would. We can speak with him privately tonight."

"Yes," Desmond agreed. "Thank you again for all you continue to do for me and Benta. These are not your problems to solve."

"We share this continent," Sarrica replied, "and we all want the fighting to stop. I'll do what is necessary to achieve that end. Anyway, I know a bit about being left wholly alone by my family and thrown around doing what other people want with little input about what *I* want. It's the lot of those of us who get to sit on the throne, and there is little room to complain at the end of the day, but no one should ever be put here unwillingly or treated like we're no longer people. We'll see this is ended properly." He rose and stretched, then offered a hand to Allen. "Dare I ask what other plots are taking shape in your head?" He motioned for Desmond

to join them, and they headed for the imperial offices, bodyguards falling into place around them once more.

In the office, Sarrica dismissed everyone but Myra, who'd already somehow managed to have refreshments waiting for them, including real Bentan coffee. Desmond didn't moan as he drank it, but it was a very near thing.

"So lay it out for me: what have you two been plotting."

"Nothing, really," Desmond said. "I had some ideas, but I've not discussed them aloud yet. I wanted to see how the initial meeting went, since that could have upended everything, and we'd have planned for nothing."

Allen gave Sarrica a look. "I have been trying to tell you, but between work and certain distractions, never managed it."

Sarrica smirked. "Don't expect me to be sorry."

Allen rolled his eyes, but the affection in them was impossible to miss. "The plan is simple enough: if Desmond is to bargain successfully, he must come from a position of greater power."

"Any power at all," Desmond said wryly. "It's the authority of Harken that is sustaining me right now. One would think the threat of Harken would be sufficient, but no, they'd love to fully provoke you; it would start the war they so desperately want. They're only going to surrender to our demands if we take them by force, or if there is some other way they stand to risk losing everything if they don't cooperate."

Sarrica chuckled. "I see where this is going. As ever, the only thing more effective than a brutal war is a good marriage. Did you have candidates?"

Desmond's stomach knotted to hear Sarrica voice what he'd been thinking, what they'd all been thinking. It was necessary, and he would do it, but he wasn't looking forward to being forcefully inserted into someone else's life. Well, maybe they'd annul it after all this was over and it was safe to do so. Though he doubted it; that risked stripping away the power that would bring Benta to heel.

"I put together several dossiers. They're mostly Harken royalty, but there are a few from further afield." Allen signaled Myra, who came over with a rather alarming stack of leather portfolios and set them on the small table next to Desmond's chair. "My strongest recommendation is marked with my seal in green, and second-best choices in blue. Every other option

will more than suffice, but I'd go with green or blue if any of them seem remotely suitable for you."

Desmond nodded, hating his stupid, traitorous heart that put forward the hope that one of those names might be Chass's. As if he would ever do that to Chass—force him into something, take away his choice, his consent? No, absolutely not. Monarchs they might be, but Desmond would not be the one to take yet another choice away from him. "I'll look them over tonight, unless I need to do so sooner."

"Take your time. It's not a decision to be made quickly, and we're already forcing you to make it quickly enough as is. You've got a few days while we smooth out the rest of the plan. Did you have your demands?"

"Yes," Desmond said, mood souring further. "I wrote everything down, though it pained me I could not include Kettermane's head and had to settle for imprisoning the bastard."

Sarrica chuckled and took the list as Desmond pulled it from his pocket and held it out. "I understand completely." He skimmed the list then handed it to Allen, who already had his own notes out. "They seem more than reasonable, and anything that's not, we'll shove through anyway. Benta doesn't have nearly the leverage they think, not now that you're here."

"We can definitely make all of this work," Allen said. "I'll put together a proper report for you and have it ready before our meeting with Wessel tonight."

"I appreciate it. I will never be able to repay all you've done for me and more importantly, for Benta. Is there anything else you need from me at present?"

Sarrica rose. "No, you are free to go, please. We will see you at dinner."

Desmond rose, took up the intimidating stack of portfolios, and headed out. In the antechamber, his bodyguards immediately moved to rejoin him, and a clerk stepped forward and volunteered to take the portfolios for him. "Thank you," Desmond said. He was healing up well, but his wounded shoulder and arm still did not tolerate frequent or hard use. "I appreciate it."

"My honor to serve, Your Majesty," the clerk replied.

It was such a uniquely Harken phrase, always said in formal Harken, with the pronouns dropped and the conjugation making it what most described as 'humble'. There was no real equivalent for the phrase in any



other language. The words themselves were simple enough, but not the nuances woven into them that made it not just a statement, but a vow.

The halls milled with whispers and stares as ever, and like always, Desmond ignored them, shoulders back and head up. The only time his composure had ever broken was when his own people had come to kill him, and he still didn't regret that, even if he hated all the stories of ridicule that must be sweeping through the rebel ranks. He would never be ashamed of doing everything he could to survive.

Mockery was the working of weak minds, and to be dismissed by strong minds, like an insect flicked off clothes. The admonition rolled through him, familiar and comforting. By the time they turned onto quieter halls, where only a smattering of people, most of them staff, were to be found, he was feeling moderately better.

His thoughts scattered as he turned down the hall his room was on, though, and spied an unfamiliar figure standing near his door, clearly waiting for him. From the look of him, and some of the jewelry he wore, the man was from Soldonir—Soltorin in particular, from one of the many clans secreted away in the jungle. Dark Tide, if Desmond was recalling his insignia correctly. He hadn't realized some of them had journeyed to Harken after Soldonir had been brought into the empire on a provisional basis. He'd worked so hard to see them freed from Benta... and the actions of greedy, irresponsible leaders had thrown them at Harken's feet. At least Sarrica wasn't a tyrant and would, by Harken law, release them at the end of the trial term if Soldonir declared the empire was not where they wanted to be. That was years off, though, and only time would tell how the saga would end.

For the present, he focused on the stranger, his mind taking barely a moment to shift into Soltorish. "Greetings, son of Dark Tide. What are you doing so far from home?"

"Being a good little emissary as my honored mother and esteemed Chief bid me."

Desmond scrolled through the many names, titles, and more in his head and came up with one. "You are Lord Hibiki, second son of Chief Dark Tide."

Surprise rippled across Hibiki's face. "That's me. I never thought I'd see the day I would come to meet not just the Emperor of Harken, but the King of Benta himself, let alone have him recognize me. Strange times."

"I'd rather they be peaceful times. What brings you to my door?"

"Rumors, mostly, regarding Benta and the rebels. Are you going to continue to stand against them?"

Desmond motioned for Hibiki to join him in his room, thanking the bodyguards as they took up their posts. Inside, he removed the heavy jewelry required of such a formal meeting, then loosened the collar of his jacket. "I will continue to stand against them, yes. I cannot say more than that right now, as the details are still being worked out and have yet to be negotiated, but I will not tolerate their attempts at returning to war. I'm sure that is the concern that has brought you here."

"Yes. Soldonir doesn't want war. We certainly don't want Benta razing and ransacking Harken and then turning its attention back to us."

"That won't happen. You have my promise, whatever it is worth."

Hibiki bowed his head. "You have mine, as well, Your Majesty, that Soldonir stands with you and Harken. We prefer not to fight, but if we must, it will be in support of you."

"I'm honored, Lord Hibiki. Thank you."

"Soldonir vastly prefers being an ally to a colony. Now I've said what I came to say, I bid you good day. Have you need of me, simply send for me."

"Do the same, Lord Hibiki. Thank you."

Hibiki bowed and departed, the door closing quietly behind him.

Desmond sighed and sat at the table where the clerk had set the towering stack of dossiers. He rested his chin in his hand as he stared at them. What would it be like to marry for love? To marry simply because he wanted to, because there was someone he chose to build a life with together?

Pointless questions, because he'd never know the answer. His duty was to marry for politics, for power and strategy and security.

Sighing again, he sat up straight and began sorting the pile into multiple stacks: no seal, blue seal, and a single, solitary portfolio emblazoned in the lower right corner with a gleaming green seal. Allen's highest recommendation.

Desmond didn't know if he wanted to laugh, cry, or throw up. Even if there hadn't been a rebellion, this day was always going to come. He'd kept putting it off, but the council had been pushing harder and harder before the rebellion claimed everyone's full attention.

Now here he was: a fallen king about to throw away his throne for good, but the price was to be immediately thrust into yet another life he never asked for, a life he'd have no say in, not really. He would probably adjust and come to like it, just as he had life at Highmont, but that would never erase that it had never been his choice.

Bile burned at the back of his throat anyway, a low-simmering anger that his entire life had been shaped by other people, subject to the whims of those others, and there was no sign that would ever change.

Did it really matter? Did he even know what he wanted, what he would choose if he had a choice?

That was easy, though. He'd choose Chass, who understood him the way few could. Who'd slept wrapped around him as they endured the deadly cold, who'd trusted Desmond to get them across a frozen lake, even though it was clear the idea had terrified him. Chass had trusted him with his torc, and his Tear, and his altar.

He could still remember that brief time on the ship when Chass had so tentatively, so warily but cautiously happy, shown Desmond his prayer cards and explained them. How he'd continued to consult them throughout their journey, until they'd been destroyed. His misery over the raspberries, how badly Desmond had wanted to do something, anything, to comfort him. How beautiful he'd been playing the harp, how deeply loved he'd been by the Yanari Clan.

A thousand moments, large and small, were engraved in his mind. Maybe he was being hasty, or a trite, pathetic fool falling madly for the man who'd saved him, who'd carried him out of a nightmare and sailed off into the horizon...

But if he could have a choice, his choice would be Chass. To master Gaulden and learn the ways of the sea and the customs of a people who were nothing like Benta at all. There were things he would always miss about his homeland, but not enough to choose them over Chass.

Save that Chass had made his feelings clear. Friendly, yes, but never friends. He was astonished Chass had agreed to have dinner with him. Perhaps he'd felt he had no choice.

Desmond pinched his eyes shut against the pain. What he wanted didn't matter, was wholly irrelevant to the matter. He was a fallen king, and would do what was best for his people, regardless of his personal feelings.

What did it matter? Even if he had a choice, his choice was Chass, and Chass didn't want him.

He stared at the folder with the green seal, eager to see its contents and utterly dreading them. The contents would reveal either a person and life he didn't want but had to accept, or the person he wanted with all his heart, but would have to refuse.

Some days, it really did feel like everyone would have been better off if Kettermane had managed to remove his head.

## Chapter Eighteen

It took Chass a good two hours of arguing, but he finally did get his way and was allowed to leave his room. Only to be escorted, heavily and dramatically, to the imperial wing and the private gardens there, but it wasn't the same four walls he was already sick of, so he'd take the victory.

Especially since, now he was away from the healer's ward, and his new private quarters were so close, it would be easy to argue that they should just let him finish recuperating there.

One step at a time, though. A war was won in stages, not all at once.

For the moment, he was going to enjoy his small victory, which smelled of jasmine and lilies, and sounded like someone had let the songbirds loose again. Chass smiled faintly, watching a few of them play in a nearby birdbath before trying once more to read the book he'd brought with him.

His ability to concentrate was a lost cause, however. All he could think about was the meeting taking place. Benta had finally arrived, and the only one among them Chass trusted was Wessel. He didn't know who else had come with him, not yet, but he didn't trust a single one of them.

Probably for the best he'd become superfluous. He'd done his part: fought and clawed and bled his way halfway across the continent to get Desmond to safety.

With that goal accomplished, the beast was no longer needed, simply put back in his kennel until needed again. Except he wouldn't be needed again. He'd been forcibly removed from service. Sent off to a field of grass to rot until death. He was lucky he was high ranking enough they couldn't put him down.

It shouldn't matter. He'd done his duty. Near as he could tell Allen was satisfied with the results. Desmond was where he belonged, back in the midst of the political maelstrom, no doubt this very moment working his way back onto his throne, or possibly negotiating how to hand it to someone else while ensuring the rebels got nothing out of it. A strong political marriage would help with that, though Desmond probably hated being thrust into one, not so different from the way his father had forced him first into Highmont and then into prison.

Chass tried to turn back to his book before his thoughts went to stupid, hopeless places. Places that would only bring him pain. A humiliating reminder that he was the monster in this story, and monsters only served one purpose.

Sighing, he snapped his book shut and set it aside, and in its place picked up the prayer cards he'd borrowed from Lanora until he could replace the ones he'd lost, or more likely, until the set Lanora had probably already ordered as a gift was complete.

He also needed a new prayer mat, but given he could barely walk, let alone do things like bend and kneel, there wasn't a particular rush. He'd more than likely commission one after he returned to Gaulden.

Chass had just started to shuffle the cards when footsteps, the unique sharp clip of the high heels so popular in court dress, drew his attention. He looked up, scowling at the woman approaching him. She was sharply dressed, in expensively dyed colors with elaborate embroidery at the hems, but not as ornately dressed as a courtier would be. More telling, she had a fancy new crest pinned to her left breast: a circle cut in half by a pen, and carved into the circle the words *Ours is to Listen and to Speak*. The new crest and credo of the Imperial Silver Tongues. This crest had the circle in silver, the quill in gold, and an emerald drop of ink at its tip, marking this person not just a silver tongue, but a golden tongue, and master enough to teach and certify others.

Why in the world would she be visiting him?

The woman bowed as she reached him, holding a leather portfolio against her chest, the long, elaborate tail of her dark brown hair spilling over one shoulder.

"Why is an imperial golden tongue paying me an unsolicited visit?"

Rising, the woman frowned, brow furrowing sharply. "My deepest apologies, Your Highness. I did not know my visit was unexpected. It was on my schedule to visit you today for an evaluation, so we can prepare the proper examinations for your certifications."

Chass's heart lurched and flipped. "My what? I've made no such requests."

"The request came from His Imperial Majesty the High Consort, though my impression was that it was on your behalf, given that you are preoccupied with your recovery." She reached into a pocket of her peacock-blue jacket and extended a slip of paper.

Chass took it, scowling as he read it over. Sure enough, Allen had written to the office with the 'request' that Chass be given golden tongue examinations, and the woman's superior had arranged matters from there.

"Sit, then, Mistress Karl," Chass said, handing back the slip of paper and waving her to a nearby bench. "I am as ever at His Majesty's service." Though why Allen wanted him wasting his time with such a ridiculous farce, Chass could not begin to imagine.

Smiling tentatively, Karl sat down, opened her portfolio, and slid a pair of reading glasses onto her nose. "My honor to serve, Your Highness. Shall we get straight to it? What languages do you know suitably to be tested on?"

"I'm not a silver tongue, let alone a golden tongue," Chass said flatly. "It's true I speak a few languages, but I picked them up as a matter of course during my travels with Penance Gate. I know Harken, Islander, and Outlander as a matter of necessity. I suppose I'm passible in Bentan and Carthian. I also know Harken hand language, though I don't think that's part of silver tongue qualifications."

"His Majesty recommended it be added, as a matter of fact," Karl said with another smile, this one less hesitant. "Only three people have requested examinations so far, though I think that will change once it becomes more widely known that is now an option. Harken we can go ahead and approve; there's no reason to test there. If you're amenable, we can go through the preliminary testing now, so I know which tests to administer for the others."

"Whatever you wish," Chass said, wishing the whole farce was over already.

The woman's brow furrowed slightly, but she only shuffled her papers and set to work, asking Chass question after question, setting him all sorts of challenges, starting with Islander and going through every language he'd listed, save for the sign language, which she didn't know.

By the time she was done, Chass was exhausted, but the woman looked pleased, as though she was the one who'd taken the tests and done well. He had no idea how long she'd been quizzing him, but it must have been at least a couple of hours, and likely more, to judge by the fading sunlight.

"Golden tongues are clearly a family trait," she said as she tucked her papers away and stood. "I'll be in contact shortly, Your Highness. Good

evening, and I hope you continue to heal without problems."

"Thank you," Chass said. "Good evening." When she'd gone, he signaled to one of his bodyguards. "Have someone send for Andalori."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Thank you."

Chass set his prayer cards, still sitting in his lap, back on the table. He then rose slowly, stretching carefully, and took a slow, careful walk around the garden. His legs weren't happy after hours of not moving, his wounds even less happy, but he'd never known remaining completely and utterly still to be the best solution to anything, except only briefly.

Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long before Andalori appeared. "Your Highness?"

"Why am I getting visits from stray golden tongue clerks without warning?"

"Because if you'd been given any warning, you'd have refused to see them," Andalori replied. "I thought you hated when people asked questions about the obvious."

Chass narrowed his eyes, but where most people would have recoiled, if not outright fled, Andalori merely stood calmly. "Any other impertinences I should know about?"

"If you knew about them, they wouldn't be impertinences, I should think."

"Is there a reason you're being particularly bratty today? Or did you decide to risk death simply for fun?"

Andalori folded their arms across their chest. "It's my job to do what you need, even if you don't like those things. Anyway, the order came from His Imperial Majesty the High Consort, and I'm under strict orders to obey those without question or hesitation."

"You're also supposed to warn me," Chass said. "I don't need my time or anyone else's wasted on this nonsense, and there will not be further nonsense, do you understand me?"

"I understand, Your Highness. Let's hope I'm clear on your definition of nonsense, which doesn't seem to match anyone else's in the empire."

Chass glared again, even though it continued to be a useless endeavor. "Why do I put up with you?"



"I would imagine it's because it would be *more* hassle to get rid of me," Andalori replied, the barest hint of smile flicking across their mouth. "How did the testing go?"

"It was preliminary nonsense," Chass said. He'd probably hear on the morrow, if not that night, that he didn't qualify to take the formal examinations. Which was fine, because he didn't want to take the stupid things anyway. "I mean it, let me know if anything else like this is going to be intruding upon my day."

Andalori smiled. "I'll do my best to obey, Your Highness."

Chass rolled his eyes. "No, you won't. Go away, Andalori, and keep your mischief to a minimum."

Smiling, Andalori bowed and departed.

Leaving Chass once more alone, even with bodyguards present. Always alone, save when a very small circle of people were with him, and they often had better things to do with their time. Even Aria hadn't been by to see him today. Not that he needed her to keep showing up to harangue him.

Perhaps he should retire for the day, as he was clearly growing increasingly maudlin and pathetic. Self-pity would accomplish nothing, he knew that better than anyone.

Of course, retiring meant picking the next battle in his war with the healers. He could just make it an order, but he preferred to avoid such methods whenever possible. Sighing, he turned toward the archway leading back into the palace to find a servant for himself, as that would help his argument.

He stopped short as he found the archway filled. Desmond. Dressed in Bentan finery and looking absolutely miserable.

"What's wrong?" Chass asked. "Did one of those *dung eaters* try something?"

"*Keftishi*," Desmond echoed, some of his misery fading beneath amusement. "Not a Gaulden word I know, but I know the root, which is 'to shit,' so I'm going to safely assume you're insulting the Bentan party that's just arrived. Well, arrived a few hours ago."

"How did the meeting go?"

"It didn't last long, really," Desmon said. "The real work will happen during dinner in a couple more hours. I didn't mean to intrude, though. I had

no idea you'd be here. I'm glad you're doing so well they released you from the healing ward."

Chass gave his good shoulder a bare shrug. "I wanted out of my room. This garden is the most secure in the palace, or damned near. I'm sure I'll be dragged back shortly."

"Your room is closer—shouldn't they just drag you there?" Desmond's eyes sparkled. "As was no doubt your plan all along?"

"Maybe," Chass said, smiling the faintest bit, heart hurting to be so easily understood and anticipated. "Should you be out here alone?"

"My bodyguards are close by. I was surprised they didn't follow me all the way to the garden, but I guess they knew something I didn't." He finally stepped through the archway, eyes skimming the garden, lingering briefly on the guards arrayed around it to protect Chass. "I can't imagine there's many safer places in the palace." He hesitated then, momentary happiness collapsing entirely, and for a moment he looked near to tears.

Chass ached more than anything in the world to go to him, comfort him, and do whatever was necessary to restore his happiness. He'd burn the whole world down for Desmond if that was what it took.

That wasn't his right, though. It wouldn't ever be. Even if it was, why would Desmond choose him?

"Would you like to sit?" Chass finally asked.

Desmond looked relieved and disappointed at the same time, but only nodded and took the bench closest to Chass's chair. "Could I ask you something?"

Chass's heart gave an unpleasant lurch and fell into his stomach. "Of course."

Desmond knotted his hands in his lap, then carefully pulled them apart and folded them together. He stared out over the garden, and after a couple of minutes turned to Chass. "Have you ever wanted something, I mean desperately wanted something, but you know you'll never have it because if you take it, or claim it, or whatever, that means someone else's choice has been taken away?"

Bad memories tried to rise up at the words, pools of darkness spreading across Chass's mind like spilled ink. He tamped them down, shoved them back, taking a few deep breaths to steady himself. The truth had already come out, while he lay unconscious oblivious to it all. What did

it matter if he spoke a bit more about it? Was that not what he was supposed to do?

Lanora would advise him to speak, to be honest, to open up the way Chass despised doing because it so rarely brought him anything but negative reactions and left him feeling worse off than when he'd started. Not every time, but often enough. "To be honest, my problem has always been that people take my choices away. I've never knowingly been in a position where I risk taking someone else's choice away, unless we're going to get pedantic about ordering soldiers around."

"I know," Desmond said. "This was stupid. Forgive me, please." He rose and bolted, and Chass gaped at his retreating form.

Clearly this had something to do with him, but what? What in Holy Tash's name could he possibly have to do with whatever tangle Desmond was in?

Standing, he went after Desmond, though his pace was abysmal. His guards, thankfully, fell in around him without question. Outside Desmond's chambers, right across from his own, Chass jerked his head at one of the guards stationed outside it. "Knock."

The woman obeyed promptly, turning and pounding on the door loud enough to echo down the hall.

Just as Chass was getting ready to tell her to do it again, the door opened, and a wretched-looking Desmond stared in misery and fury at Chass. "Come in, then. I started this mess; I may as well finish it."

On that bizarre and ominous note, Chass obeyed, dismissing the guards to their various posts. He closed the door behind him and enjoyed for a moment the cool quiet of Desmond's chambers, the scent of wistaria drifting lightly on the air. It was a soothing scent, calming, welcoming.

Too bad Desmond himself didn't seem particularly welcoming. Well, it wasn't as though Chass had expected their tenuous friendship, or whatever it was, to last forever. He'd been a fool to let his guard down as much as he had. When would he ever learn? He had his tiny circle of friends. He even had a son, the child he'd always wanted, even if he was the last person in all three Realms who should be a father.

That was more than enough. More than he deserved. Only someone who wanted to test Holy Shammari's wrath, or Holy Kinar's wrath for that matter, would ask for more.

Sighing softly, he pushed away from the door, wincing inwardly at the pull to his wounds, and ventured further into the antechamber. Noise came from his left, so Chass went that way, and found a mess: an array of leather portfolios had been knocked across the table and onto the floor, some falling open to scatter papers everywhere. One portfolio, and one alone, remained neatly in place on the table.

Affixed to the bottom right corner was the imperial seal in green wax. Whatever the portfolio contained, it had the highest approval of the imperial office.

As much as he wanted to see what it contained, that wasn't his right, not unless Desmond gave him permission to do so. Leaving it where it was, he stepped past the table to where Desmond had taken a seat at a small sofa, his hands knotted in his lap, eyes staring a hole into the ornate rug beneath their feet.

Though his pain had flared up greatly from just the short walk to Desmond's rooms, Chass remained standing. He wasn't going to start off a discussion on choices and taking them away by inviting himself to sit. "What is going on, and what does you taking someone's choice away have to do with me?"

Desmond made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob, broken and cracked and awful. "The only way I'll have sufficient power to stand against the insurgents and negotiate a deal that is best for Benta is by way of marriage. Allen gave me a number of choices today."

It felt like the rug had just been yanked from beneath Chass's feet. Desmond couldn't be saying what he thought. "I still don't see what that has to do with me."

Desmond jerked his head at the table. "It has everything to do with you."

Heart thundering in his ears, Chass returned to the table and slowly, stiffly, opened the lone portfolio left on it.

A drawing of his own face stared back at him. His life and qualifications laid out in dry detail. Allen's signature at the bottom, meaning he'd looked over and approved of the report. Meaning he'd been the one to put the green seal of highest approval on the front.

"This has to be a mistake," Chass said. "My brother would never suggest me."

"I think you two would benefit greatly from talking," Desmond said with a sigh. "What a surprise you're both so stubborn about it. He would and has suggested you."

"So what, you feel obligated to choose me?"

Desmond made that horrible broken sound again, burying his fingers in his hair. "Chass, you're so smart, but so blindingly stupid sometimes. I feel obligated to *refuse*. I don't want to be one more person in your life taking a decision out of your hands. You've suffered more than any one person should, and I barely understand even half the suffering you've endured."

Chass slammed the portfolio shut and turned fully to face him, disbelief and hope and anger all coiling through him, knotting together into something he couldn't understand, let alone deal with. "So what, you were going to take my choice away by not mentioning it at all? Choose somebody else without me ever knowing I was an option? How is that any better than forcing me into marriage?"

"I—" Desmond's face lost its color as he looked up, hands falling. "Oh, Goddess, I was going to do precisely that, wasn't I?" He laughed and pressed the heel of one hand to his forehead. "I am messing this up in every way possible."

Bile burned at the back of Chass's throat, his stomach churning in a way that said it would gladly empty itself any moment. He wanted to run away screaming. "Lanora is forever telling me I should *open up more*, so we may as well try that." Even if experience had taught him time and again that nobody cared what a monster had to say.

"You made your feelings clear a long time ago," Desmond said, sadness and bitterness threading his voice. "Friendly, but not friends. You won't be close to me because I'm close to your brother. It doesn't matter how I feel about the matter or how I feel about you."

Chass was going to scream. Cry. This could not be going the way he thought it was. Life was never this kind to him. Even with that reading Lanora had done for him, he still found it so hard to just believe. Faith in gods was so much easier than faith in people. "I abused my brother. I made a decision that nearly killed him. Many would rightfully say my wrongs are unforgiveable. Of course I would never dare grow too close to his friends. I'm not *that* much of a fool."

Desmond looked at him, then slowly rose. "Chass, it's not my place to judge or forgive you for matters I had no part in. From where I stand, though, I do see a man full of remorse, who has worked hard to change his ways and make amends for his wrongs. You're the most penitent person I've ever met, and it's clear that there is far more love in your heart than hate. You risked everything to save me, more than anyone should have had to, just because your brother asked it of you. My own siblings never even sent me a token greeting on my birthdays. If the choice was really and truly mine..." He swallowed, looked away, hands fisted tightly at his sides. "If the choice was really and truly mine, I would choose you, and see what kind of life I could build in Gaulden. It's not my choice though, not really, not unless I forced *you* into a life you don't want."

Chass opened his mouth, closed it. His eyes burned. He stared at Desmond, who still wouldn't look at him, as though braced for something painful. But all the words he knew, all the training he had, and Chass couldn't get a single elegant sentence to form in his head. Wholly without his permission, words spilled out anyway. "I'm just the monster. I clear the way so the heroes can swoop in. I go back in my cage when I'm done."

"Chass, *no*," Desmond said, gaze snapping to him, tears spilling from his eyes. "You stupid fucking bastard, that's not—that's *wrong*." He closed the distance between them, stopping just shy of being pressed right up against him, and looked up. "I don't care what the rest of the world thinks about you. Me. Us. You're *my* hero. You had no reason to save me, but you did. You lost your people because of me. You took arrows for me. You risked your friends in Cartha for me. You held me and took care of me and *understand* me. If the rest of the world sees you as a monster, that's their stupid mistake. You're the finest person I know, and after all of this nonsense, you'd better agree to marry me, you infuriating Harken."

Smiling faintly, still not able to really believe his own good fortune or happiness, Chass replied, "My honor to serve."

"Shut up and kiss me or something."

Huffing a soft laugh, Chass reached up with one hand and slowly, gently rested it against the side of Desmond's face the way he'd wanted to so many times. When that got him a smile, and Desmond leaning into the touch, he leaned down and brushed a kiss across his mouth.

Desmond's lips were soft and warm, tasting ever so faintly of wine. He huffed a quiet, barely there laugh against Chass's mouth, then pushed

their lips more firmly together, taking a kiss that was far less cautious and much more in earnest. Throughout, though, he never grabbed or pulled or anything else. Just kissed him.

Eventually Chass drew back, dropping his trembling hand. He stared into Desmond's winter gray eyes. "Is this really what you want?"

"Yes," Desmond said fiercely. "Is it what *you* want?"

"Yes," Chass echoed.

Desmond's smile was blinding, and then he was gently tugging Chass into another kiss, followed by another, each one sweet and earnest and better than all the medicine in Harken.

When they finally drew apart again, Desmond licked his lips and said, "So does this mean I can stop worrying that you'll cancel our dinner?"

"I never had any intention of canceling it," Chass said. "I worried *you* would."

"We're a pair." Desmond took his hands and tugged gently. "Come sit down before you fall down, you stubborn ass. I want to know all about life as your consort. You'll have to help me with my Gaulden; it's still atrocious."

Chass let Desmond drag him to the sofa, enjoying their twined hands, and didn't comment when Desmond kept holding his hand even after they sat. "I think there's time aplenty to discuss all of that. I doubt there's anything that would surprise you; the duties of a consort don't really vary much in the main, only the details."

"Your mother won't mind, will she? You've mentioned more than once that she has very specific ideas about how things are to be done, and I don't want to be the reason she causes you more pain."

"My mother is a controlling, unbending tyrant with her family," Chass replied, "but she's a good queen, and she'd be stupid to be anything but pleased by this arrangement, especially given my less than stellar reputation with the High Throne. She'll be more displeased—" He stopped, realization dropping over him that there was a key matter that needed to be discussed sooner rather than later.

Desmond's brow furrowed slightly. "Displeased...?"

Cautiously, Chass replied, "About my relationship with Aria, which to be fair, is not strictly speaking appropriate. I am technically her superior, and we never should have had an intimate relationship."

"You and Aria have a complicated history together, and it's clear there was never an abuse of power there. You'd never permit such a thing. If your mother has a problem with Aria being your lover, she'll have to learn to get over it, because it's your life, not hers. Surely she'd understand, given your aunt is the one who gave birth to you all?"

"One would think," Chass replied dryly. "You're getting the hang of my mother already. So you don't mind I'd continue my relationship with Aria?"

Desmond smiled, and his grip on Chass's hand tightened slightly for a moment. "I am not going to start my life as a Harken citizen, and a Gaulden consort, by throwing a fit about traditions and practices drastically different from Bentan. That aside, as I said, you and Aria have a complicated history, and a deep and abiding relationship that was built from it. I would never dream of telling you to end that. It's unusual for me, but as neither of us can bear children, I assume there'd have to be a dame or sire anyway."

"Aria's wife promised to do that for me a long time ago, though the pressure isn't great, since I've formally adopted Keeta."

"He's so excited, every time we cross paths his face lights up, and he talks about it all over again," Desmond said, leaning in so their foreheads touched. "I don't know how you can consider yourself a monster when you've gathered such a loving and happy family around you."

Chass closed his eyes, unable to speak or barely even breathe. From the way the grip on his hand tightened again, his gratitude was conveyed anyway.

After a moment, Desmond drew back and said, "So the tradition in Harken is a ring. What kind of ring do I get?"

"We can do the Bentan tradition too," Chass said.

"Not interested," Desmond replied. "Benta never wanted me, and frankly, I'm glad to leave them behind. We could do something along the lines of Carthian tradition, or... Don't you sea-faring types like your tattoos as well?"

Chass laughed. "We do. Very well, rings and tattoos. I'll have Aria design the tattoos. She's much better at that sort of thing."

"You should do one with her too. Spouse on the right wrist, lover on the left, or something like that. I'm sure she'll work it out, I have every faith."



Chass loosened their hands so he could press his right one gently to the side of Desmond's face again. "You are one of a kind. Benta will always regret driving you away."

"I hope they forget all about me and become a better country," Desmond said. "A bad fit is a bad fit; no point in wasting energy on it. Anyway, I'm much happier with where my fall from the throne has taken me. I'd be even happier if you kissed me again."

"A wise monarch knows when to heed their consort," Chass replied.

## Chapter Nineteen

"Don't tell me you're leaving," Desmond said as Chass withdrew from their latest round of kissing and stood up.

Chass gave one of those soft laughs of his, like he was afraid of getting caught laughing. "You have a dinner to get ready for, and I'm certain I have irate healers in the hallway preparing their reprimands."

Desmond sighed dramatically and stood up to walk him to the door. "Fine, fine. I suppose it would look poorly if I showed up late. May I come visit you after dinner, if you're still awake?"

"Of course," Chass said, and brushed the back of his right hand against Desmond's right cheek. "I'll see you later."

"Later," Desmond echoed, unable to think of anything more intelligent to say.

He returned to the sofa once Chass had gone, feeling like he was walking on air. Chass wanted to marry him. Chass had kissed him. Spent several delightful minutes kissing him thoroughly, and Goddess the man knew what he was about.

All Desmond's frustration and confusion and despair... all the longing and heartache and dread... and he had Chass. He was going to Gaulden with Chass, to build a new life, a real *home* like he'd never had before.

Goddess, he needed to stop stargazing and put his mind on the dinner ahead of him. Pushing to his feet again, he headed into his bedroom, where a servant waited to help him change. They'd only just gotten him into his first layers, however, when there was a knock at the door. "I can handle this," Desmond said, "if you'd see who's at the door, please."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The servant returned minutes later bearing an ornately carved jewelry case, the kind meant exclusively for holding rings. Desmond's heart kicked up despite itself as the servant set the box on the nearby writing desk before handing over a note. Unfolding the small slip of paper, Desmond read:

*If you do not like any of these, I'll have a proper one commissioned, but at the very least I thought you'd like a display for dinner. Pick*

*whichever you favor. ~C*

On the surface, the note was straightforward and unremarkable, even bordering on terse. Desmond knew Chass well enough, though, to mark the nervousness, the hope to please, and the pride.

"I suppose I should finish dressing first," he said, and moved to do so when an idea struck him. "Actually, would you run and see if His Majesty the High Consort can spare me a few minutes?"

The servant's eyes widened slightly, but he nodded and darted off while Desmond finished dressing. Thankfully, this time his clothes were somewhere between Bentan and Harken, the very height of fashion. The cost of such clothes could feed a village for a week. It was hard not to be acutely aware of such things, even after all this time.

He was, though, marrying someone who cared at least as much as him about such matters. Desmond smiled. The more he thought about his future now, the more excited he became. The marriage itself might have been thrust upon him, but not Chass. He would really have to focus on his Gaulden lessons; it wouldn't do to arrive and not understand everything being said to him. That wouldn't help him fit in at all. Perhaps he should see about hiring tutors, so the burden of helping him did not fall entirely upon Chass and Allen

Dressed, minus some finishing touches, he returned to the writing desk and flipped open the box that Chass must have unlocked ahead of time. Inside was a truly impressive array of rings, from plain metal bands to those with minimal jewel ornamentation, all the way up to some that were so encrusted, wearing them would weigh his hand down. Every color imaginable was present, so many cuts, sizes, and precious metals that it was almost dizzying. He was hardly new to such luxury, but it was still impressive.

He looked up as the main door opened, heart kicking up for no good reason at all when he heard Allen's voice. Picking up the case, he carried it into the front room. "Thank you for coming to visit me. I would have come to you."

"No, it's fine. Sarrica was called away to deal with a problem in the military yard, so I was going to see if you wanted to walk with me to dinner anyway." His eyes widened the barest bit as he saw what Desmond held. "That ring case is from the Gaulden vault. Does that mean..." He broke into a smile. "That you're going to be my brother-in-law soon?"

Desmond smiled back, feeling almost shy suddenly, even though shyness had never really been in his makeup. "Yes, by the grace of the Goddess, Chass has agreed to the marriage."

Allen's smile widened. "Good. What did you need me for?"

"Helping me make a decision," Desmond said with a laugh, and offered the note Chass had sent him. "There must be history to many, if not all, of these rings."

Allen laughed. "Yes, and how like Chass to not care or tell you, so you can pick whichever one you favor without being weighed down by their history. I would not choose the gaudy diamond one there; that was designed and worn by his ex-wife."

"He could have at least told me *that* much," Desmond said with a sigh, though he wouldn't have picked it anyway. "Any others I should know about?"

"My mother is deeply fond of emeralds, so maybe not those." Allen moved to sit on the sofa and settled the case in his lap. "I don't recognize these two columns, so those must be the ones Chass bought. They're lovely; he has excellent taste. If you preferred heirloom, though, I'd suggest one of these three..." He picked out the rings and tipped them into Desmond's hand. "The star sapphire belonged to our grandmother. Like Chass, she was deeply religious, involved in many charity works, and when she died, they finally got away with naming a temple after her."

It was a handsome ring, a gleaming star sapphire surrounded by diamonds and pearls set in white gold, the inside carved with a name.

"The colorful one has been in the family for several generations, a long ago gift from Islander visitors, who back then obviously did not visit the mainland much. Not by choice, anyway. We forged some friendships, though, that have lasted to this day. I'm starting to realize that Chass has probably forged even more, and is likely part of the reason talks with the Islanders have been going so well. I've been trying to investigate his role more, but he's stubborn about going unnoticed."

"That is Chass," Desmond said with a smile. The second ring was a positive rainbow of colors, formed in a swirling shape, like the kind of seashell that snails lived in, though he didn't think it was modeled on that exactly. "What about this last one?" he asked. It featured a circle-cut ruby surrounded by stones in various shades of red, pink, and amber, like some sort of blooming flower, or maybe a sunburst. It reminded him of a sunrise

on the mountain peaks, driving away the dark and heralding a new day. "I like this one."

Allen returned the others to the case and closed it, setting it on the nearby table as he said, "That one belonged to our great grandmother, and was a gift from the Harken Imperial Throne when they married a good friend of the High Queen of the time. Our family treasures it deeply. That old relationship and sign of approval was one of the reasons they considered me as a candidate for High Consort."

Desmond slid the ring into place. It was a little big, but could be resized later if necessary. Chass had offered to have a ring commissioned, but Desmond rather thought he was happy with this one. He smiled. "Thank you for the help. If you'll give me a moment, I'll finish getting ready."

"Of course," Allen said, returning the smile. "Maybe a bit early, but welcome to the family."

"Thank you," Desmond repeated, voice a little shaky this time. He'd never been welcomed into a family before, and wasn't it sad that was a strange feeling for him?

Desmond slipped away back to his room, where the servant quickly tended to his hair, which wasn't hard, given he still didn't really have much. When he was finally ready, he rejoined Allen, and together they headed out of the private imperial wing and through the rest of the palace, bodyguards keeping pace throughout. They made Desmond more anxious than not, haunted by Bitter Frost's betrayal as he still was, but they were also a fact of life in his circles, so he'd have to get used to them again.

"Did you get a chance to read the report I sent you?" Allen asked.

"Yes, I did. You're bold, and a bit mad, but I think it will work."

Allen smirked. "Especially now you're marrying my brother. That's not something they're going to challenge lightly."

"I certainly am not taking it lightly," Desmond said with a smile, heart hammering in his chest all over again, thumb going to his new ring, unfamiliar and impossible not to notice, on his left hand. "Very strange, to be moving from all the way north to all the way south." He laughed. "I hope I can adjust. I'm told it can get very hot and humid there."

"It can, but I vastly prefer it to the cold up here," Allen replied. "Though I am rather used to it by this point. You'll be fine." His eyes gleamed, mouth curving into a wry smile. "The only challenge is my

mother. I'm afraid there's no avoiding that, but... well, she's most often busy being queen."

Desmond was absolutely certain that Chass wasn't going to permit his mother to say or do anything untoward, or even so much as breathe near Keeta, but said nothing. He would not begin his time as Chass's consort by causing problems. He'd rather help Aria pitch the woman into the sea, but he would do his best to behave and get along.

They lapsed back into silence as they continued on through the palace. Instead of the public banquet hall where they usually ate, they headed down a wide hallway that ran alongside it, to one of the many private dining rooms that surrounded the main public one.

When they arrived, announced by a herald, everyone else was already there. Including Sarrica, who stood off to one side conversing quietly with High Commander Jader, a fierce and intimidating sight in formal regalia.

"Here we go, then," Allen said. "The guards will remain close by; neither I nor Sarrica trust this lot, save for Wessel."

"You won't find me arguing." With that, they pushed on into the room, making rounds slowly, chatting idly with every guest, as though there wasn't an undercurrent of tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

When they finally finished and reached Sarrica and Jader, Allen asked, "How did you beat me here?"

"I'm good at my job?" Sarrica replied.

Jader laughed. "The problem fixed itself before he arrived. I met him halfway to tell him not to bother."

"So you just came straight here?" Allen asked, brow furrowing.

Sarrica smiled, all mischief. "Maybe I found something else to do."

Allen sighed. "Keep your plotting to yourself then." He held out his hand, though, placing it in Sarrica's offered one, and smiled as Sarrica kissed the back of it. "When do I get to know what mischief is afoot?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Sarrica retorted. "One hint and you'll figure it out. Suffer."

"Brat."

Desmond laughed. "Commander Jader, it's good to see you again. How are Kamir and the children?"

Jader's face lit up at that, and he promptly launched into a story of the twins, a water garden, and some escaped ducks from the kitchen yards.

"Chiri and Chara are getting on entirely too well with our children," Sarrica said dryly. "To be completely honest, I can't tell who is badly influencing who, though I suspect I know the answer and can only blame myself."

"The whole palace does recall your childhood escapades," Allen said with a laugh. "Pity Lesto isn't here to recount all of them for us."

Sarrica sighed. "I'm sure he'll find another opportunity."

Allen glanced at the clock on a nearby wall. "Should we begin?"

"We have one more guest yet to arrive," Sarrica said, even as the small gong by the door sounded to signal the arrival of an important figure.

"You didn't," Allen said, at the same time the door opened.

To admit Chass. In full Gaulden regalia. He wore fitted dark blue pants and brown ankle boots decorated with gold chains, a sleeveless tunic of cream and ocean green stripes threaded with lines of shimmering gold, cut asymmetrically and slit up one side to the hip, the longest point ending at mid-thigh. The ends were trimmed with bands of dark blue and green, embroidered with an elaborate geometric design of squares and circles. The same colors and pattern also made up the sash wrapped around his hips, further decorated with a gold chain from which hung several ocean-themed charms. Black pearls gleamed in his ears, and there were gold bands around his upper arms, cuffs at his wrists, multiple rings on his fingers, and the high, stiff collar of his tunic had been folded and pinned down to show-off the torc in pride of place around his throat.

His skin still completely lacked the warm gold tone it normally possessed, and he walked far more stiffly than usual, but he was otherwise as breathtaking as ever, standing out even in a room full of beautiful people. He looked like a storybook pirate, and Desmond would be delighted to be his hostage.

Not even excusing himself, Desmond crossed the room and stopped right in front of him. "You didn't tell me you were coming to dinner!"

Chass smirked every so faintly, even as his eyes drifted briefly past Desmond's shoulders, probably at Sarrica, whose mischief suddenly made sense now. Returning his attention to Desmond, he said, "I was invited last minute by His Imperial Majesty. That's why I'm a bit late." He offered a hand, and Desmond placed his own in it, breath hitching ever so slightly at the look in Chass's eyes as he saw the ring Desmond had chosen. "That is the one I thought would most suit."

"Then you could have just sent that one, you *gooseberry*."

"You're the one who has to wear the ring; it should be your choice. *Gooseberry, really? What are we, children?*"

Desmond laughed softly and leaned up to kiss the corner of his mouth. "Depends on the hour and the day."

"Fair enough," Chass said gruffly, and turned his attention to the rest of the room, which had gone so quiet Desmond could have heard a feather fall.

"Your Highness," Wessel said, stepping forward with a smile. "I had heard you'd taken severe injury. It is good to see you are well on your way to recovery. I am sorry you had such a terrible time in Benta."

"It wasn't all bad," Chass said gruffly. "I gained a fiancé out of it."

That drew several sharp intakes of breath, as the ramifications struck the Bentan delegates.

What happened next, Desmond could never recall later. One of the delegates, Lord Henry Barlow, moved forward. There was a glint of metal. The bodyguards and the guards posted around the room all cried out and moved—

Then Chass was in front of him, even as bodyguards pulled him back, and in the next moment Chass had Henry pinned to a wall with an arm across his throat, and a pair of knives tumbled to the floor.

"Pathetic," Chass said, sounding every bit like the Captain of Penance Gate rather than the gruff but affectionate man he'd been just a moment ago. Desmond watched him through the wall the bodyguards that had formed around him. "What did you hope to accomplish here?" Around them, the guards rounded up the other delegates.

Desmond couldn't help but notice that only two of them, Wessel and Lady Veronica McCarthy, seemed genuinely upset by the turn of events. "Did... did he just try to kill me?"

"Yes," Chass said.

Desmond was already distracted by something far more important. "Chass, you're bleeding."

"Then I'll bleed, at least until I figure out where Kettermane is hiding and rip his fucking head off," Chass said. "You can tell me, or I can force you to tell me. Which is it going to be?"

Before Henry could reply—not that he likely could, given Chass was all but choking him—Jader and Sarrica joined him. "Let him go, Your



Highness. You're not a soldier anymore. Jader is the one I pay to handle these bastards. Let him take care of it."

For a moment, Chass didn't move. Then with a snarled curse, he drew back, grabbed Henry by the front of his shirt, and threw him at nearby guards.

"Come on, we need to get your wounds looked at," Desmond said, not giving Chass a chance to argue, simply dragging him to the door.

"Return to your chambers," Sarrica said. "I'll have the healer sent there."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Chass said, the words containing a bit of bite.

Desmond didn't smile, but it was a near thing. Once they were in the hallway, he said, "Now, now, I'm sure you'll get to beat someone up eventually."

Chass cast him a look but didn't say anything.

"I do wish they'd waited until *after* dinner to try and kill me," Desmond said with a sigh. "I was really excited to eat dinner with you, in a formal setting, showing you off as my fiancé. I can't believe His Majesty managed to invite you."

"We crossed paths in the hallway after I left your room," Chass replied, face clouding, as though he wasn't entirely certain of what had transpired even as he recounted events. "He wanted to know how I was, and why I was wandering around. I told him what had transpired, since there seemed little point in not telling him, and he told me to come to dinner, but to arrive last minute for the impact."

Desmond laughed. "No wonder he seemed so pleased with himself, managing to maneuver pieces while keeping Allen in shadows. How is your arm?"

"Fine. It looks more dramatic than it is. I doubt it'll even require new stitches, since they were due to come out tomorrow anyway."

"What about the stab wound?"

Chass cast him an exasperated look. "I'm *fine*."

Desmond rolled his eyes. "Forgive me for not believing a man who insists he's fine while he still has arrows sticking out of his back."

"You're as bad as all the rest."

"Oh, no, all us terrible people worrying about you," Desmond said with a laugh. That got him a cranky look and stony silence, which only made Desmond laugh harder.

Chass rolled his eyes.

They drew more than a few looks as they walked through the palace, though Desmond was sure the blood on Chass's clothes and running down his bare arm was the reason for most of them. More than a few though definitely noticed his ring, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't preen a bit.

He'd always dreaded the day he'd be forced to marry. Funny how now it was making him happier than he could ever remember being.

As they reached the enormous doors that led to the imperial wing, one of the Fathoms Deep guards said, "Your Highness, Captain Aria passed through here recently and hasn't come back through."

"Thank you," Chass replied.

Sure enough, as they continued on down the hall where Chass and Desmond's rooms were located, they saw Aria walking toward them. "Oh, they said you were at dinner," Aria said, coming to a stop as she reached them. She glanced at his arm and sighed. "What fight did you pick this time?"

"The Bentan delegates, most of them anyway, tried to kill me. Right after Chass announced our engagement. My impression is they succumbed to panic. Chass saved me, as he seems to have made a habit of doing."

"Everyone but himself," Aria said wryly, and leaned in to kiss his cheeks, then his mouth. "You're not in the military anymore, you useless pretty boy. Stop getting into fights."

"Shut up, Aria."

Aria turned to Desmond. "Congratulations on your engagement, Your Majesty."

"Thank you," Desmond said. "You should come along with us. Chass can tell you about our tattoo idea while he gets patched up."

"Oh, intriguing," Aria said. She immediately did a smooth heel-turn and led the way to Chass's room, where the guards laughed and saluted her before greeting Chass and Desmond.

Chass unlocked his door and pushed inside, closing it behind them all. Lamps with stained-glass shades were lit around the front room, which was now warm and cozy, a comforting room for studying and relaxing, rather the mess it had still been when Desmond had helped move Chass's belongings. The scents of flowers and beeswax drifted on the air, only adding to the comforting feeling.

Someone knocked on the door, and Aria waved for Chass to sit down as she went to get it. Opening it, she stood back and let Master Farrtaala enter. She immediately scowled when her eyes landed on Chass's bloody arm. "Why can't any of you listen to me?"

"Apologies," Chass drawled. "Next time I'll stand there and let my fiancé be stabbed to death."

"Oh, be quiet," Farrtaala said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Desmond helped Chass out of his robe and under robe, setting them aside to hopefully be salvaged, as it would be a pity to throw it out, then sat down as Farrtaala set to work. As Chass had said, the wound on the back of his left arm had torn open slightly and required minimal work to repair—and, as he'd predicted, it did not require stitches, and Farrtaala went ahead and removed the rest of the stitches while she was there.

When she was done and had cleaned up, she stood over him with hands on her hips. "There, all fixed *again*. Try harder to keep it that way."

"Yes, Your Highness," Chass replied.

Farrtaala narrowed her eyes at him, but her lips twitched with a smile. "Let me know if you require anything for pain—anything at all, you stubborn ass." She turned to Aria. "If he won't tell me, you had better."

Aria saluted her, and with a last harumph, Farrtaala departed.

Leaning against the door, covering a yawn with the back of one hand, Aria said, "So what's this about tattoos?"

"I didn't want to do any Bentan traditions for our wedding, but I thought tattoos would be nice. One for me and Chass, one for the two of you..."

Aria's face lit up. "I love it! Patici will love it even more! She'll probably want one for the two of us as well." She laughed, love and fondness filling her face. "Have you thought of what you want for the designs?"

"No, we're leaving that to you, so maybe you'll stay out of my hair for more than five minutes," Chass said as he rose and vanished into the bedroom, taking his bloodied clothes with him.

"That man," Aria said, rolling his eyes.

Desmond smiled. "Let him have his bluster."

"I would never dream of taking it away from him," Aria said, then pushed away from the door and prowled toward Desmond with a particular

glint in her eye. "So it's safe to say you have no issue with my relationship with Chass."

"Of course not."

"Good." Aria grabbed the front of his jacket, reeled him in, and kissed him like her life depended on it. Goddess could the woman kiss. She was bold and handsy, tongue sweeping and claiming his mouth, giving no quarter, accepting nothing less than a surrender that Desmond was delighted to give.

He also enjoyed the heat of her body, those breasts against his chest. The cock grinding against him was unexpected, but he hardly had complaints. No, he could not have mustered a complaint if someone held a knife to his throat.

Well, maybe a small one for all the clothes they still wore, but that was a problem that would resolve itself at a later time.

Desmond drew a ragged breath as Aria finished and stepped back. "Do I pass muster?"

"You'll do," Aria said.

"I should have known you'd waste no time helping yourself," Chass said from the doorway. "Go be impertinent somewhere else."

Aria shrugged one shoulder, grinning without a single shred of repentance. "Come kiss me goodbye then, you whiny brat, and I'll leave you to romance our handsome king."

Chass rolled his eyes and sighed, but did as bid and crossed the room to give Aria just as thorough a kiss as she'd extracted from Desmond.

"See you later," she sang as she departed, the door closing with a muted click behind her. Chass locked it, then returned to the seat he'd used while Farartaala treated him. "I am sorry dinner was completely ruined."

Desmond shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't break my heart that I don't have to sit around a table having tense, meticulously orchestrated conversations that leave me more exhausted than going up a mountain in the freezing dark in the middle of winter. I'm sure we'll resume just fine at breakfast or lunch or whatever. All that matters to me is that you're all right. I don't want to see you get hurt anymore; there's been far too much of that already."

Chass smiled faintly. "If there is one trait I possess in overabundance, it's sheer stubbornness. I'm not going to be knocked down by a bunch of low-grade assassins." He lifted a hand when Desmond started

to reply. "I'll try to have more care, but I'll always put protecting you first. Nothing and no one will change that."

"I won't argue the stubborn part, that's for certain," Desmond said. How could this man have ever seen himself as a monster? His armor might be thorny, but beneath it there was nothing but softness. Desmond crossed the room and leaned against the edge of the table. "Hopefully nobody else will be trying to kill us, at least not anytime soon."

"That is the hope. Shall I have dinner brought to us?" Chass asked. "Or would you prefer to retire?"

Desmond laughed and nudged Chass's foot with his own. "I was going to come see you after dinner, anyway, why would I want to retire? Call for dinner. We can finally have ours. Quiet, peaceful, no snow, nobody hunting us down, we don't have to hunt it or steal it... should be positively novel."

Rising, not looking at Desmond, probably to hide the smile that wouldn't be smothered, Chass went to obey.

## Chapter Twenty

Chass ate his breakfast, listening absently to Keeta's excited chatter. He felt bad that between his recovery and Desmond, he hadn't actually had much time to devote to Keeta. He was here now, though, settled into the spare room; scheduled for fittings for clothes, shoes, and more; he had an assessment that afternoon to establish where his tutoring needed to begin; and of course tutors had already been selected for all the forms and manners and protocols that came with being a royal prince.

If Keeta was daunted by it all, he gave no show. Chass had tried asking, but all he got was a list of excited questions. He'd never met a child so eager to throw themselves into the fray. It was an admirable and endearing trait, and if anybody took that away from Keeta, Chass would flay them—slowly.

"So what are you off to do today?" he asked, glancing briefly at Sarai, the Penance Gate soldier he'd assigned as bodyguard—one of three, on a regular rotation, all young and relatively fresh, far better equipped to keep pace with an eager, excited child.

Keeta started in on a whole new list, while Sarai used hand language to convey they were going into the city for fittings and shopping, and then back to the palace where, despite his very long list of to dos, Keeta would probably sleep until dinner.

Chass's mouth twitched. "Sounds like an exciting day, Keeta. Don't work your bodyguards too hard, all right? They can't keep you safe if you're always running off and not paying attention."

"I'll do my best," Keeta said, pouting ever so slightly. "In the village no one cared where I went."

"In the village you were not the potential future crown prince of Gaulden," Chass replied. "There are people who want me dead or suffering, and they will kill or hurt you to get to me. They will also kill Sarai first, as well as Tamith and Enni. Understand?"

Keeta sighed, but nodded and said, "I do. Can I have more of this?" He pointed his spoon at his empty bowl of honey-drenched porridge, and Chass signaled a nearby servant to serve him more before pushing away his own empty plates and rising. "I'll see you tonight, Keeta. Sarai, thank you."

He nodded to the woman who'd been serving them, let Sarai help him into his jacket, and headed out, his own bodyguards falling in around him.

The walk was slow and painful, but he refused to be carted around in a wheeled chair. It took away more of his control than he could handle, no matter who was guiding the chair. At least his scowl still worked, sending anyone who considered asking him banal questions or offering unneeded assistance scurrying off. The very last thing he needed right then was the distraction of idle chatter.

His mind was caught in a whirl, spinning largely between his looming tests—which he still considered a stupid waste of time—his dinner the previous night with Desmond, and Allen. Who'd recommended him as the best marriage candidate for Desmond. Who hadn't seemed angry when he'd shown up unexpectedly to dinner. Who'd ordered these stupid golden tongue tests.

Who still had not returned his Tear, which Chass desperately missed, but a Tear once given could not be taken back, only accepted or rejected. Given the long silence and inaction...

Well, it wasn't like he'd expected acceptance—forgiveness—anyway. Who cared if he got exactly what he'd anticipated? It was what he deserved.

He had Desmond, though. Someway, somehow. Chass was still braced for that to be snatched away from him too, but for the moment at least, he could pretend at least one faint hope had come to pass. Desmond didn't hate him. Desmond wanted to marry him. It was even more stunning, somehow, than when he'd realized Aria really and truly wanted to be his friend. Saw something, someone, worth befriending in him.

If only the cost of having something he'd so desperately wanted wasn't Larren's life. There was nothing he could do about that. Holy Shammari had summoned him, and it wasn't Chass's place to question her decision. No matter how much he fucking hated it.

Though he still intended to have Kettermane's head the moment the stupid bastard slunk out of hiding.

The doors of the new Hall of Language loomed, open wide and fronted by palace guards, bustling with activity, many of the individuals wearing the new silver tongue pins, others very clearly students, and of course the usual flock of harried looking staff and messengers trying to

keep pace with the demands of those who had no idea how hard it actually was to be the gears and cogs of the imperial machine.

The guards waved him on through, nodding in brief greeting before they turned their attention to helping out a stressed messenger and sorting out a squabble between clerks.

At the entry desk, the clerk smiled and spoke before Chass could get a word in. "Good Morning, Your Highness. Your exam room is ready and waiting. Would you like refreshment brought?"

"Tea, please. Spiced."

"Of course." They held out a ledger, and Chass signed it, to designate his arrival, presumably. Another clerk appeared and escorted him down the hall to a room marked with an elegant '5' in gold script. It reminded Chass of walking down university halls, though he'd only ever been there as a donor, never as a student. No, his mother had never allowed that, as it might take time away from his learning how to kill people.

Stepping into the room, Chass sighed softly and took it all in. Papers. Pen. Two seats on either side of a large table. A large window with a cushioned seat directly opposite the door, overlooking one of the countless gardens scattered across the palace. They'd been opened slightly to let in fresh air, and he could just hear the trickle of the fountain centerpiece depicting women dancing.

He sat on the bench, not really certain what else he should be doing. He hadn't exactly taken tests before, not like this. The few he'd taken in the military had always been in large rooms packed with fellow officers, and the practical exams had always been far more important than the written.

Normally he'd remain standing, ready to go at a moment's notice. Even now the back of his neck itched at being in a corner—easy to trap, easy to overtake—but he was in too much pain to stand for long, and his only other option was the table, and that would leave him even more vulnerable.

Hopefully this wouldn't take long. He could take the written portion, fail miserably, everyone would realize this was a waste of time, and he could go on with his day. Why had he even bothered? He should have just called the whole thing off.

Except that would mean defying Allen, and that he wouldn't do, not over something so trivial.

So abject humiliation it was.



Chass sighed and went back to staring out the window. The sleeves of his jacket had pulled up, revealing the pale, silvery scars on his wrists, a constant reminder of just how low he'd once fallen. On good days, they were also a reminder of just how far he'd come since that day. Most of the time, he simply hated them.

He was on the verge of leaving anyway when the door finally opened, and an older man with dark, nearly black skin and beautiful silvery hair stepped inside. He was dressed in green and yellow, and had the golden tongue pin on his breast. "Your Highness, I deeply apologize for the delay. There was some trouble I had to sort out, but that should not have interfered with your day."

"That's ridiculous," Chass said scathingly. "Everyone's day is interfered with by things beyond anyone's control. Apologies aren't warranted."

The man stared at him a moment, then his mouth quirked in the barest smile. "I appreciate your understanding, Your Highness." He motioned to the table. "If you would like to sit, we will begin. I confess I was honored when I learned I would be administering your tests. Mistress Karl had high praise for your skills, and you are the first we'll be testing in Harken hand language, which we hope will draw in more who do not realize it's an option, as it never has been considered a silver tongue qualification before. We have three others waiting to take the exam, but that won't happen until next month, for various reasons. So you are the first, we're quite excited."

Chass had no idea what he was supposed to say to that, so he settled on the tried and true, "My honor to serve. You are...?"

"Oh, my apologies. My wife and sire are always getting on me for my forgetfulness. Master Hashti, at your service, Your Highness. Shall we begin?"

"Of course." Chass took his seat and prepared his pen as Hashti slid the first exam across the table. At the top was the test being given, the date, and places for both him and Hashti to sign when the exam was complete, testifying it had been administered accurately and fairly.

It was also marked as number three out of seven. Likely the first two were Gaulden and Harken. They were really going to waste everyone's time five times over? Chass stifled a sigh and set to work; the sooner this was over, the sooner they could all move on with their days.

The exams went surprisingly quickly. Had they given him easy ones? But no, they wouldn't risk such a thing. Manipulating results would tarnish their reputation barely before they even had one. Maybe the system had changed, and these were the first round of exams and they got progressively harder?

As he went on, though, that didn't seem to be the case. Five hours after he'd started, and with only a couple of short breaks, he was finished with the written portion. He flexed and stretched his fingers as he sat back after finishing the last one.

Hashti signed it and set it aside with all the others. "Shall we break once more, Your Highness, before continuing on to the practical exams?"

"All right," Chass said. Hashti departed, taking the tests with him, and Chass returned to the window seat with his spiced tea in hand. Morning had turned to early afternoon, and it would likely be early evening before he finished the tests. Surely this was normally spread over a handful of days? Not that he was complaining. This farce needed to be over hours ago, so at least it would be over in a single day.

A servant appeared with a light lunch and more tea that was as good as the stuff he drank back home, something he'd never encountered before, despite all his years living in Harkenesten. After he'd eaten, and his tea was refilled yet again, Hashti returned and they set to work on the oral exams.

They were more difficult than the assessment he'd taken, but still not as difficult as he'd expected. He only faltered once, on a particularly tricky bit of Bentan, but otherwise even he had to concede he did rather well. Maybe they *had* manipulated the tests.

By the time they were finally finished, it was well into early evening, as anticipated. An entire day spent sitting in a room answering questions and having banal conversations. Well, that would be a significant part of his life once he was king. Once he returned to Gaulden, period.

He vastly preferred it to having to kill again. To being the monster.

"Give me just a few minutes, Your Highness, and I'll have your results."

Chass frowned. "Doesn't that normally take a few days?"

"Our honor to serve His Majesty the High Consort," Hashti replied with a smile. "Without him, this entire hall would not exist. Since his arrival, everyone has taken silver tongues much more seriously. We're organized now, a profession with credentials and designations, honors and

awards, just like every other. Whatever he asks, we do gladly and eagerly. He has requested you be given the highest priority. One moment and I'll return."

"At your leisure," Chass replied and having nothing better to do, returned to the window seat and people watching. Given the hour, the slowly falling dusk, the palace was busier than ever, gearing up for the banquet, the various fêtes and parties, private dinners, and more. The palace was always busy, but it was chaos incarnate, worthy of Holy Kero themselves, when the sun set.

Thankfully, he hadn't scheduled much of anything that day. He'd hoped to go visit Penance Gate, stop by his office to see how things were going, and to spend the remainder of the night with Desmond, as the negotiations with Benta had been postponed until Kettermane and the rest of the lot were brought to heel once and for all.

As it was, he'd probably go spend some time with Penance Gate and then retire. Hopefully tomorrow he'd be more productive. He really needed to go into the city to get some things done, but short of drugging his bodyguards and sneaking off, he wasn't going to be able to do that.

He turned from the window as the door opened, and Hashti stepped inside, followed by a woman he'd seen around and spoken to in passing, but didn't really know: Lady Seredia, Imperial High Speaker, head of the newly founded Imperial Order of Silver Tongues. The competition for the position had been fierce, and the choice apparently very close, though Chass always took such rumors with a heavy dose of skepticism.

"Your Highness, good evening. I'm sorry we've kept you prisoner here all day," Seredia said with a laugh as she bowed. "It's an honor to properly make your acquaintance."

"My Lady," Chass said as he rose and moved around the table to join them. "Is something wrong, that you are being troubled to speak with me?" Had he done that poorly after all? Well, that would teach him to be arrogant. He knew better.

Surprise filled Seredia's face for a moment, then she smiled. "No, nothing is wrong at all, Your Highness. I simply wanted to be one of the first to congratulate you."

"Congratulate me?"

Hashti laughed. "On your new golden tongue status, Your Highness." He held out a small black velvet box.

Chass tried to speak as he took it, but the words were lodged in his throat like a chunk of meat that hadn't been chewed properly. He opened the box and stared: a silver circle cut in half by a golden pen, engraved around the edges with the words *Ours is to Listen and to Speak*. Along the bottom were small, sharp lines of color to designate the languages he knew. Seven of them.

He was officially a golden tongue, a dream he'd given up on the moment his mother had forbidden it and sent him off to Penance Gate.

"Thank you," he finally managed. "I appreciate all you've done for me, on behalf of His Majesty. You've been most gracious."

Seredia scoffed. "Hardly gracious to do our jobs. I had no idea silver tongues ran in the family! Congratulations again, Your Highness. I'll have all the official paperwork sent on later this week, but you are officially a golden tongue, and it was our honor to serve."

Chass nodded and went through all the platitudes again, as Seredia departed and Hashti insisted on escorting him from the wing, even as his bodyguards closed in around him once more.

When Hashti finally left, Chass signaled they were going to return to his rooms. He still wanted to see Penance Gate, but he was tired and...he didn't know what. Too much was happening too fast, and he had no idea what to do with his new pin. New status. He was a crown prince from the bottom of the kingdom. Nobody cared if he was a golden tongue.

"How did it go, Your Highness?"

"How about you stop being nosy," Chass replied without heat, causing all his bodyguards to smile. The minute he swapped his armor for fancy clothes, everyone stopped being intimidated by him. If he wasn't so tired, it would annoy him more. "I'm a golden tongue now, though I'm not sure to what purpose."

They all congratulated him, looking far more excited about it than made sense, but Chass let the matter be.

Back in his room, he had someone send for a servant to bring him wine. It wasn't something he cared to drink often, but right then he could use it, if only to dull all the damned pain.

Unfortunately, he'd only just poured the wine when a knock came at his door. Stifling a sigh, Chass called for the knocker to enter. One of his guards stepped in and bowed. "Your Highness, His Imperial Majesty the High Consort is here and requests a word with you."

Chass's blood turned to ice, heart dropping into his stomach like lead, and the smell of the wine suddenly made him nauseous. "My honor to serve," he managed, and shoved the wine away before retreating to his bookcases, somewhat comforted to have them at his back. Across the room, his altar gleamed in the dying light, but it offered none of its usual comfort as the door opened wider and Allen stepped inside.

The door closed behind them, and it took everything Chass possessed to not run to his room to throw up everything he'd eaten and drunk that day. Allen was, as always, beautiful and perfect, the very definition of a leader, a high consort. He had been trained for such a role his whole life and flourished in it.

The same way Chass had flourished as a monster, even though it was never what he'd wanted to be. No, all he'd ever wanted to be was right in front of him. Allen had *everything* Chass had dreamed of being, and it had made him an easy target for all the pain and rage he'd held onto for far too long.

"Your Majesty," he finally managed. "How can I serve?"

"You don't have to address me so formally," Allen said quietly. "Certainly not here, not now, when I feel it is time you and I have a long talk. Sit, Chass, before you pull at your wounds again, and the healers kill both of us."

Though pride and training railed against it, Chass obeyed and took a seat, and couldn't deny, at least privately, that it made life slightly less painful. "What do you want, then? I cannot imagine that after all this time you suddenly want anything to do with me. I don't understand... well, anything that you've done."

"I don't understand *you*," Allen replied. "I remember every lash, every mark, every scar you left. I definitely remember that night you had *him* help you."

"That was my biggest mistake," Chass said roughly, mostly looking at the table, because he just did not have the capacity to take in the hate that undoubtedly filled Allen's eyes. "Of all the things I've done wrong, and there's many of them, letting Manda worm his way into the matter was by far the worst. I'm sorry for all of it, but especially for that."

Allen sighed. "Is it true, all the things I've heard? About what you endured in Penance Gate?"

Chass laughed, a cracked and broken sound. Why couldn't they all just leave him *alone*. He'd chosen this path himself, though, and Lanora wanted him to *talk*, so he supposed that was that. "Did Bateker beat and torture us? Did he drug me and rape me and keep me under his boot with the threat that if I defied him in any way, he'd do worse to the others? Yes. Over and over and over again. How do you make a man brutal? You brutalize him. It was Bateker's justification for everything, and he was good at brutalizing everyone, and the more powerful they were, the sweeter the breaking. Did I try to go to Mother for help? Yes. She wouldn't listen. She was convinced I was trying to weasel out of my role yet again and dismissed me." He dared to look up then, braced for pity, or disbelief, and after all these years, he still didn't know which one he hated most.

Instead, Allen was crying, his skin so leached of all color he looked ill, close to passing out. "Chass—"

"It's over," he said, looking away again. "Bateker made a monster but didn't collar it nearly as well as he thought. Now he's nothing but pieces of bone at the bottom of a river. I took command of Penance Gate and cleaned out the remaining rot. Once that was done, I turned to trying to fix or make up for all I'd done wrong. Whether or not I've succeeded..." He shrugged and spread his hands. "That's not for me to say." At the end of the day, a monster was a monster, whether it had ever wanted to be one or not.

Allen wiped his face. "I believe you. I'm sorry none of us was there for you."

Chass swallowed. Of all the things Allen could have said, Chass never would have guessed that. Hoped, maybe, but not expected, not in a million years. "I tried to ask Mother. When she cast me aside, I gave up. I should have thought to ask someone else, instead of lashing out at the nearest, easiest target."

"If I'd endured what you did, Chass, I don't know how I would have reacted. I'm not sure I would have survived it, to be honest."

"I almost didn't," Chass said. "Lanora found me while I was still bleeding out."

"Chass—" Fresh tears fell down Allen's cheeks. "I'm sorry you've been so alone for so long. We're your family. We should have been there for you."

"Well, I shouldn't have beaten you nearly to death," Chass said. "There's a world of difference between not being aware of a problem and

torturing someone. I *am* sorry, however little those words are worth." After years and years of trying, of working in silence, staying away because he felt he had no right to approach... One more knot in his chest unraveled, finally being able to say those three small words to the person who most deserved to hear them.

Allen pulled out a kerchief and cleaned his face, then tucked it away and smoothed back a few strands of escaped hair. "I'm glad you made it, Chass, that somehow you came out of that Pantheon-forsaken nightmare. I can't say it's possible to just sweep everything aside and forget everything, but... you've done a great deal for me, even when I had no idea you were doing it." He smiled ever so faintly, fleeting but true. "That seems to be your preferred method for doing many things. I can't ignore or dismiss that either. I've already lost one brother, and Pantheon alone knows where Manda is or what he's done. It's clear he was the real monster all along." Drawing himself up, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We can't change what's happened, but I don't want to lose my remaining brother, and I would like to see what we could manage going forward. So... so don't ever give me cause to regret this." He set a small box on the table.

Chass's chest lurched, sharp and painful, as he jerked to his feet. "Allen—"

But he was gone, the door closing quietly behind him.

Chass swallowed the lump in his throat and moved slowly around the table, hand trembling as he reached out to pick up the box, which was small and square, made of shimmery dark green velvet. Two in one day.

Picking it up, hands still shaking, he removed the top and cast it aside, then stared through blurry eyes at the object within: a diamond Tear. Forgiveness of the Wronged. Completion of the Penitent Path.

Chass yanked out a chair and sat, clutching the Tear tightly as he cried.

When the tears were finally spent, his face raw and sore, he went to his bedroom to clean up and change for dinner, though he didn't really have dinner plans at the moment. All he wanted was to not eat alone in his room for the thousandth time.

He'd just finished dressing when a knock came at his door. Desmond?

One of his guards stepped in as he bid them do so and bowed. "Your Highness, His Majesty the High King requests you come at once to the

dungeons. He requires your assistance in identification of prisoners."

"I'm on my way," Chass said, lingering only to put on the Gaulden torc and his new Tear, clutching it tightly and whispering soft prayers to Holy Prima and Holy Jenn. He added his signet ring and a few other pieces of jewelry, tucked a couple of daggers into their hidden sheaths, and finally headed out.

His bodyguards fell in around him, and though they gave him curious glances, none asked about the visit from Allen.

When he reached the heavy metal-framed double doors that led down into the dungeon, it was guarded by not just palace guards, but Fathoms Deep, all of them armed to the teeth. "Your Highness," one of them said. "His Majesty and the Commander are waiting for you just downstairs."

"Thank you." Chass continued on, two of his guards taking the lead down the narrow stairwell, the other two taking up the rear. After years of being one of the most terrifying soldiers in the whole of the palace, it chafed to need a protection detail, but even Chass couldn't deny that right then, still recovering and in a great deal of pain, he wouldn't be able to fight off an angry butterfly.

Down in the dim lighting of the maze-like dungeon, Sarrica and Jader stood waiting as promised, locked in quiet conversation that ceased as they saw him. "Good, thank you for coming so quickly," Sarrica replied. "How are your injuries?"

"Injuries," Chass replied.

Sarrica laughed. His eyes dipped briefly to the diamond Tear, but he said nothing. "Come, I believe we have captured some rather important figures, but I want verification from eyes I trust. None of them is talking, probably the only smart thing they've done this whole time."

"My honor to serve."

"This way," Jader said, and headed down the hall as he pulled out a ring of keys. He motioned to the guards blocking the door and once they'd moved, unlocked it and threw it open. Chass followed him inside, to where two people were chained to the wall. The first was Geoffrey Davidson, the detestable captain responsible for the slaughter of Penance Gate. Chass wanted to break his face into a thousand pieces.

Instead he turned to the other figure—and was across the room without thought, slamming a fist into the bastard's face before wrapping a



hand around his throat. "You. You killed my brother, and now I'm going to kill you." The things he'd done to Bateker had *nothing* on what he was about to do to this sniveling rat.

"Chass!" Sarrica bellowed, even as Jader and two guards dragged Chass off Kettermane.

Thrown by the way Sarrica had used his given name so casually, Chass forced himself to look away from Kettermane. "I'm going to take his head, and not a one of you is going to stop me."

"Believe me, I wouldn't lose sleep if you did," Sarrica replied. "One less piece of warmongering trash in the world doesn't strike me as a problem. *However*, we do need him alive for now. We can't negotiate successfully if they learn I'm letting my people murder theirs, even if the bastard deserves it."

Across the room, Kettermane was a mess of blood as it poured from his nose and down his body, dripping onto the floor where fabric didn't soak it up. It was a good start, but Chass would be much happier if he'd been allowed to finish the job. "Fine. I'll let him be."

"Let him go," Jader said, and the guards obeyed, leaving the room again at the sharp jerk of Jader's head. "It's not like you to be so brash. So this is definitely Kettermane?"

"Yes, that's Kettermane, leader of the world's sorriest rebellion, and the one who paid Iron Moon to assassinate the High King and Consort." They'd failed their mission, but unfortunately not enough. Chass curled his fingers into fists and then forced himself to relax them. "When we finally breached the fortress, he was standing over Desmond. I believe their plan was to behead him, in keeping with the old tales, but I cannot say for certain. When they realized we were there, there was a woman who got him out, First Lieutenant Bethany, I believe, though I did not learn her name until later. She's been highly instrumental to him and the rebellion. Hopefully you find her."

"Oh, we will," Jader said.

"The other one is Geoffrey Davidson, the captain responsible for slaughtering my people while we sailed for home." He stared at Davidson and added, "Also, according to His Majesty, fairly well known as an abuser and rapist, so I doubt Benta will be wanting him back either."

They had Kettermane. Who never should have been anywhere close to Harken. What had he been doing? Who had sold him out? Because

someone must have—that was the only way they could have caught him.

In the next beat, though, Chass remembered that wasn't his problem. He didn't have to care about any of this anymore, by command of the High King himself. Even if he was down here assisting, that assistance was trivial at best.

There was also that if they had Kettermene, the rebellion as a whole would not last much longer. They'd removed the head of the snake.

That gave Desmond a great deal more power than he'd had just minutes ago. Enough power he wouldn't necessarily *have* to marry. The backing of Harken would be sufficient with the threats negated.

Desmond had also made it clear he didn't want to go back to Benta. That his choice was Chass and Gaulden. Now it *was* a choice, at least more than it had been before. It was hard to believe that something else was going Chass's way, but he could hardly deny that it *was*.

To the very bottom of the Penance Realms with Kettermene and all the rest of them. Everything they'd done, everyone they'd killed, had been for nothing. Desmond would still win, Benta and Harken would not return to war, and Kettermene would die knowing that.

Chass stared at Kettermene again. "I hope they hang you, and I hope the drop is too short to break your neck."

"Both of you *get out*," Jader said, all but shoving them. "You did what was needed, now go away. The last thing I need is either of you getting wounded because one of these bastards managed to slip their chains. Lesto and Allen would never let me hear the end of it. Go, go, go."

"Yes, Commander," Sarrica drawled. "Come along, Your Highness. If you've no plans for dinner, I'd like you to join us at the high table. There is much to discuss before we deal with Benta once and for all, and as you are now mostly capable of walking around, I feel you should be present."

Chass hadn't wanted to eat alone, but he didn't know that he was feeling that adventurous. One thing to join a private meal simply to reinforce Desmond's position. Another to eat at the imperial high table for all the world to see.

Holy Prima, this day had already included far too much tumult. He wasn't certain he could take more.

As if in prelude to the meal he was about to face, everyone they passed in the halls stared and whispered to see Chass with the High King

but not in uniform. There would be the same ridiculous politics at home, but they'd be at a far more bearable level than in Harkenesten.

He wasn't surprised when they stopped just outside the private entrance behind the banquet hall that let Sarrica, Allen, and their other guests come and go quietly, without having to walk the entire length of the enormous banquet hall. He was even less surprised when Sarrica dismissed all the bodyguards.

"I see Allen gave you that Tear he's been holding onto for some days now," Sarrica said. "Do anything to make him regret it, and it will be the *last* thing you do, understand me, Your Highness?"

Chass bowed his head. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good," Sarrica said gruffly, and gently gripped his shoulder. "Then it's Sarrica, and now let's go greet our men and put the fear of the Pantheon into Benta, shall we? Be *you*, Chass, but every now and then, if you want to remind them, just a little bit, of what you recently retired from, by all means."

Chass smirked. "My honor to serve."

Sharing the smirk, Sarrica dropped his arm and stepped away. "Then let's go enjoy dinner."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Desmond looked up from his conversation with Charlaina and Jader as the door opened, and for the second time in recent history, he got to enjoy the surprise of Chass showing up unexpectedly for dinner. "Excuse me a moment, please." He hastened off, barely noticing the amused smiles the other two shared, and braced his hands on his hips as he reached Chass. "You really need to start telling me when you're coming to dinner."

"It's not like I knew," Chass said with one of his soft, barely there smiles. "I was summoned to identify a couple of prisoners, and then His Majesty dropped a surprise invitation on me again. By all means, chide him."

"Maybe not," Desmond said with a laugh, and turned to greet Sarrica, who didn't appear remotely concerned that Desmond had broken etiquette by not greeting him first. "Your Majesty. Allen tells me you have Kettermane in custody."

"And the bastard who killed so many of Penance Gate when they were sailing home. I believe we'll have a few more in custody before the night is out. Shall we sit to dinner?" When they nodded, he strode over to Allen to greet him and kiss him softly, and then the large group scattered about the room gathered around the enormous table, Allen and Sarrica at the head.

It was quite the assemblage, though from Benta, only Lord Wessel and Lady Veronica were present. The others, so far as Desmond knew, were still locked up—one for trying to kill him, the rest on suspicion of being party to it. Only Veronica had been cleared, largely on Wessel's word.

Lord Hibiki was also there, taking the seat on Desmond's left.

Desmond took his seat and couldn't hide his pleasure when Chass wound up sitting next to him. Maybe not so last minute an addition after all.

A sparkle caught his eye, and his eyes widened as he noticed Chass was once again wearing a teardrop—this one a brilliant white diamond. Desmond smiled. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you," Chass said gruffly.

Desmond's smile turned into a grin. "There's also a rumor going around that you're an official golden tongue now."

"Yes, there's been a great deal of scheming going on while I was too bedridden to do anything about it," Chass said.

Desmond laughed and pressed a hand to his cheek. "Oh, no, the target of shenanigans instead of the instigator, whatever will you do?"

Chass cast him a look. "Have you been spending time with Andalori?"

"Just Aria," Desmond said. "She and her wife are lovely."

"Don't worry, they'll rid you of that notion soon enough," Chass replied with another of his whisper smiles.

Desmond could easily converse with no one else the rest of the night, but he was a former king and a future consort, so he should probably act like it and converse with the other guests at the table. Thankfully, Allen seemed content to hold more serious matters until later in the meal, leaving them all to converse idly while they worked through the several courses of the elaborate meal. "I suppose I should get used to all this spicy food. We are not nearly so adventurous up north."

Across the table, Jader and Kamir laughed. "You'll get used to it, I've every faith," Kamir said.

"Especially since the entire army knows that Chass likes his food spicy enough to kill," Jader added, laughing again at the glare that got him. "It's true and you know it."

Chass said nothing, only continued eating, but the twitch at the corner of his mouth was a dead tell he was trying not to smile. Would there come a day when he no longer felt he had to hold all his smiles back? Desmond hoped so—to see that day come would be worth any price.

"I do hope the next course is a little cooler," said Lady Veronica said ruefully. "I am a long way from accustomed, delicious though it is. Lamb, I think?"

"Yes, lamb curry with samosas," Chass replied. "Harken in general is more known for its seafood dishes, but lamb is a favorite in the high court."

Desmond was fairly certain lamb was *Sarrica's* favorite, which amounted to the same thing, in the end, but was an interesting detail nonetheless. "I'm looking forward to the dessert course; there's a great many fruits and such we simply cannot get in Benta that I am eager to try. Coconut, for one, though I think coconut milk has been in some of these dishes?"

"It's used heavily, yes," Chass replied. "Whatever you don't find a chance to try here, I'll make sure you try it back home. The cooks will be delighted to deviate from my mother's rigid schedules."

"I admit I do not miss that rigidity," Allen said.

Kamir smiled, exchanging some look with Chass, a silent conversation to which no one else was privy. It seemed to make them both happy, though. "My mother was the same way with food, always a set meal for every day of the week, with little to no variation, even on holidays. The only exception was when she wanted to show off. I got supremely tired of the beef curries she favored; they were mostly tomato and rather bland."

"Sounds like the mutton stew popular in the northeastern parts of Benta," Desmond said. "Tomatoes weren't something we saw often at my end of the country. Potatoes, though, those we had in piles. Potatoes and mutton, all year long. Monasteries aren't much for creativity either."

"It must have been strange, Your Majesty, returning wholly to your royal life after so many years as a monk," Veronica said. "You handled it with grace, but I always did wonder if it was hard for you. Simply did not seem like the kind of question one asked a king."

"One asked my father or brother, you mean?" Desmond asked wryly. "No, talking to them like they're human was a good way to get backhanded, trust me. As to your question, though, yes, it was difficult. Hopefully I make a better consort than I did a king." He briefly covered Chass's hand with his own. "Goddess willing, by the time we arrive in Gaulden, I'll be able to speak the language without embarrassing myself."

Chass smiled then, really smiled, and Desmond's heart skipped with the delight of it. "You'll be fine. You are one of the most accomplished golden tongues in the room, after all. Between you and the High Consort, I think you've got every language on the continent covered."

Desmond smiled back, but before he could reply, a servant banged the gong, and all eyes turned to the head of the table.

"Lord Wessel, you heard our proposal earlier. Have you had enough time to think upon it?"

"I still think it's far too grand a post for me," Wessel replied, "but the brutal truth is that I see no better options. If King Desmond cedes his throne willingly, with no coercion from Harken or other parties, I will accept it. We both want what is best for Benta, and the rebels are most definitely not it." He lifted his cup of wine. "So tell me the demands. I assume that's why

we're here, in addition, of course, to celebrating a certain engagement." He tipped his cup to Desmond and Chass. "Congratulations. I hope you'll be happy in Gaulden." He laughed. "That's as far as you can get from Benta and still be on the continent. If the goal is to be left alone, I think you'll succeed."

Desmond smiled. "Thank you, Wessel. The goal is simply to be where Chass is; political machinations just make it easier to get what I want for once." That got a round of laughs, and then he turned more serious. "I want peace. Benta doesn't need to be dragged into further wars. No fights with Harken, with Cartha, and no interfering with Soldonir."

"Of course," Wessel replied. "Those aren't even really concessions; it was already the plan."

"I don't know what the plans for Kettermane and the others are," Desmond said. "That's no longer my problem, not if this agreement goes through. Should they be taken back to Benta, they're to be stripped of all their wealth, privilege, and power. I want them left with nothing."

Wessel hesitated there. "I don't know what's to be done with them yet, either. That's an entirely different negotiation to take up once this matter is settled. I promise they'll be left unable to threaten anyone, one way or another."

"Fine. I require proof, whatever you decide."

"Agreed. What else, Your Majesties?"

"I want the military reduced," Sarrica said. "I don't want Benta fit for large-scale war for ten years."

"Five," Wessel replied immediately. "We're already severely damaged, there's no point in playing coy about it. I'm not going to leave us vulnerable for the next ten years, not when there are countries aplenty who will rush to take advantage of that."

"Ten years, and Harken's guaranteed protection and support," Sarrica immediately countered.

"No presence, though," Wessel said. "The last thing I need is Harken building garrisons across Benta. That won't accomplish anything."

Allen replied, "One small garrison in Bentamasura, so we can assure a quick response time should it be needed. If you agree, we can haggle the finer points later."

"Tentative agreement," Wessel said. "I'll have to hear the details before I can definitively promise anything."

"Fair enough," Allen said.

"I do have to ask that His Majesty revoke all claims to the throne and his Bentan citizenship."

Desmond bowed his head slightly. "Of course. All the paperwork is being prepared." He looked to Allen. "Should be ready in a few more days?"

"Some will be ready for signing tonight, and the rest in not more than two days," Allen replied. "It's the Bentan paperwork that's the most difficult, but thankfully, Kettermane's entourage included suitable officials for that. We're just waiting on... details, is the easiest answer."

Desmond didn't roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. There was nothing quite as exhausting and frustrating as the intricate, tedious paperwork required for everything. The proper paper, the proper ink; seals and notaries, party signatures, witness signatures, official copies, archival copies, copies to be sent abroad... "Here's my chance to never have to deal with such paperwork ever again, and I'm diving right back into it. Should have run away with that handsome merchant who carted me off when I had the chance."

Chass laughed—really, truly, loudly laughed, clearly catching himself by surprise. "If I recall correctly that voyage didn't end well."

"It had a few perks," Desmond replied with a smile. It was entirely unfair he couldn't kiss Chass right then. Oh, well, he'd just have to enjoy himself all the more later.

Veronica stared, expression sharp and curious. "Did you really travel across Benta and Cartha all the way here to Harken? That must have been dangerous and exhausting, especially given the time of year. However did you do it so quickly?"

"We only made it as far as Cartha before Bentan forces got the better of us," Chass said shortly. "Much of the journey was done with sled dogs, an experience I am in no hurry to repeat."

Desmond laughed. "You big baby. We crossed the lake just fine, exactly as I promised."

"Lakes are for swimming and sailing, not sleds," Chass retorted.

Sarrica stared in horror. "I'm sorry, did you say *sleds*. You crossed a frozen lake on a *sled* being pulled by those overexcitable dogs Bentans love so much? Chass, I said you were to show caution."



Desmond did roll his eyes then. "Who would have thought the whole of the Harken Empire could be undone by sled dogs. It's perfectly safe."

"It is not," Chass said. "I could hear the ice cracking."

"Learning the safe portions from the dangerous is easy. You should try taking a sled along narrow mountain passages, where one wrong move will send you down a very long drop."

Sarrica, Chass, and Jader all looked pained.

"Oh, honestly," Desmond said with a huff. "You're only just recently retired from *Penance Gate*, and *you're* the High King and the High Commander. You've faced far worse than icy mountains."

"We don't travel them on sleds with out of control dogs," Sarrica said.

"They're perfectly obedient," Desmond said, rolling his eyes again. "You're all a bunch of babies."

Chass huffed. "I'm just glad there's no snow where we're going."

"Only the ocean, which everyone knows is perfectly safe," Desmond retorted.

"Oh, be quiet," Chass retorted, making the entire table laugh.

Wessel chuckled. "Now you have to tell us what 'perfectly safe' things you do in Gaulden, Your Highness. Your Majesty?" He glanced down the table at Allen, but his amusement faded as a soldier slipped quietly into the room and approached Jader, who dismissed him a short time later and went to speak with Sarrica and Allen.

Next to Desmond, Chass had gone still, his face taking on the familiar closed off, severe lines that were so familiar, and which Desmond was truly beginning to hate. He preferred the Chass who didn't feel a need to shut himself away from the world.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness," Sarrica said as he rose. "With me, please."

Stifling a sigh, Desmond set aside his napkin and rose, following Chass and the others from the room, across the hall, and into a small sitting room. Jader closed the door behind them and remained there.

"What's wrong?" Chass asked, voice gone entirely Penance Gate.

"Nothing, necessarily," Sarrica said, "but it was important enough to interrupt your dinner, for which I'm sorry. Jader's had soldiers scouring the city and surrounding areas, and we've captured a handful more of Bentan

rebels. One of them, a woman named Bethany, has asked to speak with Desmond."

"Absolutely not," Chass said flatly. "That's the woman who was helping Kettermane hold him when we breached the castle. She's former second in command of Bitter Frost. The only words she should be saying to anyone are prayers of apology to her Goddess."

Desmond raised his eyes to the ceiling, and then said, "Why is she asking to speak with me?"

"She didn't say precisely," Jader said. "Only that she'd like to speak with you while she can. She seemed... sad, mostly."

"Let her rot," Chass said.

Desmond gave him a look. "What if she wants to apologize?"

"What if she's a backstabbing *kashi* who wants to try and kill you again?" Chass retorted. "What if she's not worth your time after she vowed to protect you and instead was minutes from beheading you?"

"You make good points, but I'm still willing to speak with her, provided she can't get anywhere near me," Desmond said.

Chass gave him a scathing look, but he wouldn't argue further, not with Chass being Chass and that glittering diamond Tear he wore.

"Take them, then," Sarrica replied. "I'll return to dinner, but I want a full accounting later—and to speak with all the prisoners myself tomorrow."

Jader sighed. "Of course you do. I'm starting to see why Lesto retired so quickly once the decision was made."

"I'm fairly certain that had more to do with finally getting himself a pirate," Sarrica said with a smirk before spinning neatly on his heel and heading out. "Fair warning, he's coming to visit in a couple more days."

"Now you tell me," Jader muttered, even as the door shut on Sarrica's laughter. "Come on, then, this way. You'll get to see our dungeons, Your Majesty."

"It's really not 'Your Majesty' anymore," Desmond replied.

"Yes, it is," Chass said, the words *and that's the end of the matter* left unspoken, but loud and clear anyway. "Commander."

"Follow me," Jader said with a sigh. Instead of leaving the room, however, he went over to the enormous painting on the far wall. Reaching behind the right side of the frame, he pressed something that resulted in a muted click, then pushed and swung the frame out like a door—revealing an actual door behind it.

Chass's brows rose sharply. "I always wondered if those rumors were true. Stupid security risk."

"The benefits outweigh them, at least for now." Jader took out his heavy ring of keys and unlocked the door, beckoning them inside. Once they were in the revealed hall, dark and narrow, Jader reached out and grabbed a short bit of thin rope, pulling the painting back into place before he swung the door shut and locked it again. "Watch your step, there's a lot of loose and uneven stone around here; it's not exactly the kind of thing we can have easily repaired."

Though it was dark, there was still light to see by from cracks and crevices scattered about. The tunnels must run along many of the gardens and other open-air places scattered about the palace.

As they traveled further on, though, the light decreased, and Jader finally lit a lantern hanging on a hook at an intersection.

Thankfully, it didn't take long after that to spill out of the tunnels into... more dark, damp places, though these halls at least were better lit and clearly maintained.

Jader led them through the narrow, mazelike halls until they came to a door watched by two Fathoms Deep guards. "Anything?"

"She's been quiet since arrival, Commander."

"Unlock it, but don't seal us in."

"Yes, Commander." The rightmost guard took out his keys and unlocked the door, then returned the ring to his belt. He eyed Chass. "Want my sword, Your Highness?"

"No," Jader snapped before Chass could finish his emphatic yes. "Stop encouraging him, Mithti."

Mithti's mouth twitched. "Yes, Commander."

Jader led the way into the cell, and it closed behind them with a ringing clang and scraping metal.

The room was small, about the size of Desmond's bed—large for a bed, horrible for a room. Against the wall opposite the door, where she could be easily seen by the guards, was Bethany.

She'd come a long way down from the woman in Bitter Frost regalia cutting down her commanding officer and dragging Desmond from his dressing room. The woman who'd pretended to be his friend, and then stood by uncaring as he was beaten half to death.

Who'd discussed his beheading right in front of him, like he wasn't even there. *Who would you like to do it?* The way she'd clearly known that Kettermane wouldn't be capable of it but had dropped the matter easily, clearly uncaring about how horribly and painfully Desmond was about to die.

She was dressed in little better than rags, her clothes having clearly not fared well in her fight first for survival, and then to escape, torn and bloody and just plain missing in places. Her face was a mass of bruising, one eye swollen shut, her lips cracked and bloody. One arm was manacled to the wall, and the other was bandaged and secured in a sling. Effort had been made to clean her up, treat her wounds, but she still looked very much the way Desmond had felt when Bitter Frost had finally finished with him. Her hair had grown out into a matted, tangled mess. She looked so far from the woman he'd once called friend that she could have been a stranger.

He supposed she was at that.

"Stay close to the door," Jader said.

"I will," Desmond said, then finally turned his full attention on Bethany. "You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, thank you for indulging me. I'll be brief. I only wanted to say I was sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing, no matter how much I hated it. But in the weeks since, it's been made painfully clear that I chose poorly. So I'm sorry—for the betrayal, the murders, all of it. I don't expect it to make a difference, but I wanted to say it."

Desmond had no idea what to say. Part of him reflexively wanted to say it was all right, she was forgiven. The Goddess preached love and forgiveness above all else... but this woman had stood and watched as he was beaten nearly to death. She'd discussed *cutting off his head like what should we have for dinner*.

If the Goddess chose to punish him for the lack of forgiveness in his heart, so be it, but one apology didn't wipe away all the terrible things she'd done, the betrayal that had left still-healing wounds on his heart.

"I see," he finally managed. "I suppose an apology is something, and I'll certainly pass it on to Wessel—soon to be King Wessel—that you expressed remorse. I'm afraid that's all I can do."

Bethany didn't reply, merely looked downcast at the floor.

"I'd like to go now," Desmond said, abruptly feeling tired and thin. He wasn't remotely sorry all of this was no longer his problem. His only

problems were what to wear to the wedding ceremony in a couple of days, and if he'd be able to get his Gaulden to suitable levels before reaching his new home.

Also how long he had to wait until he could steal a few more kisses, but patience would reward him there.

Jader took the lead again, and in a short time he had them in a sitting room in the imperial wing. "I figured you wouldn't want to return to dinner."

"I really didn't, so thank you," Desmond said. "I doubt I was needed for further negotiations anyway, and thank the Goddess for that."

"Wish I was so lucky," Jader said with a wink. "See you later." He closed the painting and door they'd used that time as he vanished back into the tunnels, leaving them alone.

Desmond sighed. "Was it wrong of me? Not to forgive her?"

"It's your forgiveness to give or not," Chass said. "Not even the Pantheon themselves have the right to dictate that choice for another. You were the one wronged. You are the one who chooses if and when forgiveness is granted."

"What would you have done, in my place?"

Chass's mouth tightened before he finally said, "For her crimes? Penance must be paid in blood and pain. It is between her and your Goddess and whoever guides her on her path when there's been enough of both. It is up to Wessel and the others if she will get the chance to pay that price. Would you like me to escort you to your room?"

"Could we go to yours? I know you like your space—"

"You, like Aria, are always welcome there," Chass cut in with that tone of *obviously* that was so strangely endearing. "Maybe one of these days we won't be dragged away from an imperial dinner."

Desmond's levity snuffed out. "I'm sorry, of course you'd want to spend time with Allen, especially since—"

"It's fine," Chass replied. "I'll see him plenty while we're here, especially over the next few days. It's not like I was doing much anyway, other than whining about the crazy tendencies of Bentans to race over ice that could crack at any moment and plunge everyone into a freezing demise."

No longer curtailed by the etiquette of formal dining, Desmond burst into giggles. "You make it sound like the ice was as thin as a pane of

glass! It was at least as deep as my hand, we'd have had plenty of warning—oh, nevermind, you're just being a brat now, wipe that smirk off your face."

Chass's smirk didn't go anywhere. "No."

Desmond's heart sped up as he drew close and tilted his head up. There wasn't a huge difference in height between them, but just enough to be delightful. "Guess I'll have to get rid of it myself."

"You can try."

"Brat," Desmond repeated, then pushed up and covered Chass's mouth with his own, shivering at the hands that slid into his hair to gently cup his head, holding him fast at the tender mercy of Chass's talented mouth. He smelled like oranges and sunshine, and tasted like the wine they'd been drinking. Desmond slid his arms around Chass's waist and held on tight, perfectly content to stay right there, lost in Chass's kisses, as long as he breathed.

He might have whined when Chass eventually drew back, but he wasn't remotely sorry.

Chass smiled ever so faintly, most of it in his eyes, as ever. "Shall we adjourn to my room?"

"Yes— Oh, wait! I need to go to mine really quick. I'll meet you there." He darted off before Chass could ask, hastening out of the room and through the halls to his chambers, where he scooped up the package that had arrived late that morning.

Across the hall, he knocked on the door—but hadn't gotten the first knock out when it opened. "You can come on in," Chass said. "If I didn't trust you enough to enter my rooms as you wished, I wouldn't be marrying you."

Desmond smiled and leaned up to kiss the corner of his mouth. "Everyone can hear the *dumbass* at the end of your sentences, you know."

Chass scoffed, but was fighting a smile as he closed the door behind them. "So what did you need in your rooms?"

"Your present," Desmond replied, and held out the box, long and somewhat narrow, carved all over with birds, insects, and flowers that represented various deities of the Pantheon. He'd coordinated with Lanora so it would match the new prayer cards he was having made.

Predictably, Chass scowled. "You didn't—"

"Chass, say thank you like a normal person and enjoy your present."

Chass huffed. "Fine. Thank you." He took the box and opened it, carefully removing the rolled up prayer mat inside. He smoothed it out on the table, face shuttered like usual, but his eyes flame-blue as he studied it.

It depicted, in stylized mural form, a brilliant sun in the center, pushing away the darkness from encircling, snow-capped mountains. All along the edges was embroidered one of Chass's favorite prayers, along with a Bentan one that meant a lot to Desmond. The top and bottom were further decorated with delicate fringe in dark blue and silver.

"Thank you," Chass said again as he rolled it up and put it away. "It's beautiful. I like the prayers."

"You're welcome," Desmond replied, and preened shamelessly for a kiss, which he happily received. "I like doing this," he said, voice a husky whisper. "Kissing you is very, very nice."

Chass huffed a bare laugh. "Nice is the best I get? I'll have to try harder." Twining Desmond's fingers with his, he pulled him further into the suite, to a private sitting room where a tray of food waited, no doubt arranged by Allen shortly after they'd been pulled away from dinner.

Though the food smelled good, Desmond was vastly more interested in Chass, who dragged him down onto the sofa and pulled him in close before taking his mouth in another kiss, deep and thorough, and always gentle. Desmond definitely could not picture Chass as the type to play rough, which was fine by him. If he really had an itch for that sort of thing, he was relatively certain Aria would be glad to help. The thought made him chuckle.

Pulling back, nipping ever so lightly at his lips. "So now I'm funny instead of nice?"

"You are positively delightful, *beloved*. I was thinking you probably aren't the sort for bondage and whips and stuff—which I'm not either, so stop panicking—and I'm afraid that led to me to thinking that if I was ever in the mood for a spanking, Aria would probably provide. I'm sorry."

Chass stared at him, then laughed—and laughed, open and bright and beautiful, like he'd completely forgotten to hold anything back. It was the most beautiful thing Desmond had ever seen, except perhaps that moment when Chass had said yes about marrying him.

When he'd finished, Chass said, "I'll be sure to share your thoughts with Aria, who incidentally, yes, would be happy to beat your ass if that's what you'd like."

"Oh, Goddess, *don't*, I'll never hear the end of it," Desmond said, face burning. "I don't know why my thoughts wandered so strangely."

Chass gave him a look. "Given the way she kissed you the other day, and presuming you had no problems with it, I would say it's pretty clear how *she* thinks matters are going to go between the four of us. By all means, think what you like. You are correct though, I'm... relatively boring in my tastes. If that's a problem..."

"It's not, of course it's not," Desmond said. "I want you, Chass, however I can have you. If there's something you don't want or like, then I don't need it. All I want is you, for as long as I can have you."

"That will be quite a while," Chass said gruffly, and tugged him into another kiss.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Much like his furniture while he'd been confined to the healer's hall, Chass had a sneaking suspicion his wedding clothes had been commandeered from some poor bastard who would now receive their ordered items late. Not much he could do about it, though, except set his secretaries on the mystery and see the individual properly compensated, as Chass's wardrobe, extensive though it might be, despite seldom seeing use until recently, lacked clothes suitable for a royal wedding in the imperial palace. Who maintained wedding regalia when they'd been forbidden to marry, after all?

He still hadn't read his mother's letter, and since then another, much thicker envelope had arrived. Chass would have to read them soon, but he wasn't going to ruin his wedding day. He wasn't going to deal with her until he had absolutely no other choice.

Climbing from the tub, he dried off and went to where his clothes had been laid out on the bed. If they were in Gaulden, there would be a ceremony in the sea itself, vows sworn while the tide rushed about their legs. Likely they would do that when they reached Gaulden, so their people would be witness and party to the marriage of their new crown prince.

Or maybe his mother would forbid it and want him to draw as little attention as possible. A fight for later.

For now, he pulled on the ornate clothes. Doing so would be easier with help, but Chass seldom allowed such a thing, outside of soldiers helping him with his armor, which was a show of how much he trusted them and the only reason he bothered.

The pants were a rich cream color, fitted close and embroidered along the sides with various types of tiny seashells in silver and gold. The underrobe was a delicate shell pink with a faint shell pattern that echoed the stitching on the pants, and the primary robe was of a deep, jewel-toned aquamarine with a silvery plumeria pattern. All was secured with a sash of striped dark pink and green, and gold cord affixed with his various charms and tokens of state, a few religious ones for luck, fortune, health and so forth.

The shoes were the same aquamarine of the tunic, the ends curled, embroidered all over with delicate beadwork. He'd thought the clothes stolen, but the more he thought about it, the more these felt commissioned, especially given how well they fit. Such intricate work would have taken weeks, though...

Well, it hardly mattered. Whoever the plotting schemer was—Allen, likely—clearly their efforts had not been in vain.

Dressed, he went to the table where his jewelry was laid out: torc, large drop earrings of aquamarine, diamonds, and pearls, matching jeweled bracelets for his arms. For such a formal occasion, there was also his crown, though in Gaulden crowns had never been the tradition, merely an imported one used rarely. The ruling monarch traditionally wore a special collar necklace, the heir the torc, their respective spouses less ornate collar necklaces, and everyone else rings of state.

The last time he'd gotten married, it had been a quiet affair, though stately. There was supposed to have been a larger celebration later, when he returned from war, but instead he'd received divorce papers and an order from his mother banning him from marriage and ever having children. He couldn't blame her for that decision, but he also couldn't help resenting that she'd never even talked to him.

In the end, though, he'd only been relieved at the divorce. The marriage had been miserable. They'd both hated it and couldn't sign the papers fast enough. It was never being able to have children that had truly hurt, but what was one more hurt on the pile?

Hopefully this marriage, his own choice, despite the circumstances rushing the matter, would fair better.

Crown firmly in place, he finished by sliding his various rings onto his fingers—ring of state, a Harken ring, a military service ring, his Penance Gate ring, engagement ring, signet... He should have just worn his rings into battle—there was enough of them to suffice as crude gauntlets.

All that lacked was his cloak.

Even though he'd been retired from military service for months now, it still felt strange to go day after day without putting on his armor, without more than a few daggers tucked away on his person—which he was leaving off today, even though it made him twitchy to go around unprotected.

Out in the main room, the door flew open, and Aria called, "Let's go, pretty boy."

Rolling his eyes but smiling, Chass left his bedroom. "Look at you, then. Almost look respectable. Your mother would die of shock."

Aria scoffed, but preened slightly, clearly pleased with herself—and she should be, because the black and aquamarine ensemble that echoed his own looked damned fine on her. She was also wearing the triple rope of pearls he'd bought her a few years ago. "Ooh, la la," she said. "I like when I put that look on your face, but save it for the wedding night, pretty boy. Wouldn't want to deprive your spouse of anything."

"Oh, shut up," Chass replied, and kissed her. He was going to desperately miss her when he returned to Gaulden, and she had to remain with Penance Gate, but it wouldn't be forever, and Penance Gate always periodically returned to Gaulden, so he would see her intermittently—and his departure was months away yet.

Aria let the kiss linger a bit, then drew back. "Shall I help with your cloak?" She didn't wait for his reply, simply went to where it was draped over a nearby chair, the pins for it on the table. Plumeria again, a set Larren had gifted him years ago.

He wished Larren could be here—but if Larren were still alive, Chass probably never would have met Desmond, let alone be marrying him. It seemed unfair that two such important parts of his world would never meet and could only exist without the other... but all was as the Pantheon willed. Larren was gone. Desmond was here. All Chass could do was move forward.

Aria shook the cape out and set it to his shoulders. Chass reached up to hold it in place as she fussed with ensuring it was all shaken out and laying properly, like he wasn't going to sweep it right back up to walk through the halls.

When she was satisfied, she stood in front of him and pinned the cloak in place, left shoulder then right shoulder. "There, I dare say you'll be the most handsome man in the room."

"That's not true by half," Chass retorted. Not with Sarrica, Allen, Desmond, and several others in the same room. Not with his extensive scarring, and the fact rooms tended to drop in temperature when he arrived. The fact this was his wedding wouldn't change any of that.

Aria rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Be your usual stubborn self then." She dragged him into another kiss, then pulled away and said, "Come on,

your wedding awaits. Can't have you showing up late and offending the High Throne, your betrothed, and your precious Holy Whatever."

Chass sighed. "Holy Jenn and you know it, stop being blasphemous."

"No."

He rolled his eyes, but let the matter drop, refusing to give in further to her goading. In the hallway, she looped their arms together, and four Penance Gate soldiers fell in around them, led by Riker. "Bodyguard is a bit beneath your pay grade, these days, Lieutenant."

"Serving Your Highness is never beneath me," Riker replied.

Chass was absolutely certain they all had more important things to do, but he also wasn't going to complain that his few friends insisted on being at his wedding. It was far more than he'd gotten the first time. After that ceremony, and the resulting misery because he and his wife simply had not been able to get along, he'd been relieved that at least he'd never have to go through another marriage ceremony.

After his divorce, the only comfort he'd found was knowing he'd never have to marry anyone else. In the aftermath of killing Bateker, for a long time he'd just wanted to be alone. Later, he and Aria had become lovers. Then they'd been returning from assignment and wound up stuck in Rilen, and crossed paths with a gardener being harassed by local soldiers.

By the time they'd finally been able to return home four months later, Patici had agreed to come with them, and she and Aria had gotten married the following year. Chass had paid for the wedding, despite everyone's protests, because at the time, Aria's family hadn't been pleased with her marrying some peasant gardener instead of a peer as she 'should.' Thankfully, unlike most families in their position, they'd mellowed over the years.

Shortly after Aria and Patici had formed a serious relationship, Chass had naturally withdrawn—only to find that neither Aria nor Patici was tolerating that 'utter nonsense' as they'd put it. Since then, they'd both been his lovers.

Chass had been more than content with that arrangement, even with the rumors that ever swirled about him sleeping with his direct subordinate. It was more than he deserved, and he'd not been stupid enough to want more.

Not until he'd rescued a fallen king. Strange how something he'd disliked was now something he was looking forward to.

Given the ranks of the persons involved, and the gravity of the ceremonies taking place today, Sarrica had ordered all would take place in the primary throne room. As they reached it, the hallway buzzing with people, the doors still shut, Chass's nerves finally started to get the better of him.

What if there was another assassination attempt? What if Desmond realized this wasn't what he really wanted? What if—"Ow!" He glared at Aria. "Pinch me again and see what happens to you."

"Stop worrying yourself to death. You're so stiff you could pass for a statue."

"I'm fine," Chass hissed. "Stop annoying me."

Aria just smirked. "Penance Gate, stand down but remain watchful. Chass—"

"Not a word out of you." He walked off to mingle before she could finish the order to do precisely that, even though he'd rather find a corner and keep to himself until all this nonsense was over.

"Papa!"

Chass jolted at the word, even as Keeta ran toward him the way only children could, like they might die if they were forced to walk. He swept Keeta up and hugged him, then set him back on his feet. "You look good, Keeta. I'm amazed you held still long enough for them to get you into the fancy clothes."

Keeta laughed. "Barely. All these layers, don't they bother anyone else?"

"Don't worry, once we're in Gaulden you'll get away with wearing far less," Chass said with a smile. "I suspect I'll have a hard time getting you back out of the ocean."

"They won't let me play in the water here," Keeta said with a pout.

"The ocean here can be especially rough this time of year, and it's not for swimming if you don't have the experience. Which I'm sure every last one of your tutors has told you."

Keeta sighed in a way that said they had, and his suffering was both great and eternal. "Can we go into the city soon?"

"Tomorrow, in fact," Chass said. "I have it all planned." He tousled Keeta's hair and said, "Now run along so I can be polite and talk to other

people. I think you've some friends over there trying to catch your attention anyway."

Keeta turned, brightened, and immediately bolted off to join the cluster of children who had indeed been trying to draw his attention.

Chass chuckled softly and turned his attention back to the crowd. Thankfully, the nearest person was Lanora, who would be conducting the ceremony. He was dressed in full formal regalia of the Holy Temple of the Pantheon of Prima, white, purple, black, and gold. Marriage fell under the domain of Jenn, God of the Hearth, but all formal ceremonies were conducted in the name of Holy Prima, God of Life.

Per Desmond's wishes, no Bentan traditions had been incorporated. Across the hall, standing slightly apart, the Bentan delegates stood out in their more somber colors and severe lines. Handsome and striking, Bentan style never lacked, but it was in stark contrast to the softer lines and veritable rainbows favored across Harken.

"Chass," Lanora greeted. "Blessings of Holy Prima and Holy Jenn be upon you, and of course I have faith that Holy Shallana looks favorably upon you, one of her most devoted disciples."

"Thank you, Lanora—for this, and for everything."

Lanora's eyes sparkled. "Don't make that sound like a goodbye. You're going to be stuck with me for a while yet, *little fish*. Her Most Holy has said I may return to Gaulden with you, and I am not ashamed to admit that having the ear of the crown prince might help me find a position without too much trouble."

"You hardly need me for that," Chass replied, making a mental note to write to his mother about it, so the post would be ready when they arrived. He had no desire to cast someone else out to make room for his personal favorite, but a place could be found or made. "I am honored."

"Don't be. I love Gaulden, for all that I've enjoyed my time here in Harken and have learned a great deal, so this is more than a little self-serving."

Chass rolled his eyes. "Of course it is."

Lanora snickered. "I'll leave you to speak with others. I need to rehearse my lines a bit more, anyway. I've never done a wedding service this formal before. Lately the fashion has been gardens and bare feet and wispy string music, with an alarmingly expensive 'casual' air. Not my place

to judge, of course." He winked and departed, leaving Chass to be greeted by Wessel and Lady Veronica.

Wessel gave a slight bow, and beside him Veronica gave a deeper one, before he said, "Your Highness, best wishes for your wedding and every happiness to your future."

"Thank you," Chass said. "Looking forward to the later ceremonies?"

Laughing, Wessel said, "I don't know that 'looking forward' is the right term. It's all a bit much for me. I will be happy to see Benta back on the path back to peace. Your efforts to that effect will never be forgotten, Your Highness."

"My honor to serve," Chass replied.

Lady Veronica gave another bow and presented a small gift, wrapped in ornate green and gold silk, "A token of Benta's esteem, Your Highness, and apology for all the suffering and misfortune we have caused you, personally. We wanted to be sure it was not mistaken for a wedding gift. That has been placed with the others already."

"Thank you," Chass said, bemused. "It's deeply appreciated. I'm happy Harken and Benta are back to forging an alliance."

They moved on, and Chass tucked the gift away to open later as he spoke with the other parties assembled in the hallway, though he looked constantly for Desmond, who'd yet to arrive. Was something wrong? Was he having second thoughts? What else could possibly be keeping him?

A change in tone of conversations drew him from his fretting to find the source of it had arrived. He was dressed nearly the same as Chass, though in aquamarine and dark blue, confirming suspicions the clothes had been commissioned long before the decision to marry had been made. His accents were entirely silver, drawing out the color in his winter-gray eyes, and his hair had grown out enough by now to frame his face with hair that held the slightest wave when it wasn't weighing itself down, as blue-black as the finest inks in Harken. By rights he should have been wearing a crown, as he was still King of Benta, but the only decorations were diamond beads scattered through the strands like stars.

There were diamonds in his ears, shaped like stars, with sapphires at each inner point. Desmond's ears hadn't been pierced the last time Chass had seen him.

The only jewelry he lacked was something around his neck, but that was traditional, leaving it bare for the necklace of the consort he'd receive at the end of the ceremony. Chass had paid and paid well to have the wedding rings and necklace exactly the way he wanted—and ready in time.

Chass ignored the lulls in conversation as everyone put their attention on him and Desmond. *His* attention was solely for Desmond, for this fragile dream come true that he feared would be taken from him at any moment. He offered his hands as Desmond reached him, and when Desmond placed his own in them, lifted them to his lips, not quite kissing, as intimacy between couples on the day of the ceremony before it took place brought bad luck. "I like your earrings."

"I hoped you would," Desmond said with a smile. "Have to fit in with my new home, don't I? Little birds told me that earrings are quite the to do in the southern regions. You're as breathtaking as ever. I hope nobody has the sense to steal you away at the last minute."

Chass snorted. "I don't think anyone will be fighting you for the dubious honor of marrying me. If they had sense at all, it's you they would be trying to steal away."

Desmond rolled his eyes. "Uh-huh. So what good works and contributions did you make to pay forward your good fortune? Fess up, I know you did. That's not a tradition you'd overlook."

"I'm not telling you anything," Chass said, the back of his neck burning. "You're as bad as the others."

Desmond laughed, but before he could reply, the gong sounded, and those still gathered in the hallway vanished to take their seats in the throne room.

Chass offered his arm as they took up position with the other members of the wedding party. "Last chance to show some sense."

"I'm a former monk, Chass. I know when to heed what Her Most Holy Grace is telling me."

Chass smiled, and then the doors opened, the strains of the music Desmond and Allen had selected filtered into the hallway. At the signal of the footmen at the doors, Aria, Riker, Keeta, Lady Veronica, and Lord Hibiki headed off. After a few minutes, the footmen signaled again, and it was time. Chass and Desmond walked into the throne room at a slow, steady pace, walking the length of it across a wide runner of blue and gold



scattered with a rainbow of chrysanthemum petals, either side lined with candles in stained glass holders.

In place of the thrones was an altar, with honeysuckle and other flowers that marked Holy Jenn arranged around a statue of Them, with incense braziers on either side. Behind the altar and to Chass's left were Sarrica and Allen, resplendent in full imperial garb. Keeta stood between and just in front of them. If the rest of his family were present, they'd also be there. Chass was eternally grateful his mother wasn't here to ruin the day.

Opposite them, on the right, was Wessel in his equally resplendent Benta royal garb.

In front of the altar was Lanora, and in front of him were two blue and gold silk cushions. In front of them, close to the edge of the stairs, was a small brazier with gently flickering flames.

At the base of the dais, on the left side were Aria and Riker, Chass's honor guard for the ceremony. Traditionally they would have been the only two on his side to carry weapons, protecting him when he could not protect himself. These days, it was unnecessary, and with rare exception, weapons were forbidden in the throne rooms.

Opposite them were Lady Veronica and Lord Hibiki, serving as Desmond's honor guard, and as subtle demonstration that peace really was the main objective of the day.

As they reached the stairs leading up the dais, Chass and Desmond stopped and bowed their heads. The music faded, and Lanora said, "We gather here today to witness the union between Crown Prince Chassenta Dorian Alana Telmis of the Kingdom of Gaulden, territory of the Harken Empire, and King Desmond Terrence Byron Velarow of the Kingdom of Benta. Is there anyone present here who objects to this union? Speak now, or speak never."

Chass waited, tense and miserable, for the full minute to pass. When no objections came—not that they would have done much good—he relaxed ever so slightly.

Desmond cast him a look. "Chassenta?" he asked in the softest, barely-audible whisper.

"Why do you think I go by Chass?"

Lanora gave them a reproving look as he finished the first prayer and said, "In the name of Gaulden, is this marriage approved?"

Allen replied, "I speak for Gaulden, and this marriage is approved."

"In the name of Benta, is this marriage approved?"

Wessel replied, "I speak for Benta, and this marriage is approved."

"In the name of the Harken Empire, is this marriage approved?"

"I speak for Harken," Sarrica replied. "This marriage is approved. Carry on."

Lanora gestured, and Chass and Desmond rose together and climbed the stairs. When they reached the top, Chass knelt on the rightmost cushion and Desmond opposite him. The last formal step of approval taken, the wedding had truly begun.

Lanora had always possessed a beautiful voice; he drew many to his sermons, readings, and prayers, more than most of his peers. Here in the primary throne room, built to make voices carry, his voice was nigh on enchanting. Holy Prima must be pleased.

When he'd concluded the second prayer, Chass lifted his left arm and held it out toward Desmond, who did the same, so Desmond's hand rested on top of Chass's. Lanora wrapped their wrists in a string of flowers comprised of tuber roses, jasmine, and marigolds. He also twined a string of shells, the Gaulden tradition. Chass hadn't known they were going to do that. Allen must have arranged it.

That completed, Lanora stepped back and recited the next prayer. There were seven in total, for each of the admonitions of marriage: love, loyalty, trust, respect, faith, growth, and generosity.

As the latest prayer concluded, Chass tried to quell the sudden panic that rose up. After everything he'd done, everything he'd suffered and survived, wedding vows should be easy.

And yet.

"Prince Chass," Lanora said, "How do you vow?"

Staring into Desmond's eyes, soothed by the hand resting on his, Chass recited, "To honor and cherish the bond we forge today. To treat with loyalty, trust, and respect. To act in good faith, to grow myself and our bond, to share and spread the generosity granted me this day. In Holy Jenn's name, this vow I offer."

"King Desmond, how do you vow?"

Desmond repeated the words, never breaking their gaze, eyes like sunstruck silver, ending with, "Before Her Most Holy Grace, I do humbly vow."

"The vows are spoken," Lanora replied, and moved smoothly into the next prayer, finishing with, "All rise." A bit silly, since Chass and Desmond were the only ones not already standing, but whatever.

Once they'd stood, and the cushions had been removed, Lanora cut the bonds around their hands, and together Chass and Desmond cast them into the flames, a final promise to Holy Jenn that they would uphold their vows.

They turned to face each other again, and Lanora presented the velvet tray that held their wedding rings. Chass took the first one and slid it onto the third finger of Desmond's left hand, a cluster of blue diamonds, emeralds, and opals that he hoped conveyed all he'd wanted when he'd had them made. All the cold they'd fought their way through and the warmth they'd be traveling to.

From the way Desmond's eyes shone, they did. Picking up the second ring, Desmond slid it into place on Chass's finger.

Lanora recited the next prayer, which was followed by Allen himself stepping forward with the jewelry case that held the mark of Desmond's new status: a collar necklace comprised of beads made from precious jewels for the banding, interspersed with gold bars decorated with the same jewels that were in their rings, and the front a large, square-cut emerald surrounded by more opals and blue diamonds. It suited him even better than Chass had anticipated.

The second to last prayer was recited then, by Lanora, Chass and Desmond, as Allen returned to Sarrica's side. At its conclusion, Chass once again offered his arm, and he and Desmond walked back down the length of the throne room as music played and the final prayer was recited, Sarrica, Allen, and the others following them out.

Normally, they'd go straight on to the banquet, but there was important work that needed to be done first, so they had arranged for the banquet to take place later that night.

Chass relaxed as they reached the hallway, which was mercifully sparse of people.

"Congratulations," Allen said, embracing Desmond. "The ceremony was beautiful—and much shorter than mine." He laughed, but there was no missing the adoration on his face as he looked at Sarrica, who returned it full measure.

"Thank you," Desmond replied.

Allen turned to Chass. "Larren would be proud. Even Mother would struggle to find something to complain about."

"No, she wouldn't," Chass retorted. "She'd already have a list prepared."

"I wish I could be offended on her behalf," Allen said with a sigh. He offered a hand, and when Chass took it, covered it with his other hand. "Congratulations, truly."

"Thank you," Chass said, barely managing to get the words out. It was more than he'd ever dared hope to have from Allen.

"You earned it," Allen said, and let go, stepping back so others could congratulate him.

Keeta, predictably, charged right in. "Papa! How did I do?"

"You did wonderfully, Keeta," Chass said gruffly. "I am truly impressed you held still and quiet for so long; I know that's your least favorite thing to do."

"No, math lessons are my least favorite thing to do," Keeta replied, making everyone around them laugh. "Can I go play with the twins and the others?"

"Yes, you may go play with Master Chara, Mistress Chiri, and the rest." The rest being Sarrica's children, which was more than a little shocking, but Chass didn't have energy to spare to panic about that right now.

As Keeta once more darted off in that indefatigable way of his, Chass shook his head faintly and turned his attention once more to the people around him, greeting and thanking everyone who came up, exchanging pleasantries, but mostly focused on the new ring on his finger and the arm that slipped through his.

"Your Highness."

Chass froze reflexively as the voice registered, right before Lesto filled his view. After all this time it was still difficult to remember to say "Your Grace" instead of calling him commander. "Thank you for attending."

"It's good to see you doing so well," Lesto replied. "The Imperial Army will suffer for your loss, but I'm sure Jader will have them up to standard eventually."

"I think Aria is more than capable of replacing me," Chass said. "She has been for a long time."

Lesto laughed, a gleam in his good eye, but only agreed and moved on.

What did he know that Chass didn't? What was Aria up to? Chass was going to *kill* her, whatever it was.

Before he could though, the gong sounded, signaling it was time for the next step in the proceedings, and Chass walked with everyone else into the lesser throne room.

A podium had been set in the center of the room, and behind were tables where secretaries and clerks held order over a distressing, but expected, amount of paperwork. The higher the rank, the higher the stack of papers. Given there was a king, a prince, and that prince brother to the High Consort...

There was going to be a lot of signing.

First were the marriage papers, which had to be signed by him, Desmond, and Sarrica, who as High King had to approve all royal marriages in the kingdom, though it was almost entirely a formality. The High Throne would only interfere if someone tried to marry into the family of a mortal enemy or similar.

After the marriage documents were all the papers making Desmond officially part of the family, granting him the titles and privileges that came with being the future Consort of Gaulden, formally Consort-in-Waiting.

When all of that was done, it was finally time for what was arguably the most important paperwork of the day: Desmond surrendering his throne and severing all connections to Benta. Chass kissed the back of his hand and withdrew, leaving Desmond and Wessel to their signing.

A servant came up with a tray of drinks, and Chass was happy to take one, if only to soothe his parched throat. It was fruity, tangy, and sweetened with a generous helping of rum.

Papers were signed, slowly and steadily, one packet after another, immediately notarized by the clerks—the originals, official copies for various offices, and slightly less official copies to be sent to dignitaries around the world.

When all was finally completed, a clerk stepped forward with a large box, a second stepping forward to remove the large lid. Inside, nestled on velvet, was a new Bentan crown, as even if they could have obtained the original one in time, in the chaos of the rebellion no one could even be sure of where it was exactly.

New crown, new start, Desmond had insisted, and everyone agreed.

Desmond picked the crown up and turned to Wessel. "Promise me you will always do what's best for Benta."

"I promise," Wessel said. "On my life."

"Then congratulations, Your Majesty, and long live the king," Desmond said, and placed the crown on his head.

The room filled with applause and cheers, and Desmond withdrew, leaving Wessel to enjoy his moment.

Chass offered his hand as Desmond drew close. "For a brief time there, you were the most powerful person on the continent."

"I'd rather be the happiest person," Desmond said, and leaned up to kiss him.

Far be it for Chass to complain. He stroked Desmond's cheekbone with his thumb as they drew apart. "I'll remind you of those words when you're stuck in yet another tedious meeting about whether to increase import taxes by one or two percent."

"I think you have no idea how tedious life in a monastery can be," Desmond replied with a laugh. "Also, I do have some experience as a monarch, though I know when we met I wasn't at my best."

Chass scowled. "If I had managed to catch that stupid bastard then —" His eyes narrowed at the finger Desmond placed on his lips.

"I think it's safe to say you won the day, Your Highness," Desmond said, then pressed into his space and craned his head up. "Hopefully we'll soon get a chance for you to enjoy your prize."

Chass traced his face lightly with his fingers, brushing back strands of ink-dark hair. "I seem to remember enjoying it last night."

Desmond nuzzled his cheek, then stole a quick kiss. They should be socializing, but Chass really didn't give a damn. "Oh, I have no complaints about the fun we had on your sofa last night, but I'm looking forward to seeing your bed. Your ceiling. Whichever."

"Some monk," Chass said with a soft laugh.

"Attention, please!" Sarrica called out as the desk and podium for signing were cleared away. "A couple last pieces of business, and then everyone is free to go about their day, and we'll see you again at the banquet. Captain Aria, if you please."

"What?" Chass's eyes widened, then snapped to Aria, who pointedly ignored him as she strode past to the front of the room. "Aria, I will *kill*

you."

"Empty threat," Aria said cheerfully, then stood at attention in front of Sarrica and saluted sharply. "Your Majesty, I'm honored you would address the matter directly."

"It would be cold of me not to, given this entire day is the result of the brave and tireless work of Penance Gate." A clerk held out a sealed set of papers, and Sarrica took it, presenting them to Aria. "Captain Aria, I release Penance Gate from imperial service with full honors. May you serve well in your new capacity. Good luck with His Highness."

Aria laughed. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Prince Chass," Sarrica said. "Come here."

What now? Chass was going to kill all of them. "You," he said as he passed Aria.

She simply smiled and made her way to take his spot by Desmond.

A clerk came up with another box, Jader beside him, and Chass dutifully stood where he was bid, even though it once more made him the center of attention. Jader opened the box and removed something, but he was just slightly too far to Chass's right for him to see what it contained.

Sarrica said, voice carrying clearly across the room, "Prince Chass, throughout your military career your service has been exemplary. You always go above and beyond the call of duty, and since you took over Penance Gate, they have been a true force to be reckoned with, and a high standard for others to reach. Above all that, your actions in retrieving His Former Majesty and delivering him safely showed extraordinary courage, determination, and selflessness. In recognition of that, the High Throne awards you the Imperial Medal of the Steel Heart."

"The Imperial—" Chass nearly recoiled in shock. "You can't—"

Sarrica's eyes gleamed with amusement. "I'm fairly certain I can do whatever I want. Commander."

Jader stepped in and draped the medal over his shoulders, so it rested right in the middle of his chest. "Congratulations, Your Highness. I don't want to hear a word of complaint out of you, understood?"

"My honor to serve," Chass said dryly.

Snickering, Jader withdrew, Sarrica clapped Chass on the back, and the room once more filled with applause and cheers.

The moment he was free to go, Chass made directly for Aria. "You!"

She ducked behind Desmond, her arms looping over his shoulders. "You wouldn't want to accidentally hurt his pretty face."

"We both know I can get to you without hurting him," Chass retorted. "Why in the name of Holy Tash did you withdraw Penance Gate from imperial service?"

Letting go of Desmond, who seemed amused and concerned all at once by the exchange, Aria stepped in close, chin jutting out as she said, "Because frankly, we need the break, and if you think you're going home without me, you ass end of a goat, you're as dumb as you are pretty. Penance Gate has officially been declared your honor guard, and there is *nothing* you can do about it."

"I sponsor Penance Gate, I can do whatever I want with the lot of you," Chass said.

"Stop being so stubborn and grouchy and just admit you're happy to hear I'm returning to Gaulden too, you—"

"Stop insulting me," Chass said. "It's my wedding day. You could pretend to be a little nice."

"That's rich coming from you."

"Shut up," Chass replied with a sigh, and kissed her, completely uncaring for the looks and whispers they were drawing. As they drew apart the barest bit, he said against her mouth, "You're going to pay for this, you wretch."

"Promises, promises," Aria retorted, and drew back further, smirking all the while.

Desmond laughed. "You two are a pair. Can I have a scandalous kiss too?"

"Of course, darling," Aria replied, voice turning into a purr as she drew him into a kiss that did nothing to quell the whispers.

Chass rolled his eyes. "Why is Patiki never here to drag you away when I need her?"

"She's working hard on the flower arrangements for your banquet," Aria retorted as she drew back, licking her lips. "Congratulations on your medal. You do deserve it, no matter how much you're going to whine about how pointless and stupid and unnecessary it is."

Desmond chuckled into her shoulder, and only laughed harder when Chass glared at them. "What? She's right. I can see the complaints taking shape in your stubborn head already."



Aria grinned. "You did choose well. Now I'm going to vanish before you do finally kill me. Ta, pretty boys." She slipped away, and that was all the excuse the rest of the room needed to converge, forcing Chass to once more extend platitudes, thank yous, and the like, until mercifully a bell chimed in the hallway, signaling the top of the hour, and the group arrayed for the private coronation slowly dispersed.

"We have a couple of hours still before the banquet," Desmond said as they walked through the halls, bodyguards around them but as ever, impressively unobtrusive somehow. "What would you like to do?"

Chass smirked. "Some books I ordered were just delivered this morning. I should probably get them properly catalogued and shelved."

"You're not funny," Desmond said, even as he laughed. "Stop being a brat."

"I have it on loud, if not good, authority that I don't know how to be anything else."

Desmond slid him a look. "I don't know, you seem to have a knack for being charming when you forget to bring out the thorns."

Chass rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

As they reached Chass's chambers, Desmond took the key when Chass pulled it from his pocket, unlocked the door, and gently fisted a hand in Chass's robe before dragging him inside. "Come here, Your Highness."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

The door closed behind them, and Desmond dropped the key on the nearby table before working on the fastenings of his cloak, casting it aside on the table where Chass read and catalogued all his books. The shoes went next, followed by his jewelry, minus his wedding ring and collar necklace.

"Leave that," Chass said, voice low and husky, as Desmond made to remove the necklace.

Desmond shivered and let his fingers drop, shifting his attention to the rest of his clothes. "I don't see you getting undressed."

Chass's blue eyes smoldered. "Maybe I'm distracted by the view."

Finished with his clothes, Desmond closed the space between them and tugged playfully at Chass's jacket. "Let me help, then. I do want to be a good consort."

Chass kissed him, cradling his head in that way that left Desmond feeling like something precious, leaving his skin tingling and his body rapidly warming with anticipation. If all they ever did was exchange these breathtaking kisses, Desmond would live and die happy.

He admitted, though, he was looking forward to finally getting Chass naked and in bed. Drawing back, he carefully removed the beautiful gold and steel medal and set it on the table, then worked next on Chass's cloak, followed by the rest of his jewelry, save for the wedding ring.

Chass toed off his own shoes, and after that came the fun part: stripping away one layer after another, casting the ornate clothes carelessly aside—along with something that landed on the floor with a muted thunk—until Chass finally stood bare before him, nothing but golden skin, golden hair, and sapphire eyes.

His poor body was a legacy of his soldiering life, especially the most recent set of still-healing wounds. Desmond gently touched the worst of them, fingers feathering across the mark on his gut that had nearly killed him. "It's terrifying how close I came to losing you."

"You took some marks yourself, you know," Chass said gruffly, tracing the scars from the bear claws on Desmond's face and arm. "I was supposed to keep you safe."

"You did," Desmond said, attention turning to the tattoo on Chass's chest that he was finally able to see clearly after all this time: three red roses in a cluster, accented by leaves, with thorny vines extending out to twist and turn around his shoulders and upper arms, along his chest and down to twine around his thighs and...

Desmond froze as he saw the tattoo low on Chass's abdomen, right above his cock. Framed by vines and rosebuds were the words *For the Taking*. "Chass..."

"It was something Bateker liked to say. That I was so beautiful and fuckable I practically had the words *for the taking* tattooed on me. So I tattooed them. Then I killed him."

There was clearly a lot more to the story, but now was hardly the time to discuss it. "I'm sorry. I feel you don't hear that nearly enough, but I am sorry for everything you went through."

"It's over. Bateker left his marks, but he's dead and forgotten by the world, and I'm here. But if you don't want—"

"Oh, I want, but you know I'd understand if *you* don't want, Chass. This isn't necessary. I only want you, however I can have you."

Chass smiled, soft and wispy. "I'm fine. Don't try to pin me or throw me around or tie me up, and there won't be problems." He grimaced. "Though I've never slept with anyone but Aria and her wife, so I'm not the most exotic lover in the world."

Desmond laughed. "Don't worry, as a devout monk, I have enough experience for a bordello." That made Chass laugh exactly as he'd hoped, and Desmond continued, "Now kiss me, Chassenta, and then show me your bed."

Chass groaned. "Don't ever call me that again." He kissed Desmond before he could reply, fingers curling into the hair at his nape, not-really holding Desmond captive to his attentions. He trailed his other hand along the necklace, then slowly worked his mouth down Desmond's jaw, throat, until he reached the necklace. "Do you like it?"

"I love it, but I'd love twine as long as it meant I was yours," Desmond replied.

That got him another kiss, Chass's body flush against his own, their cocks sliding and rubbing. Desmond groaned, reaching up to sink his hands into Chass's soft hair. Hands skated down his body, cupped his ass and lifted

him as though he weighed nothing, and that nearly made him whimper. "Take me to bed, Your Highness."

Chass didn't reply, simply scooped him up and walked off, leaving Desmond laughing breathlessly. "I know I weigh a few stones, and surely this isn't good for your wounds."

"Shut up. It's my wedding day. Let me have my way."

"Oh, well, when you put it that way, how can I say no?" Desmond replied as he was set on Chass's bed. The room was handsomely appointed in the blues and greens that Chass seemed to favor, interesting when so many probably associated him with red.

Desmond wanted to push him into the blankets and cover every last bit of him with kisses, but he settled for waiting impatiently as Chass locked the door before joining him in bed. There, Desmond's patience ended, and he immediately set to kissing and touching whatever he could reach, lingering on every scar, tracing the beautiful rose tattoo with his tongue, lavishing every scrap of attention he could manage, until somehow Chass was beneath him, Desmond straddling his hips. "You really are the most beautiful person I've ever seen."

"You must need glasses or something, then," Chass retorted, hands running along his thighs, one coming up to wrap around Desmond's cock and stroke it teasingly. "I like the diamonds in your hair."

Desmond blinked at the comment, then smiled. He'd somehow managed to completely forget about the beads. "Allen's idea. I thought they were a little much."

"No," Chass said, and hooked a hand around the back of his neck to draw him into another of those devastating kisses that left Desmond completely incapable of thinking and feeling like he'd just sprinted around the palace twice.

Panting softly as he drew back, Desmond squirmed tauntingly against him. "So what would you like next? I know I put forth a fine performance with my hand last night, but I feel there's room for improvement. My mouth?" He thrust against Chass again, dizzy on thoughts of tasting him, swallowing the length of him, Chass fucking his mouth and leaving his throat and jaw sore. Then straddling his hips and spending across his lovely chest. Or maybe taking Chass's fingers and then his cock. So many delightful possibilities. "Shall I ride this fine cock? Or —"

"Fuck me," Chass said, the words spoken quietly but with force. "That's what I want."

It wasn't what Desmond had expected, not in the slightest. Not after all Chass had been through, and Desmond had only the vaguest idea, given only the most selfish, insensitive ass would demand details about such a thing.

He couldn't deny the words went straight to his cock, though, and pushed a shameless groan right out of him. "Chass..."

"Let's see what you can do, monk," Chass said, and stretched out his left arm to grab something off the nightstand, shoving it into Desmond's hands.

Desmond set it aside and shifted off and back until he was settled delightfully between Chass's thighs. Then he kissed and licked his way down that beautiful chest again, until he reached Chass's cock. Stroking each other off the previous night had been delightful, but getting to really see and taste and feel was infinitely better.

Drawing back, he retrieved the oil and slicked his fingers generously, teasing at Chass's hole until he got some creatively-worded threats. "One day when we have more time, I'm going to put you on your knees and open you up with my tongue."

Chass jerked sharply, and the prettiest groans spilled from his lips as he draped an arm across his eyes. "That is... not something I've ever heard of. Not even from Aria."

That was adorable and distressing all at once. Desmond was going to lavish him with attention, affectionate and amorous, every chance he got for the rest of their lives. For the present, he settled for adding a second finger to the first, stretching Chass carefully, enjoying the feel of him, every twitch and gentle thrust of hips, the moans and hitched breaths. With his other hand he teased Chass's cock, running his fingers along the length of it, rubbing his thumb over the top and licking his thumb clean, savoring the strangled noise that earned him. Nothing was prettier than Chass riding his fingers, though. Well, not yet. "So is this what you generally prefer?"

"I'm flexible, but yes... despite everything that probably says I shouldn't, I like it best when someone is fucking me," Chass replied. "Now I've really had it with *talking* today, if you please."

Desmond laughed, withdrew his fingers, and slicked his cock. Shaking his hair out of his eyes, he braced his hands and pushed slowly into

Chass's body, moaning as that delightful tight heat wrapped around him. "You feel divine."

"That's blasphemy," Chass said with a laugh, hooking his legs around Desmond's hips, forcing him deeper. "Come on, monk, show me how bad you were at chastity or abstaining or whatever they call it."

Desmond leaned down to kiss him, licking into his mouth and sucking on his tongue, uncaring of the mess he was making, hungry for all that Chass would give him. Then he drew back, braced himself again, and drew nearly all the way out before thrusting back in, eliciting a delightful moan from Chass, who started to cover his eyes again before abruptly stopping and dropping his arm, meeting Desmond's gaze, though it was clearly difficult for him.

That called for another kiss, which Desmond gave gladly, before putting all his attention to fucking Chass as best he knew how, adjusting until he hit the right spot with every thrust, reducing Chass to moans and whimpers, wordless pleas for more. He'd been right: the only thing prettier than Chass riding his fingers was Chass taking his cock.

When he was close, so very close, he wrapped a hand around Chass's cock and stroked it in time with his thrusts. Sweat stung his eyes and made his skin itch in places, but Desmond's attention was wholly for the blazing blue eyes staring back at him, until Chass's climax rippled through him, sending his head tilting back into the pillow, his long, deep moan filling the room.

Desmond sank in deep one last time and kissed Chass wet and messy as he came.

After a few minutes, when he felt like he could mostly move again, Desmond gently withdrew and shifted until he was draped across Chass, mindful of his wounds. "Now if only I could stay right here the rest of the day, instead of having to get dressed all over again and go pretend I want to talk to people some more. At least the food will be good." He frowned. "I don't know any Harken dances, though, I'm afraid."

"I think the healers would converge on the dance floor and drag me from it if they caught me dancing," Chass replied. "That being said, plenty of people will be happy to teach you, or suffer trod-on toes and clumsy turns, for the chance to say they got to dance with you."

Desmond laughed, folding his arms across Chass's chest and propping his chin on them. "I suppose we should get cleaned up and

dressed."

Chass sighed, long and aggrieved, and sat up as Desmond rolled off him. He retrieved a dressing robe from a hook by the bed and handed it over. "Unless you want to walk across the hall naked."

"That would certainly give Fathoms Deep some fresh gossip." Desmond snickered as he shrugged into the robe and loosely belted it. "Suppose I should retrieve the clothes I left on the floor to get wrinkled and mussed."

He headed off to the front room to do precisely that, scooping all his jewelry into his sash and knotting it securely before setting to work on the rest of their clothes—and stopped when he came to a silk-wrapped package. "What is this?"

"A gift from Lady Veronica, on behalf of Benta, a token of esteem and apology or some such," Chass said from the doorway.

Desmond rose and turned, and nearly forgot all about the package, because mercy of Her Most Holy Grace, Chass thoroughly tumbled was a whole new level of distracting. He hadn't even bothered to put on clothes, and his torso gleamed where he must have just cleaned himself up. Desmond wanted to get him dirty all over again.

"What?" Chass asked, brow quirking.

"Sorry, my brain has ambitions my cock can't fulfill quite yet." Desmond held the gift out. "Are you going to open it or make me suffer? I had no idea they were going to give you something."

Chass smirked in that utterly delicious way of his, doing nothing whatsoever to cool Desmond's ambitions. "Is make you suffer an option?"

"You really are the biggest brat I have ever known," Desmond said, and attempted to pout. "Open it!"

Chuckling, Chass obeyed, unknotting the silk and letting it join his clothes on the floor, revealing an ornate box made of light and dark woods, the top displaying a tree in light wood, with gold letters around the edge of the box.

Desmond stared at it. "That... those are made at Highmont. The words are a prayer. We sell them for additional income; they're always popular at certain holidays. I wonder how they managed to get one."

"Probably already had it," Chass replied as he found the subtle catch that allowed the lid to be pulled off. Inside was more of the green and gold

silk. Chass unfolded it and frowned as he lifted out the object within. "What is this? It's like... is this a *folding* knife?"

Desmond burst into laughter, bracing himself against the wall so he wouldn't toppled over. "I've never heard someone speak so scathingly of such a highly-sought item."

"What good is a blade that could fold in at any moment?" Chass asked, even as he examined it thoroughly, clearly more interested than he wanted to admit, in typical Chass fashion.

It was a beautiful piece, the handle of dark wood, probably stained oak, with an inlay of a plumeria blossom on each side. The blade itself, as Chass pulled it open, was equally beautiful, gleaming in the lamplight and clearly sharpened to a razor edge. Here too, a plumeria blossom had been delicately etched on either side, leaf-strewn vines extending up to the point and down to the base.

The knife would have cost no small sum with that sort of custom work, and the maker's mark at the base of the handle was the best in Benta. Wessel and Veronica must have worked hard to have it commissioned and transported in time.

"They really outdid themselves, no matter how scathing you want to be," Desmond said with a smile.

"It's interesting, I'll concede that," Chass replied in his gruff way that was more adorable than Desmond would ever tell him.

Desmond smiled and kissed him. "I'll see you shortly." He gathered up his belongings and hurried across the hall, ignoring the teasing smirks of the posted guards, and slipped into his own room. There, his servant, Teja, was waiting with his banquet clothes, which were far more flamboyant and colorful than his wedding clothes. Desmond had never worn such a vivid pink before. He didn't think he'd ever worn pink at all. This was so much fun.

He sat at the dressing table to let Teja do his hair first, swapping the diamond beads for more colorful ones, smiling at the memory of Chass's face when Desmond had first reached the throne room. He'd nearly been late, he'd fussed and fretted so much, but every moment had been worth it for that look.

When he was finally dressed several minutes later, Desmond examined the results in the mirror and smiled. Above and beyond all else, it was his necklace that pleased him most. He belonged with Chass. He



belonged in Gaulden. He had somewhere to call home that really felt like it was home.

"Thank you, Teja. Take the rest of the night; I doubt I'll return before morning."

Hiding a smile, Teja bowed and said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Desmond shook his head slightly as he departed. He'd argued and argued that it should be 'Your Highness' now, but Chass had put his foot down on the matter and insisted he retain the old form of address, declaring he was owed at least that much respect for all he'd done and sacrificed. Because Chass was Chass, and all those thorns and growls hid the softest center Desmond had ever encountered.

He wasn't remotely surprised to see Chass waiting for him in the hallway. "You always wear such beautiful clothes, but whenever I see you, all I want to do is take them off."

Chass rolled his eyes, but the barest hint of smile ticked up one corner of his mouth as he kissed the back of Desmond's hand. "I will be happy to let you do so later. Shall we go deal with people again?"

"I suppose," Desmond replied, and twined their hands together as they headed off, bodyguards falling in around them.

Thankfully, Harken did not have the same tradition as Benta, where he and Chass must stand at the head of a long receiving line to welcome and thank every last single person who came through the doors. They'd have been there for hours, if not days.

Instead, they simply got to walk through the room to applause and cheers until they reached the high table, where both Sarrica and Wessel toasted them before the festivities began.

As the banquet officially began, Desmond took his seat and sipped at the cup of wine set before him. "All right, so I want to hear more about how your name is really—"

"Don't say it," Chass said.

Allen laughed on Desmond's other side. "It's an old family name. Very old, like older than Gaulden itself, or practically. Even the oldest person in the kingdom winces in sympathy."

"Oh, like my poor friend in basic school who was named Garfield. Poor kid never caught a break. I think by the time we moved on to advanced schooling, he was going by his middle name and beating up anyone who used his first."

"Yes," Chass said sourly. "That about sums it up. This was the first time I've heard my whole name in decades. Hopefully I never have to hear it again."

Desmond smiled. "I think it's pretty. When I was really young, my nurse called me 'Master Dezi' and then 'Prince Dezi,' before I was shipped off to school, and then shoved into a monastery to be forgotten about."

"Dezi?" Chass smiled. "It never occurred to me to ask if there were diminutives for your name. Dezi."

Hearing Chass use his old nickname had more of an effect than Desmond would have ever guessed. He liked it. A lot.

The way Chass's eyes gleamed before he looked away to reply to someone else said he knew it.

Desmond really couldn't wait for the banquet to end, as much fun as he was having.

Aria approached the high table a few minutes later, in a low-cut gown that, by her smirk, she knew very well drew plenty of attention. "Consort Desmond, may I have this dance, since your spouse is too beat up to even walk without trouble?"

Chass gave her a look, but didn't deign to reply.

Laughing, Desmond rose and took Aria's offered hand as she led them to the dance floor. "So I still don't know much about you, my lady."

Aria shrugged one shoulder. "Do you know this dance?"

"I don't know any of them."

"Well, this one is easy." She guided him through the steps, laughing after a short time. "You seem to have a knack." She spun him around, and they stepped to the side. "As to not knowing much about me, there isn't much to know. I'm the third child in my family and was meant to follow in my mother's footsteps like most third children and train to take over a household."

"I really can't see you meshing well with that."

Aria grinned. "Neither could I, so I ran away from home and signed up with a mercenary band. When spots opened up in Penance Gate, I transferred there to get even further away. Unfortunately, I didn't know the nightmare I was walking into—a nightmare Chass, the stupid, aggravating bastard, largely kept away from me." She sighed, a wealth of thoughts and emotions in the sound. "Anyway, that's hardly a proper wedding topic. My stepfather is ambassador to Soltorin. My stepsister is his protégé, when

she's not also showing a penchant for defiance." Her eyes glittered. "My brother, the heir, is also quite useless and gallivanted off to a university halfway across the world. My parents find us vexing. I suspect they're going to appoint me heir instead and leave him to his dusty books, especially since I'm now returning to Gaulden, likely for good."

"What does your wife think of that?" Desmond took his turn spinning her. "Quite a change, to go from gardener to lady."

"She's excited," Aria replied. "She's been working hard during her rare free time to learn all the etiquette and such, even though I've told her no one cares, and they wouldn't dare cross me anyway. My parents were not happy, to say the least, when I first informed them of the marriage. To the point they cut me off once and for all. I didn't even have sufficient funds to pay for a proper wedding, or even an improper one."

Desmond smiled. "Let me guess."

Aria snorted and replied, "Your guess is correct. Thankfully, my parents eventually came around and are fond of Patiki and concede she's good for me. Doesn't hurt Chass is my best friend, of course. All that to say, Patiki is working hard to ensure she'll be a 'proper lady' once we're back in Gaulden, even though I keep telling her it's not necessary."

"Easy to be dismissive of such things when you've lived amongst them your whole life, but it's true no one would dare cross you," Desmond said, and bowed as the dance came to an end. "Thank you for the dance."

"My pleasure," Aria said, and winked. "If you ever want that beating, it would be my honor to serve."

"I'm going to kill him," Desmond said with a groan.

Aria laughed and walked off, leaving Desmond to be inundated in dance requests.

By the time he was able to break free and return to the high table, he was ready to fall over and sleep on the first available surface. He hid a yawn as he sat down and thanked the servant who brought him a cup of coffee. "Have I missed anything while I was treading on toes?"

Allen's smile was full of mischief as he said, "I was just telling Chass that his wedding gift to you was getting a bit impatient, and he should probably go ahead and give it to you."

"My wedding gift?" Desmond turned to Chass. "What in the world did you get me?"

Chass signaled to someone behind Desmond. A few minutes later he stood and vanished from sight, but returned almost immediately carrying something that was black and fluffy and squirming desperately to break free.

"You— You got me a dog?" Desmond asked, holding the puppy up as Chass dumped it in his lap. "They're beautiful. What breed is this. I don't recognize it. What a beautiful coat."

"They're a Gaulden breed, meant for swimming, particularly good at rescue," Chass said in that gruff, carefully indifferent way of his that hid absolutely none of his delight the way he thought. "No snow where we're going, thank Holy Denala, but plenty of water. She should be useful."

Desmond laughed as the puppy licked his face before trying to squirm free to explore the table. "I love her. What's her name?"

Chass just gave him a scathing look.

Returning it with a smirk, Desmond said, "I think I'll call her... Senta."

"No, you will not!" Chass said, as Allen and the others laughed.

"My puppy," Desmond said. "Nothing you can do about it."

Chass lifted his eyes to the ceiling and retrieved his wine.

Desmond shared Senta around, until she finally nearly succeeded in breaking free, at which point he handed her off to a servant to be taken to his room, where she'd probably destroy half the pillows. Well, better the pillows than anything else.

He yawned again and enjoyed the remainder of the banquet sitting at Chass's side and conversing with their friends, until at last things began to wind down and they could finally take their leave. Tomorrow, they'd tackle the veritable mountain of gifts waiting for them, and all the other little tasks that came in the aftermath of a wedding.

Tonight, though, he wanted to snuggle in close and sleep a few hours, then do absolutely filthy things to his spouse, followed by more sleeping. "Are you with me, or am I with you?" he asked around a yawn.

Chass gave him a look. "Did you really think we'd just keep our current rooms?"

"What?" It was only then Desmond registered they'd walked right past their rooms and had stopped in front of a completely different door. "You let others move your things?"

"Allen said he would attend it with utmost care, and I trust him," Chass replied, and pushed the door open.

The suite looked much the same as their previous rooms, save the front room was larger, and there were three additional rooms instead of two. Fast asleep in a plushy bed of her own in front of a small fire was Senta. There was also food and water, and a wide, shallow box of dirt for her to use in the night.

Desmond drew Chass to a halt, slid arms around his neck, and drew him down into a long, thorough kiss, enjoying the taste of wine in his mouth, and better yet the familiarity of his mouth, how much more familiar it would become. "Thank you for Senta."

"You couldn't pick literally any other name?" Chass grumbled without heat. "I'm glad you like her. I am sorry you had to leave behind your dogs in Benta, and that they cannot come to us in Gaulden."

"They'd be miserable in all that heat and humidity," Desmond said. "Wessel promised me he'd take care of them; I'm content. Shall we go find our new bed and rest up so I can ravish you in a few hours?"

Chass replied with his soft, wispy smile, and held fast to his hand as they headed to the left-most of the rooms, which proved to contain all of Chass's belongings, neatly put away or left for him to attend. He vanished into his changing room, and Desmond settled for dumping his own things on a settee, content to wait until the morning to take it all to his own bedroom.

Climbing into bed, he snuggled into the blankets and waited. Chass appeared a few minutes later, beautifully naked exactly as Desmond had hoped, and went around the room extinguishing the lights.

"What does that tattoo on your back say?" Desmond asked. "It's beautiful, but I can't read it, sadly."

"An old prayer, written in Pemfrost," Chass replied as he climbed into bed and settled awkwardly, clearly not used to sharing space, at least not in this fashion. Desmond shifted in close, tucking up against his side, soaking in the heat and scent of him, the hint of spicy, flowery perfume that lingered on his skin. "A prayer to Shallana, my patron. Holy Shallana, grant me strength and courage as I leave this broken road I've walked too long; Grant me humility and grace as I walk the Penitent Path; Grant me peace and understanding as I seek to heal myself and right my wrongs; Grant me

love and understanding as I seek to prove I am not what I was. By your will and wisdom."

Desmond kissed him. "As the Goddess wills, so mote it be. I guess I wasn't too terrible a monk if I gained myself a brand new kingdom, the world's finest spouse, *and* a puppy."

"Why does it sound like you consider the puppy the best part."

"Senta. Her name is Senta."

"Her name is stupid, and I'm not saying it," Chass retorted.

Desmond laughed, until Chass kissed him to shut him up.

## Epilogue

Home. After years of living almost entirely in Harkenesten, but more often abroad on missions, with very rare trips all the way south to Gaulden, it was a strange feeling to be back—back forever. It would likely take months, if not years, for that realization to truly settle in.

The white stones of the sprawling Gaulden royal palace gleamed in the scorching sunlight, the sky jewel-bright and cloudless, though the scent on the breeze promised there was a storm in the future. This time of year, there were many of them, and hurricane season loomed. That was a problem to be faced when it happened, though. For now, he was simply happy to enjoy the beautiful weather and being home.

"How beautiful," Desmond said as he climbed from their carriage. "Everything is so open and bright. Don't you worry about when it gets cold?"

"The heat is of far greater concern than the cold," Chass replied. "It can get remarkably chilly, even down to freezing temperatures at times, but never for long. We've ways to mitigate it that don't require sleds and ice."

"You are never going to let that go," Desmond said with a laugh, and leaned up to kiss him.

Thankfully, there was no fanfare waiting for them. In a rare moment of agreement, he and his mother had decided a quiet arrival would be best. Tomorrow there'd be a small affair welcoming him and Desmond home. At the end of the week they'd have a ceremony for Larren and cast his ashes to the sea.

At the end of the month would be the fanfare: a welcome banquet, a Gaulden wedding ceremony, and more.

Behind them, Keeta stumbled from the carriage, still groggy from sleep and the medicine that kept away the motion sickness that carriages gave him.

All that vanished as he took in the palace. "There's so much water!" He ran to the railing on the east side of the pavilion and stared at the ocean beyond. "Can we go swimming?"

"Tomorrow, maybe," Chass said. "If I tried swimming now, I'd drown from exhaustion. You have to meet your grandparents too, Keeta,

and settle into your new room and other tiresome things before you can play."

"All right, I guess," Keeta said, and slowly rejoined them, eyes constantly sliding back to the water. Holy Denala preserve them when he discovered the surf-riders.

"Your graciousness is noted," Chass said dryly, Desmond chuckling beside him. "Where is the dog?"

"She needed to go for a quick walk," Keeta said.

"You're going to have to say her name eventually," Desmond said.

Chass shot him a look. "I've gone this long."

"You're absurd."

"So is that dog's name," Chass retorted.

Desmond kissed him.

Chass sighed as they drew apart. "Ready? If my mother—"

"I'll be fine," Desmond said, cutting him off with another soft kiss.

"I was once nearly beaten to death by my own so-called bodyguards. I can handle my mother-in-law."

Chass would frankly rather have the beating, but he dropped the matter and offered his arm. Desmond took it, looking delighted as always with the arrangement, despite the almost year that had passed since they were married.

Figures appeared at the top of the steps: his mother, father, and dame.

His father, Kareen, and Eila, his dame, at least seemed happy to see him. Chass's relationship with them wasn't much better than that with his mother. Hard to have a relationship with people who either disregarded him entirely or simply weren't there, never even realized they needed to be.

Picking fights right upon arrival wouldn't help anything, though, and above all else, he wanted Desmond to be happy here.

Standing with them was Aria's mother, an older version of her daughter, as beautiful as a siren come from the sea, but warm and loving instead of hungry and deadly.

"Good luck," Aria said as she signaled the bodyguards to fall back before falling into step with them.

Chass stifled a sigh and climbed the stairs. Desmond's hand tightened on his arm, a show of support that Chass needed more than he



liked admitting. As they reached the top of the stairs, Desmond withdrew slightly, and they bowed in greeting. "Mother."

"Your Majesties," Desmond said. "Lady Eila, it's an honor to at least meet you all."

Eila smiled ever so faintly, but didn't speak as Queen Marren stepped forward. "It's good to finally have you home. Lady Aria, you're looking well. Welcome home."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Aria rose from her bow and greeted her own mother, the two of them moving slightly off to the side of the royal family.

Eila turned to Desmond. "Prince Desmond, we're honored to have you as part of the family. Welcome to Gaulden—welcome home."

"Thank you," Desmond replied. "The honor is mine. I could ask for no better spouse in the world than Chass, and I'm truly happy to meet the people who raised him and finally see the home he speaks so highly of."

Chass prodded Keeta, suddenly turned shy, forward, where after another gentle prod he remembered to bow. "Mother, Father, Aunt, this is Keeta, my son and heir."

"Keeta, what a joy to finally meet you!" Eila said. "You've come from so far away. What do you think of Gaulden so far?"

"There's so much water, even more than in Harken," Keeta said. "Papa says I can't go swimming until tomorrow though."

Eila smiled and winked. "I think we can do better than that. How about some food first?"

Keeta bobbed a nod, and shyly took the hand Eila offered before walking with her into the palace.

Marren relaxed ever so slightly, even permitting a small smile. "Shall we go inside? Tea is waiting, and the cooks were most excited to prepare something especially for you, Chass."

They were probably excited to be able to prepare something that wasn't the same twenty dishes they prepared every week, but Chass had learned far more quickly than his siblings to keep his opinions to himself around his mother and anyone who might tattle to her.

The royal palace, officially the Palace of Tides, hadn't changed a bit, though he hadn't really expected it to have done so. The great hall was tiled in blue and white, with large squares throughout that looked down onto sea life below. The tall support columns were interspersed with decorative

columns of glass filled with water where the fish and more from below could swim up easily to explore and be seen.

"It's like being in an aquarium," Desmond said. "Beautiful, truly. How do all the fish get here? Are they brought?"

"No, there's a direct path to the sea, so everything comes and goes as it pleases, though many of these fish know there's easy food to be found here at certain times of day. I'll show you all the boring maintenance and access rooms later," Chass replied.

There was a series of barks from behind them, and a moment later a black blur came charging by, bounding all around the great hall, too excited to hold still, though normally Senta was a fairly staid dog like most of her breed.

"Senta, here," Chass said sharply, and with a faint air of pouting Senta obeyed, coming to stand at Desmond's side, panting cheerfully as she continued to look around. "I hope you like wet dog, because the moment she sees the ocean, that is all she'll ever be."

"You said her name!" Desmond said with a laugh. "See? It wasn't so hard."

"Oh, be quiet."

"Senta?" Eila asked with a short laugh. "Really?"

Chass scowled as Desmond snickered. "The next time you get a dog, I'm laying down rules on naming it."

"You can try," Desmond said with a wink.

Marren's mouth flattened, though Chass for the life of him, could not begin to guess what they'd just done to offend her. Be happy for two minutes? Flirt with each other like all spouses did?

It was going to be a long day.

He refused to let her get to him, though. He'd come too far, worked too hard, to fall back under her grinding heel. If she didn't approve of something, she could choke on it.

They continued on, through the great hall into a slightly smaller one. The blue and white tiles ran through the majority of the palace, even the upper floors. The only exceptions were some of the rooms, and the servant halls, which had something more practical and far easier to maintain.

Marren led the way to the end of the hall, where servants opened a set of white double doors set with large ovals of stained glass. They led onto one of the many sweeping porches that overlooked the sea, where

currently many boats of various sizes were out either working or simply enjoying the excellent sailing weather.

A large, glass topped table had been set out, along with white and green wicker chairs. The table was covered in an impressive spread—including every last one of Chass's favorite teatime foods. He hadn't known anyone there even noticed his favorites, let alone remembered them. It was always what Marren wanted, or Larren, sometimes Allen.

Currently, Keeta sat next to Eila, chatting enthusiastically between bites as she watched with a fond smile. Chass couldn't remember any of his parents looking at him like that. Maybe they had when he was too young to remember. Whatever. It didn't matter. At least they were being kind to Keeta. So far, at any rate. If they were smart, that wouldn't change.

"Right, then," Marren said briskly. "Introduce us properly then, Chass."

"Mother, Father, Aunt, I make you known to my spouse and consort, Desmond, formerly of Benta."

"Formerly of Benta," Eila said with a laugh. "What a marvelous understatement. We're honored to have you as part of the family, Your Majesty."

"Then it's Desmond, please," Desmond said with a smile. "I really am happy to finally be here; I've been excited to see Gaulden for a long time. I'm eager to settle in and learn all I need."

"There's time enough for that," Kareen said. "Sit, sit, and let's eat. The cooks outdid themselves, probably excited to have some variety." He winked at them and smiled innocently as Marren shot him a look. "They're making your favorite curry for dinner, and to judge by the tears streaming down the faces of everyone in the kitchen, it's hot enough to melt skin off."

Eila wrinkled her nose. "What a delightful image while I'm trying to eat."

"So just barely hot enough for Chass, then," Desmond said with a snicker that turned into outright laughter when Chass shot him a look. "It's true and you know it."

"Can I go swim now?" Keeta asked hopefully. Ever since Chass—and Shemal and Jader—had given him lessons, it was all he wanted to do. He'd been obsessed from his first lesson, and in the months since that ardor had only grown.

"I can take him, Your Highness," said a nearby palace guard. "I'm a strong swimmer and used to young charges. It would be my honor."

"Very well, then. Thank you," Chass said. "Keeta, do as he tells you."

"Yes, Papa."

Even though he'd called Chass that for months now, every time he said it, happiness curled through Chass, the kind he was afraid would be ripped away from him if he ever got complacent. He watched as Keeta raced off, chased by the guard calling for him to slow down, then turned back to the others. "Sorry, he's quite obsessed. Some days I think he'll turn into a mermaid and vanish for good."

Kareen just laughed. "Better hope he doesn't meet the deep divers or the surf-riders. You'll never get him back out. He's precious, Chass. I've very happy for you. How was the journey?"

"Thank you, Father. The journey was uneventful, except for a brief encounter with some bandits. Penance Gate dispatched them quickly."

"Some bandits," Aria said, rolling her eyes. "There was fifty-three of them, and their aim was to kidnap you for ransom."

Chass glared.

Aria sipped her tea, as unimpressed as always.

"I'm glad it came to nothing," Marren said, "and that no one was hurt. You do like to underplay things, Chass." Her eyes flicked to Aria, who was sitting with her mother directly opposite Marren. "As to Penance Gate, I finally received the official paperwork just last month. The imperial throne will be hard-pressed to find a replacement of their equal."

"Not our problem," Chass said curtly, hoping that would curtail the obvious reprimand she was clearly working up to.

For a moment, Marren looked hurt, but Chass must be imagining things, because his mother never gave a damn what anyone said, and it wasn't like he'd insulted her.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Aria said. "We strove to be the best, and Chass's fancy medal certainly proves we succeeded, and I don't envy whoever does replace us."

Oh, was that what she'd meant? It was going to be an even longer day than he thought, if his mother was trying to be *nice*.

"What medal?" Eila asked. "No letter we received from Chass mentioned a medal. Or from Allen for that matter."

"Nothing," Chass said.

Uselessly, as Desmond and Aria said simultaneously, "The Imperial Medal of the Steel Heart."

Even Marren forgot her food, pastry slipping from her fingers as she stared at him a moment before breaking into an actual, real smile. "Chass, congratulations. You must be so pleased. The last time that was awarded, *my* grandmother was a young girl. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you, Mother," Chass said. Once upon a time, the words would have delighted him. Despite everything, he had always wanted her approval—approval it had always felt like Allen earned simply by existing.

Now he simply didn't care. He was far closer to the family he'd found and made than the one that had raised him.

Marren's smile faded, and she shared a look with Kareen before pushing back her chair and rising. "I was going to wait until tomorrow, after you'd had a chance to rest, but I think perhaps we should speak now, Chass. Please."

Since when did his mother say please? "As you wish." He touched Desmond's shoulder, set down his napkin, and rose, following her out of the room and, predictably, to her office. Her fortress. "You changed... everything."

Marren looked around the room, which rather than the maroon and brown that had dominated it for all of Chass's life, was now done in softer golden woods and sunset shades of orange, yellow, and pink. Even the enormous picture window behind her had been redone, the stained glass on either side of it depicting a sunrise and sunset, respectively, instead of the ships on the sea they had before. "It was time for a change."

Even more shocking, she sat at the sofa in one corner of the room, motioning for Chass to sit where he liked. He'd rather remain standing—battle ready, as Aria liked to say—but he took the seat farthest from her instead. "What's so urgent you decided it couldn't wait?"

"An apology—well, many of them," Marren said. "Your father and dame would like to make their own, so I'll not speak for them." She looked up at him, chin jutting slightly, the blue eyes exactly like his, and sad. "I'm sorry. It's not good enough, I know, but I'm your mother. I should have known something was wrong. I should have been there for you. I was focused on being queen, on my ambitions, and did not work nearly hard enough at being a good mother."

"You did with Allen," Chass said, unable to hold the bitterness back now the door had been opened after all these years. "You gave him everything."

Marren's mouth twisted. "I locked him up like a doll. I crafted Larren to be my perfect heir, I crafted you to be the perfect soldier, Allen to be my legacy in the wider world, and Manda..." Her mouth flattened, eyes filling with anger and pain. "Well, Manda doesn't matter anymore. He's dead to us, by his own wishes. Whether he's alive and thriving, or dead by his own damned stupidity, we'll likely never know."

This was all the very last thing he had expected to hear. "Since when do you apologize to anyone?"

"Since I went to surprise Allen with a visit, and His Majesty the High King explained, loudly and concisely, just how abusive I have been regarding my children," Marren said, hands folded in her lap, but clenched so tightly the knuckles stood out. "Allen forgave me, but facing him and the mistakes I made there forced me to take a long, hard look at my other children. Larren told me what he knew about... your and Allen's history, and discreet inquiries got me the rest of the story, or enough of it to put the pieces together. Allen also wrote me a letter last year that confirmed my suspicions, and... well, he has grown well into his place as High Consort, that's for certain."

"It's always Allen with you, that's for certain," Chass said. "I'm long past blaming him for your mistakes, but it is frustrating that you never listen to anyone until he enters the picture. I tried to come to you multiple times, and all you ever did was reprimand me for whining or trying to weasel out of my duties. I *needed* you, and all you did was drive me away. Why should I give a damn about your apologies now?"

Marren met his gaze, then looked away again, such strange behavior for a woman who stared down people as they threatened to kill her. All the things that made Chass terrifying, he'd inherited from her and refined to a sharp, deadly point. He didn't like it, but he wasn't going to deny it.

Finally looking back at him, Marren said, "I think I'm doing this all wrong."

"Yes, apologizing was never your strong point."

For a moment, Marren looked angry, but it vanished in the next moment. "I know. You're right. Look, I don't expect you to accept my apology and move on with life. That wouldn't be fair under ordinary

circumstances, never mind when compared to all the dedication and heart you put into earning Allen's forgiveness. But I have to start somewhere, so I am sorry, that I failed you, that I wasn't there for you, that I was more focused on being a queen than a mother. I can't change the past, but I can and have been working at being better. Did you get any of my letters?"

"Yes, I did," Chass replied. In the end, they'd been rather anticlimactic, just a formal letter acknowledging him as heir, and a later stack of papers with copies of all the official paperwork, along with his mother's usual awkward ways of telling him he had done well, all things considered.

It hadn't contained the reprimand for not saving Larren that he'd expected, and he hadn't known what to make of it at the time. This answered that question.

Marren sighed. "I know this isn't what you want."

"What would you know about what I want? Every time I tried to say anything about it, you told me no and shoved me back to the military. Back to Bateker. Not once have you *ever* cared about what I want."

That flicker of anger again, more telling about her thoughts and feelings than her carefully chosen words would ever be. Whatever apologies fell out of her mouth, his mother was never really going to change. "You wanted to be a scholar, an explorer. You wanted to travel the world and be anywhere but here."

"I have always loved my home," Chass snapped. "I was often rather sick of my family, but I have always loved Gaulden, more than any of the others. So what if I wanted to see more of the world? I would have come back."

"Some days it felt like you wouldn't, and I couldn't afford to lose you, and I knew your brother would need you someday when he took the throne. I made the best decision I could, for this family and for Gaulden. I never meant to push you into a nightmare, though, Chass. You have my grit, my ferociousness. The military was a good fit for you, and would still allow you, I thought, to pursue some of your interests. I suppose I was wrong about that too."

Chass needed more time to process his mother saying things like *I'm sorry* and *I was wrong*. "To be honest, Mother, I don't really know what to say to you right now."

"That's fine," Marren said briskly, rising and smoothing her hair, which was still perfectly arranged, not so much as a strand out of place. "Like I said, I thought it would be better to put this off until tomorrow, give you time to rest, but you seemed so tense at lunch... I don't know if I've made things better or worse now."

"I don't either. How about we move to more familiar ground for now?" Chass said.

Looking relieved, Marren nodded and moved to her desk. "As you wish, then. I've had some rough schedules drawn up for you and Desmond. Nothing before next week, so you have time to rest, acclimate, show him and Keeta around the city, that sort of thing. Then of course the ceremony for Larren—" She stopped, looking for a single moment like she might cry, but true to form, she quickly smothered it and returned to her brisk demeanor. "There are plans from the affairs coordinator about your wedding for you to look over, and I've scheduled fittings and the like for you as well. I'll have the papers sent on to your rooms, which... I've had you moved to Larren's former chambers, and your old rooms fixed up for Keeta. Some new keys are here for you—we had a few locks changed for one reason or another."

Chass rose and crossed to the desk, took the keys—and stilled to realize her hand was trembling. "Mother?"

Eyes gleaming, she looked at him, then looked away. "I had four children once. One is dead. One is a traitor. One I will probably only see once or twice more in my lifetime. I don't want to lose you too, even though it's what I deserve for failing you so miserably."

"Mother..." Chass sighed. "I'm here, I'm not going anywhere, for better or for worse. We'll take it one day at a time, all right? The only way you'll make a complete enemy of me is by hurting Desmond, Keeta, or Aria and Patici."

"Is she still your lover, then?"

"Yes, and Desmond's, and so is her wife, who has agreed to bear further children for us. You're going to have to deal with it."

"It's your life," she said stiffly, "though you will be looked at askance for such an arrangement."

"If the Islanders can manage such things without trouble, so can the rest of us," Chass said. "Is there anything of immediate importance? I don't need to wait a week to get to work."



"Take the week, Chass," Marren said with a hint of smile. "That being said, there is in fact something important to discuss. After you are fully trained up and comfortable taking over, I plan to abdicate the throne. I'm old and tired, and I'd like to spend what remains of my time being a mother and grandmother. I think by the end of next year at the latest."

"Mother..." Of all the shocking things she'd said that day, this one was by far the most astonishing. "You're serious?"

"Yes, quite serious," Marren said. "I've been queen long enough. Time to do something else. Once you're up to par, anyway."

It wasn't much of a joke, but he could see she was trying. "I'll do my best, Mother."

"You always have, even when you didn't want to," Marren said. "Come on, let's go rejoin the others, and see if my grandson has learned how to surf-ride yet. When is his birthday?"

Chass sighed, resigned to always having to drag his son from the water. "In two months, actually."

"Splendid, I'll speak with the board crafters today."

"Marvelous," Chass muttered, and relaxed slightly when she laughed. He had no idea what to make of all she'd said. He'd gone from desperately wanting her approval, to hating her, and settled at simple indifference. He was never going to be fond of her again, that wasn't possible, but this strange stalemate was better than being completely at odds. Easier, at any rate.

For now, it was also a problem he could set aside to ponder over late.

When they reached the stairs, Marren said, "Head on up to your room, if you like. I'll let Desmond know, and send the food up for you to enjoy there. You always did like your quiet."

"Yes, Mother. Thank you."

She smiled briefly, gathered her skirts, and strode off in that regal way of hers that Chass had admired as a child, until his frustration and hurt had made him hate every last single thing about her.

Chass headed up the stairs to the second floor, where he turned toward the wing reserved for the private rooms, mostly bedrooms, but also offices and the like that the public didn't have access to. Allen had once kept a personal library in one of them, and spent more time there with his

studies than anywhere else in the palace. If it wasn't being used, Chass might turn it into *his* private library.

He paused at the door to his old room and opened it, pleased to see a fire had been laid and the lights were already lit. Nothing remained of the rooms he'd grown up in; it had been redone in bright colors, almost playful designs, well-suited to a growing boy. There was a study area already set up, toys, even some clothes to fill out Keeta's wardrobe until proper fittings could be done.

A gift was on the bed, neatly wrapped in silk and tied with braided cord. Even from a distance, he recognized his mother's handwriting.

Chass departed, heading further down the hall to the suite that had once belonged to Larren, closer to his parents' chambers and with a view of the sea that was one of the best in the palace.

When the suite, a set of four rooms, had belonged to Larren, they'd nearly always been decorated in various hues of purple with black and gray accents. Far too severe for Chass's tastes, but they'd suited Larren.

Now nothing of his eldest brother remained. Assuming his mother was responsible for the renovation, though it could have been Eila, she'd gone to great lengths to know what Chass would favor. Everything was done in shades of blue and green, contrasting accents of orange and pink scattered about. The balcony doors had been repainted and refitted with stained glass depicting stories of Holy Denala... and the arch above the doors was a stained glass tale of the Goddess.

The soft whisper of feet across rug had him turning sharply, but he relaxed as he saw it was only Desmond. "You beat me here."

"I was starting to fall asleep in my tea, so your father was kind enough to dismiss me," Desmond said with a laugh. "Last I saw Keeta, he was talking in that charming way of his to some people with strange, long wooden boards."

"Surf-riding boards," Chass said.

Desmond's brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

Chass explained as he set to removing his jewelry and outer layers.

"You brat! You total, hypocritical brat!" Desmond said when he finished, gripping the front of Chass's tunic and playfully shaking him. "All that whining about sledding across the lake, and you do the same thing with water!"

"It's not the same thing at all," Chass said. "Nobody is going to plunge through ice to a freezing, terrifying death with surf-riding."

Desmond folded his arms across his chest. "Uh-huh. So no surf-rider has ever accidentally drowned while doing this? Never encountered one of those sharks you talk about?"

"It's still not the same thing," Chass retorted. "One of those is perfectly ordinary, the other is wildly dangerous and stupid."

"Shut up, Chass, and admit you've been caught out," Desmond said, then pulled him into a kiss.

Chass slid his arms around Desmond's waist and pulled him flush, enjoying always the feel of Desmond in his arms, the warmth and eagerness of his mouth, and above all how *safe* he always felt with Desmond, no matter where they were or what they were doing.

Pulling back, Desmond said, "Want to spend the rest of the day settling into our new rooms? The journey was fun, but I'm happy to finally be here."

Chass smiled softly, drawing him back in close. "I can't say every part of the journey was fun, but I'm certainly happy with the destination."

*Tales of the High Court Fin*

## About the Author

Megan is a long-time resident of queer romance and keeps herself busy reading and writing it. She is often accused of fluff and nonsense. When she's not involved in writing, she likes to cook, harass her wife and cats, or watch movies. She loves to hear from readers and can be found all over the internet.

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