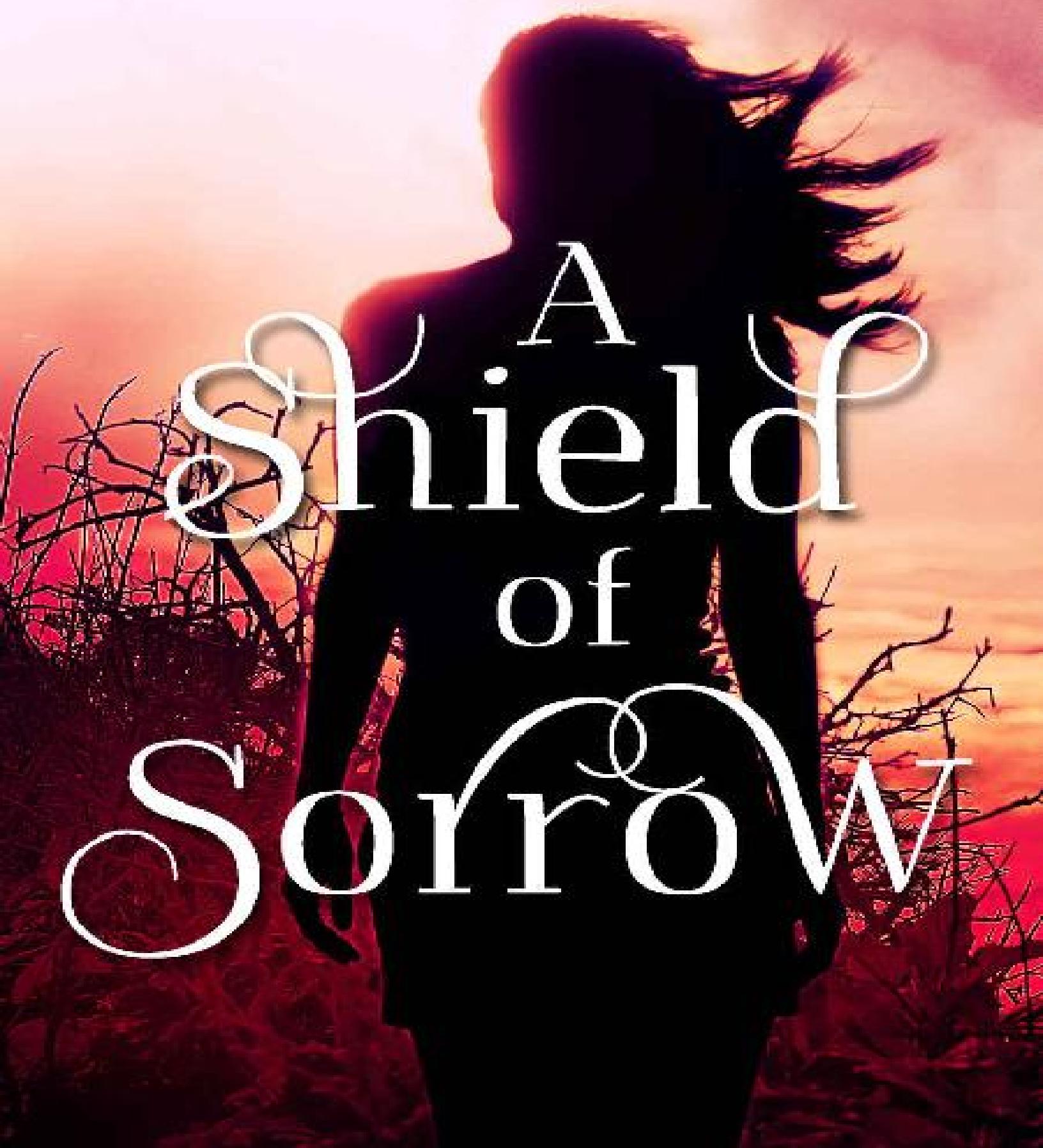


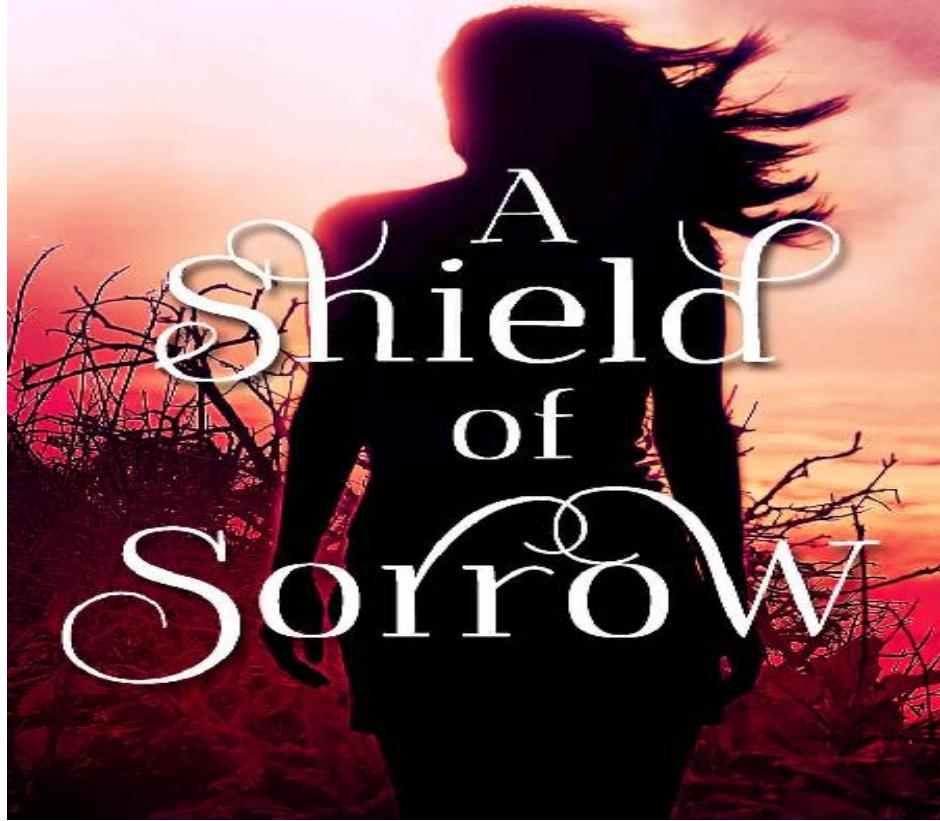
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THE KINGMAKERS' WAR BOOK 5

A  
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# A Shield of Sorrow

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# A Shield of Sorrow

Kate Avery Ellison

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*For Natalie Cleary*

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“Has some foolish man wounded your heart, my lady? For you bear a shield  
of sorrow over your breast.”

—from *The Ballad of the Sythran Duchess*

# **Part One:**

# **Blood on the Blade**

# CHAPTER ONE

THE NIGHT WAS cold. A freezing wind from the Wild Lands blew across the hills and ruffled the cloaks of the yak herders huddled around a fire at the edge of the forest of evergreen pines. The yaks were a dark blur of shadow below in the hollow of the field, their shaggy backs looking like mounds of grass in the moonlight. The occasional sound of grunting or the stamp of a hoof drifted upward, but otherwise, the night was quiet.

The youngest yak herder, Lan, chafed his hands together to warm them as he scanned the hills. The mountains between Kyreia and the Wild Lands glistened in the distance like the spine of a great, dead dragon. A wolf howled, and Lan thought wistfully of the stories his grandmother used to tell of the wild people who lived on the other side of the peaks—people with silver skin and hair who rode giant wolves and painted their faces blue when they went to war.

“Stay awake,” his older brother chided, nudging him. It was Lan’s first night in the fields, and they were all treating him like he was a nursling. Lan opened his mouth to fire back a retort when one of the others held up a fur-wrapped hand.

“Quiet,” he said. “Did you hear that?”

Lan listened.

The yaks below moved restlessly, their snorts filling his ears. His brother rose and reached for his staff. “Wolves?”

Dark figures appeared on the hills at the far end of the field.

Lan’s brother muttered a curse.

Bandits.

The yak herders leaped to their feet and ran down the hill, herding staffs in hand. Lan’s brother had a hunting knife, but Lan had only his whittling blade and his staff.

The bandits made a trilling call. It stirred up the yaks, and they milled in a nervous circle before surging forward like a brown wave, heading for the farthest hills. Two figures ran behind the yaks, driving them with whips.

“No!” Lan shouted with rage and hopelessness, but his voice was lost in the thunder of the pounding hooves.

They couldn’t lose the yaks. They’d starve without them.

His brother ran at one of the bandits, swinging the staff. The bandit pulled out a sword.

The yaks plunged up the hill, where more bandits waited for them at the top with whips and ropes in hand.

Just as Lan's brother reached the bandit, a plume of fire appeared on the top of the hill, bathing the field in a flash of orange.

The bandits on the hilltop cried out in alarm. The flame extinguished, leaving them in sudden darkness. Lan heard a shout, a muffled curse, and then silence.

The bandit facing Lan's brother wavered, his sword trembling.

A figure stepped from the shadows. The moonlight revealed a flowing cloak the color of clotted blood, the hem smoldering. The figure's eyes were in shadow, hidden by a hood, but the mouth was delicate, feminine. When the stranger spoke, the voice was female.

"Surrender," she ordered the bandit, and drew a knife. The blade glinted in the pale light of the moon.

The bandit sneered.

"Is this your little sister?" he asked the yak herder. "I'll take her after I've killed you— Ahh!" He dropped his sword with a howl and clutched at his hand as blood flowed through his fingers.

"Not his little sister," the girl said. Woman? Lan couldn't be sure, exactly. She stepped forward and whistled.

A dark shape loped through the night toward them. The stranger in the cloak smiled.

"Then I'll merely kill you." The bandit, still clutching his hand, started toward her. The cloaked woman, Lan realized, was no longer holding the knife. She took a step back.

And then a flame erupted from her left. A beast with a long, scaly neck and lashing tail, its jaws open wide, was breathing fire on the bandit before he could accost the girl in the cloak.

The bandit screamed. His clothes caught fire, and he dropped to the ground, rolling and flapping to put them out. Lan's brother fell on him, pinning him in place.

The girl in the red cloak smiled again. She tossed Lan some rope and a jar of what smelled like salve. "For the burns," she said. "And take care that he doesn't lose that finger. I nicked it when I threw my knife. I was aiming to make him drop the sword, but I hit a pinch too far to the left."

“Who are you?” Lan demanded.

The girl only smiled. She bent to retrieve her knife from the ground and tucked it into her belt.

With that, she disappeared, the beast following her. Was it a rock dragon? He’d never seen such a thing before.

At the top of the hill, the bandits lay on the ground, trussed like chickens waiting to be plucked. Two figures slid down the hill to join the girl. One of them, a thin man with a scarred and ugly face, approached Lan and handed him a bag of coins. Lan stared at it in astonishment. “What’s this?”

“Money taken from the bandits’ belts,” the man said. “Here’s your half.”

Lan grabbed his arm. “Who is she? Who are you?”

“That’s the Scarlet Blade,” the man said. “She’s here to help the people.”

“A vigilante?”

“A promised one,” the man said.

Lan stared at him. There were dozens of odd prophecies that his people liked to tell around the fire, most of them so ancient that anyone who thought they might be true had been dead for centuries.

Which one was she?

But he didn’t have time to ask. They were striding away into the darkness.

“Another thing,” the man added, turning back to Lan.

“Don’t tell anyone?” Lan said. He was still reeling with surprise.

“No,” the man said. “Tell *everyone*.”

## CHAPTER TWO

BRIAND INSPECTED THE burned edge of her cloak with a noise of displeasure as they rode away from the trussed bandits and bewildered yak herders.

“We need a better system,” she said. “Vox burned a hole in my cloak because I didn’t know where Crispin was.”

“It isn’t my fault,” Crispin protested. “There were more of them than we counted. I was busy knocking out the one keeping watch in the forest.”

Nath grunted. “If you’d let us stage these interventions like I suggested, we wouldn’t be having these problems, dragonsayer.”

“No,” Briand said firmly, dropping the edge of the cloak and looking toward the dark smudge of the horizon. “We’re not staging crises and manipulating people to gain fame. I’m uncomfortable enough with this promised one nonsense you’ve been spouting to everyone we meet.”

“People love a promised one story,” Crispin said.

Briand gave him a cutting look, and he grimaced.

“It’d be simple,” Nath argued. “The lad here puts on a black cloak and brandishes a knife at a few frightened milkmaids. You show up in a burst of flame and chase him away. The milkmaids are delighted, and you’ve won admiration in their eyes and a story at their hearth for their friends to hear and spread across the countryside. And nobody was ever in any real danger. Easy as shearing lambs.”

“Nath, you’ve never sheared a lamb before. I’ll wager it’s trickier than you think.”

“It’s an expression, guttersnipe.”

She shook her head.

“I could play a bandit easily,” Crispin said eagerly. “Despite my slender stature, I’m quite fierce in the face when I want to be.”

Nath muttered something under his breath.

“And I’m not a lad,” Crispin added. “If we were in Tasglorn, the census would count me as a man already.”

“Are we in Tasglorn?” Nath snapped, turning in the saddle to look at the boy. “I must have missed the bridges and the royal palace when we passed them on yesterday’s ride.”

Crispin sniffed but didn’t respond.

“Since we’re in Kyreia, I’ll call you lad if I please.” Nath looked back at Briand. “Anyway, my plan would have us spreading the legend of the Scarlet Blade thrice as fast as this plodding pace we’re at now. The whole countryside would have heard of us in a month.”

Briand shook her head again. She looked up at the stars.

Nath studied her. Finally, he said, as if understanding something that had eluded him, “It doesn’t mean you’re like *him*, you know.”

Briand closed her eyes briefly as she thought of the exiled prince, Jehn, and his right hand, Kael. Thinking of them sent a dagger of pain through her heart.

“Like who?” Crispin asked. “Who are you talking about?”

“Hush, lad.”

“I’m not a lad!”

Briand ignored their bickering, her thoughts spinning her away into a daydream. Yes, it did make her like him. Manipulating people, arranging kidnappings and rescues as easily as a man moves a piece on a chessboard. She was nothing like him. She would never be like him. He was a cold-hearted, ruthless bastard.

She was not cold-hearted. She was only moderately ruthless.

Briand swallowed a sigh as they rode through the darkness. Now that she’d allowed her mind to go down this path, she was going to wallow. She could feel the mixture of sadness, fury, and hurt creeping around her like quicksand.

It had been two months since she’d sneaked away from the Monarchist company in the dead of night after Kael told her he would follow Jehn’s orders and marry Lady Valora.

She chewed her lip, letting the rage gain the upper hand. She had been nurturing a daydream in which she rescued a wealthy foreign prince on the road. In the daydream, since anything was possible in daydreams, the prince promptly proposed marriage, for he needed a wife to escape an arranged marriage he had waiting for him in his home country, and Briand agreed to the impromptu match out of sheer spite. They rode to the coast, where he had a ship filled with riches waiting, and then the prince choked on a bone at their hasty wedding feast and died. Briand was left with untold wealth, and she used it to buy a small country in the southern continent, and then she sent assassin after assassin to creep up upon Jehn while he slept, hold knives to his throat, and whisper, “the dragonsayer sent me.”

The daydream gave her a bitter pleasure, but it never lasted. On the heels of the rage, as it faded, came the pain.

Yes, it had been two months. Two months of sleepless nights and staggering pain that knifed her in the chest when she least expected it. Briand would far rather have the knife than the grief. She'd never forget that stark pain in Kael's eyes as he told her he would do as Jahn commanded. As he let her go.

The memory was like a scar across her chest.

She realized Nath was looking at her strangely. Was she making a face? She rearranged her expression into something stern and somber. "What?"

"We got a good bit of coin from the bandits," he said. "Enough to let us stay in a real inn when we reach the next town."

"A real inn," Crispin said wistfully. "I think I might die if I have to sleep on the ground again in this cold."

"You might die if I hear another complaint out of your mouth," Nath said.

"I've barely complained at all! And not nearly as much as you have!"

"Save some of the coins," Briand said over her shoulder. "I'm expecting a friend. I've agreed to split the passage."

"A friend?" Nath spurred his horse forward to trot alongside hers. "Who might this be? Why didn't we discuss this?"

She eyed him. "Discuss? When you joined me on this adventure, I was clear that I was going to set the rules and the plans, and if you didn't like it—"

"Yes, yes," Nath said. "You're our fearless leader now. But solid companies of friends, spies, even vagabonds have some discussion."

Friends. She met his eyes with a glimmer of a smile in hers at his words. Hearing him claim their friendship still send a spiral of warmth down her spine.

"Don't let Crispin hear you call him a friend," she said to cover her emotions and divert the old tutor's attention. "He'll never let you forget it."

"Lords," Nath grumbled. "Why we ever let the lad come along...?" He paused, frowning. "And I'm not letting you derail me from the conversation, guttersnipe, simply by mentioning that irritation's name—"

"Look," Crispin called from behind them. "Something's coming!"

Briand's knife was in her hand before he had time to speak again. A faint whirring sound met her ears. She pulled the horse to a stop and leaned forward, squinting at the trees.

A mechbird.

The mechanical courier landed on the pommel of her saddle, the gears still hot and spinning as it spat a roll of paper into her hand and then took to the skies again.

Nath watched her, curious but holding his questions. Briand unfurled the paper and saw the code scrawled across it—a code that only she knew the key to—in Maera’s neat, quick handwriting.

“What’s that?” Crispin asked.

“A correspondence,” Briand answered in a tone that said in no uncertain terms that she wasn’t going to discuss the matter further. She kicked her horse into a trot.

“How’d the mechbird find you?” Crispin persisted. “We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

She pulled a necklace from its place tucked inside her shirt. “Locator device. Have you never traveled in the northern province before? It’s the only way anyone gets any messages that aren’t hand delivered.”

Crispin’s face might have reddened, but it was hard to tell in the faint moonlight. “I’ve never been beyond Tasnia except in the Monarchist camp in Estria before now.”

“Well,” said Briand, pointing at the mountains, “you can add the Wild Lands to your list now. Because that’s where we’re headed next.”

~

Nath’s backside was as sore as a sass-loving stepchild’s when they finally stopped to make camp. He swung down from the saddle with a groan. His bones were growing old, and they did not rejoice at cold nights and long rides quite like they used to. These young things didn’t know how badly he wanted a warm fire and a tall pint and a pile of books to read. They were both chafing for adventure and glory, and he wasn’t about to admit that he was tired, but lords, he was tired. He grunted under his breath as he pulled the saddle from his horse’s back and draped it over a fallen log.

His eyes fell on the dragonsayer tending to her horse nearby. She had already removed the saddle and blanket and was running her hands over the animal’s back, checking for sores. The horse poked her shoulder with its nose, and she scratched the creature’s neck. Then, when she thought no one was looking, she leaned forward and buried her face in the horse’s mane.

Her shoulders rose and fell in a quick shudder that he would have missed if he'd blinked.

Nath bit the inside of his cheek.

He was a bit of an idiot when it came to these kinds of matters, but he wasn't a blind fool. She was hurting deeply; he could see it in every gesture and word she made and spoke. Even her threats to cut the lad's ears off when he whined too much lacked her usual vigor. It was a sad thing to see. Sometimes, she muttered in her sleep, and Nath always turned away and pretended to snore to drown out whatever words she might be uttering, lest the lad hear them.

She deserved her privacy, at least.

She didn't know that he knew about Kael. Well, they'd never discussed it. She surely suspected, though.

He tied his mount's lead rope to a tree and headed toward the campsite, where the lad was poking at the fire, a pot of water in his hand. Steam curled from the top, and the water bubbled as Crispin set the pot in the dirt and reached into the saddlebag nearest him.

The dragonsayer also didn't know that he'd been sending mechbirds to Kael since they'd begun traveling, telling his former leader vague updates of their health and whereabouts. It was all in a code only he, Kael, and Tibus knew. If intercepted, the messages would be pure gibberish to anyone else. It was the least he could do for Kael.

Sometimes, Nath reflected, he felt like an old man caught between two favorite children. He loved them both. He mourned for them both. He—"What are you doing?" Nath shouted at Crispin.

The lad was so startled he nearly spilled the bag of grounds he was trying to put in the pot of water. "I'm making coffee."

"By putting tree bark in it?"

A handful of curling pieces of bark floated in the boiling water that was about to receive some of their precious, hoarded grounds.

"The woman in the last town said it would make it last longer and give it heft," Crispin protested. "It's a special bark. It has a good flavor."

"Give it... heft?? Flavor??" Nath strode forward and snatched the pot from the lad's hands. "Give me that. I'll make it myself. Heft," he growled to himself as Crispin scrambled away. "Guttersnipe!" he bellowed.

She was Guttersnipe when he was irritated, always.

She appeared from the bushes, buckling her belt. "Yes, Nath?"

“Was it your idea to let the lad make the coffee?”

“I thought he should learn,” she said. She was fighting a smile. Nath almost lost his anger at the sight of it, but then he remembered—tree bark—and saw red all over again.

“We have barely a fortnight’s worth left, and he’s ruining it!”

“I’m trying to make it last longer,” Crispin interjected. “She also said we could put sawdust in our bread to stretch the flour.”

“Who was this woman?” Nath exclaimed. “Did she look like a witch? Did you do something to anger her, lad? Because she’s trying to murder you with her suggestions!”

“I have heard of the sawdust in the bread,” the dragonsayer offered. “When I was with the thief-queen, some of the shops sold it that way when flour stores were low. Tasted terrible.”

Muttering angrily, Nath set about making the coffee. He glanced once or twice at the dragonsayer, who was hiding a smile. One of the best he’d seen in weeks.

Maybe it was worth the lad trying to kill them all with bark—bark!—in their precious coffee.

No, he took that back. Not the coffee.

But he was glad to see her smile.

He only hoped Kael was finding a little peace too.

# CHAPTER THREE

THE ASSASSIN STRUCK without warning.

Kael had been accompanying Prince Jehn on foot through the Tyrian capital's trade district—Jehn's insistence—with a retinue of guards and one of the Tyrian ministers of trade when the figure appeared on the roof above them and dropped to the street in a flutter of sand-colored robes. Everything slowed around Kael at the sight of the assassin. The world turned strangely silent as he snapped to action. His hand fell to the sword at his hip. His feet moved into position. His blood pumped through his pulse points like a drum.

Sand puffed around the assassin's feet as he hit the ground. The man's mouth was open in a snarl, his face hidden behind a fold of blue-striped, rough-spun cloth. He wavered once, as if drunken. An act?

Kael's blade was in his hand before the man in tattered brown had risen from his crouch. The attacker wore rags, but the curved knives in his hands were crusted with gemstones that winked and flashed in the glaring Tyrian sun.

This was no drunken beggar.

The men and women browsing nearby fled, leaving the street empty. Kael was not a man given to unnecessary violence, but he wanted to fight this man, and not just because the assassin threatened his prince.

The assassin stood cupped between two bone-white walls that framed him perfectly as Kael ran forward to meet him, a faint ringing filling his ears. A hungry sense of rage filled him, a rage that rejoiced at this opportunity to clash blades with an enemy. The world narrowed to the edge of his sword, and he lifted it with a strange and unfamiliar pleasure.

It was not Kael's oath that drove him to fight with such relish. There was something dark in him now, a wound upon his mind and his heart. He'd tried to drown it with rigid calisthenics in the courtyard among the others who practiced swordplay and archery, and by climbing walls and swimming in the warm surf outside the summer palace.

But this... this fierce bite of danger was a kiss upon his fevered soul. In the face of it, he felt solid. Composed. Whole. The jagged tear inside him closed up tight, sealed by his focused rage. It felt good. Intoxicating, almost.

When Kael swung his sword, his blood sang along with the blade. Their weapons clashed with a ringing sound. Behind Kael, Jehn's guard closed around him in a human shield. The Tyrian minister was shouting something, but his voice seemed muffled, distorted, as though Kael were underwater. It was only Kael and the assassin in a deadly dance, moving around each other in a circle. Sweat sparkled on the assassin's brow. Air rushed into Kael's lungs. They moved in tandem toward each other, kicking up more dust and sand.

The assassin's left blade caught Kael's shoulder, leaving a burning slice across his skin, but the pain focused Kael. He brought his sword up to catch the other's blade without hesitating. The assassin grunted at the shock of the blow. Their weapons flashed again, and then Kael knocked the blade from the man's hand. He feinted left and struck right, and his sword sliced along the assassin's ribs.

The assassin staggered, and Kael disarmed him, the other blade falling into the dust. He stepped forward and pressed the tip of his sword against the man's chest.

“Surrender—”

The assassin grabbed both of Kael's shoulders and pulled himself forward into the blade. His face froze in pain, and he sagged with a groan. Kael dropped the sword and caught the man as he fell, curses sliding from his lips.

The fiery beauty of the focus faded. The pain of his bleeding arm cut a swath across his awareness. Now he was just a broken man kneeling in the dust and heat, holding a body as the life drained from it.

~

Servants ran forward to attend them when they reached the summer palace where Jehn's court resided in exile.

“Call the physician,” Jehn ordered as the servants flocked to him. “Have him attend us in my rooms immediately.”

Kael had tied a cloth around his arm above the cut, and the bleeding had slowed, but there was still an alarming red splash on the sleeve of his shirt. He stood in the courtyard, dirty and drenched in sweat, drawing stares from the nobles who had come to greet the prince upon his return. Some looked

alarmed, others in awe, as though he had just returned from slaying a monster.

Three months ago, he'd been the most hated man at court. But the attention and memory of the nobility were fickle at best. Now, Kael had the aura and reputation of a dangerous and important man. He garnered careful respect and an amusing amount of bootlicking from some of the more enterprising nobles, who saw him as a path to currying Jehn's favor.

"Come," Jehn said to Kael as he strode from the courtyard, his long robes swirling behind him.

Kael followed his prince through the endless corridors of the Tyyrian summer palace that had housed the exiled Austrisian court and their prince for the last year. Sunshine striped the white stone path before them, and a breeze that smelled like salt blew from the direction of the sea, stirring the stifling heat of midday. Dappled shadows swayed, cast by precisely placed palms lining the gardens on either side of the corridor, and Kael's pulse raced as he kept pace with the prince. He saw enemies lurking around every column and corner. A flick of an assassin's scarf—no, just a vine waving in the wind. A thud of feet as a man dropped to the ground behind them—no, a servant unloading a sack of grain from a wagon bed. Lords, he was tired. They reached Jehn's chambers. Guards sprang to attention at their approach, and one tried to speak, but Jehn didn't acknowledge them. He swept inside the antechamber.

A figure stood in the middle of the room, bathed in shadows.

Kael wrenched his dagger from his belt reflexively before he realized it was Lady Valora.

Her eyes widened, and he wasn't sure if it was the sight of him or the dagger that had her so alarmed.

One of the guards entered behind them. "Lady Valora is here to see you," he said to Jehn.

"Thank you; we noticed," Jehn said with faint amusement.

Valora curtsied as Kael sheathed his weapon. "Your Grace," she murmured to Jehn. "Kael," she said to him, with a flick of her chin in his direction.

"Lady Valora," he replied. A nobleman might have bowed, but he was not a nobleman. He gave her a firm nod.

Jehn looked between them, his eyes missing nothing, though Kael was not sure how the prince interpreted what he saw, or if he was pleased or displeased with it.

Frankly, Kael didn't care if the true prince was pleased. He had returned to Tyrr. He was going to marry this woman with the countenance as cool and placid as a lagoon at midnight, even though his dreams were consumed with another woman, one whose eyes sparked with fire and fury in equal measures, it seemed. Only in dreams, though, because dreams were the only part of his mind that he could not chain into submission.

He would not think of *her*. He would focus on his duty. He would not waver.

He did this for his prince. For Austrisia.

Lady Valora was a beautiful woman, and he respected her devotion to the Monarchists, but she might as well be Kael's sister for all the interest she inspired in him.

It had led to a number of awkward moments since he'd returned from Tasglorn.

Lady Valora was looking at his torn sleeve, bright red with blood. Her mouth was a line of concern, his eyebrows slashes of fury. "Have the merchants become more aggressive since I last visited the trade district?" "There was an assassin," Jehn informed her. He sank onto the settee in the middle of the room and leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling high above them, where the builders had wrought an intricate pattern of squares in an interlocking grid that Kael found mind-numbingly dull, but Jehn had remarked upon multiple times as beautiful.

Needless to say, their taste differed.

"Sit, Kael," Jehn ordered, not taking his eyes from the ceiling. "Before you collapse."

Kael lowered himself to a chair, startled to find his hands trembled. His arm was burning, the pain radiating out in waves.

Lady Valora crossed the room to a low table that held a platter of fruit and a pitcher sweating beads of water. She poured some of the water into a silver goblet and brought it to Kael.

"Thank you," he said, his fingers brushing hers as he accepted it.

Valora's gaze flicked to his and then away. She returned to the other side of the room, her long gown sliding over the floor with a swishing sound. She sat across from Jehn and looked expectantly at the prince until he sighed and moved his hand in an invitation for her to speak.

"The attacks are getting bolder," she said.

"It was a—" Kael began.

“A local,” Jahn finished. “Not Austrisian.”

“Agreed,” Kael said. “The fighting style, the knives. He was Tyyrian, not merely styled to look so as has been true in the past.”

“What does that mean?” Valora asked. She looked between them.

“It means,” Jahn murmured with a bemused smile, “that we’ve overstayed our welcome here.”

A low knock came at the door, and the physician entered, his bronzed face shining with sweat.

“You’re late,” Jahn said.

“My apologies,” the physician said to the prince, bowing low. He seemed frazzled. His robes were askew as if he’d run the whole way. “I have just finished delivering Lady Orissa’s child.” The physician unpacked his satchel, withdrawing bandages and instruments for wound cleaning.

“I did not realize she was laboring,” Valora said with interest. “Was it a girl as she expected?”

“A boy,” the physician said, and Valora absorbed this bit of news with a wrinkle of her forehead.

Kael had a brief thought—did she want a child? A girl, perhaps, or a boy? He would be expected to give her children.

Thinking of it caused him a mixture of shame, pain, and anger.

The physician handed Kael a draught to drink for the pain, and Kael downed the mixture in one bitter swallow.

He sat still as the physician cut away the torn sleeve and inspected the wound.

“I shall stitch the cut,” the physician said. “Keep it clean, and rest the arm for two weeks.”

Kael held his position as the needle pierced his wounded flesh. He had withstood torture before without making a sound; he knew how to manage physical pain. He imagined himself in Estria, with the wild blue sky overhead and a herd of brindled horses grazing nearby.

And... *her*.

There she was, blinking into existence in his fantasy with her eyes flashing indignantly at him and her mouth curling up in some unspoken challenge. Her knives flashed at her hip and wrist, and her curling hair danced around her ears in the stiff breeze. She was like a spark, an ember, and he was like dry kindling.

He wrenched himself away from the image. The physician was dabbing at the wound. Valora and Jehn spoke quietly across from him. His mind was fuzzy—the drought had begun to work its effects—and Kael struggled to maintain alertness.

“Finished,” the physician said. “Remember, let it rest. Keep the wound clean and dry.” He wagged his finger in Kael’s face. “With your reputation lately, I know you are going to want to disregard my orders. Don’t.”

His reputation lately?

He had been training a great deal. Though he was welcome among the court again, with his pardon from Jehn and his engagement to Lady Valora, Kael sought solitude. Early morning found him in the yard, practicing his swordplay and knife-throwing skills. He’d recently taken up the bow as well, pushing himself to obtain greater marksmanship, training for hours in the midday sun. And in the evenings, he swam in the surf outside the palace walls, which he scaled without a rope upon finishing. Whenever Jehn did not need him, he trained. It was a punishing regimen, and the resulting exhaustion ensured he was asleep within seconds of becoming horizontal at night.

No doubt the court gossiped about it.

He didn’t care.

Kael nodded when it became apparent that the physician wasn’t going to leave without some kind of agreement. “Understood.”

Jehn was watching him even as he spoke with Valora. Kael met the prince’s gaze, and he had the oddest urge to smile. The drought was taking hold. The physician moved to examine the prince next, but Jehn waved him away. “The assassin never touched me,” he said. “Perhaps you ought to return to Lady Orissa and see that all is well with the child.”

After the physician left, Valora asked, “What now?”

Jehn sighed. “I suspected it would come to this, but not so soon. I have already sent letters to several monarchs requesting sanctuary for our court.” For a man whose life had just been threatened, he seemed very calm. But Jehn had never conformed to what Kael might think of as expected emotions.

“Which ones?” Kael asked.

They both looked at him as if surprised he was still listening.

“Nyr,” Jehn said. “Mammot. What do you think?”

“Mammot is unlikely to take us in,” Kael said, considering the options. Mammot was a small island country at the far eastern tip of the middle continent. It had the most prestigious library in the world, and a small army. Far smaller than Cahan’s. “They have no quarrel with Cahan yet. Housing his rival would declare a side in a war they’ve so far managed to stay out of.”

“Agreed,” Jehn said. “And Nyr?”

“The Nyrian queen has agreed to an alliance, but won’t her taking us in signal this fact to her enemy—Bestane—earlier than she planned?”

“Yes,” Jehn said, nodding. He seemed pleased, as if Kael was his pupil and he a patient tutor. As if this were all some hypothetical exercise for their intellectual amusement. “That is true. However, I think we can make it work in our favor.”

Valora seemed as mystified as Kael. Jehn held up a finger.

“Give me a little time,” he said. “I need to sort out the details in my head. Then, we can present our plan to the council. Make no mention of it yet—I don’t want them to have time to come up with too many objections.” He paused. “Lady Valora. Did you need anything else?”

Lady Valora clasped her hands together. A flush of color stained her cheeks. “The council is asking about the whereabouts of the dragonsayer.” She did not look at Kael.

Kael was like a thing carved from stone as Jehn answered, “Tell them she is on a mission for me in southern Austrisia. Thank you, Lady Valora.”

Lady Valora curtsied. She left the room in a soft swish of her skirts, still not looking at Kael.

Jehn and Kael were silent in the wake of her. Kael stood as if to leave, and Jehn turned his head.

“Stay,” he said quietly.

Kael froze, waiting for the words to come.

# CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRINCE AND Kael stood in silence in the antechamber. Kael practiced clenching and unclenching his right hand, as Jehn had recently pointed out that he tapped his leg unconsciously whenever he was irritated.

“Your arm,” Jehn said. “What do you think that injury’s worth—more land to your future Estrian estate? One thousand acres?”

It was a joke Jehn liked to make—every time Kael occurred an injury in his service, Jehn teased that he ought to reward Kael with some duchy or estate. Sometimes the hypothetical prize was a string of Tyrian brood mares, or once, he’d promised a set of chess carved from marble, with diamonds for eyes on the figurines.

Kael wasn’t in the mood for jokes today.

Jehn looked at his face. “Two hundred acres,” he said.

Kael still didn’t smile.

Jehn resumed looking at the pattern on the ceiling. “She isn’t in the south, you know.”

Kael swallowed, resisting a flinch. “I know.”

“You’re angry with me,” Jehn observed.

Kael pressed his lips together and turned his head to look at the ornate wooden screens carved to let in patterns of light on the white stone floors of the antechamber. “I am your obedient servant,” he said. His head felt fuzzy, his tongue loose from what the physician had given him.

He was going to say something he’d later regret.

Jehn swung his feet to the floor and stood. He clasped his hands behind his back and paced the length of the room. “My friend, I know it has been difficult for you to—”

“I am doing as you have ordered,” Kael interrupted. “Is that not enough, my prince? Must you also torment me with a lecture?”

Jehn stopped before the carved wooden screens covering the windows. He rocked on his heels. The shadows of the patterns rippled across his nose and cheekbones as he turned back toward the inner part of the room.

“You’re angry,” he repeated, as if solidifying the observation.

Kael wondered, as he had wondered before, how his prince was simultaneously so brilliant and so dense.

“I have arranged a perfect match for you,” Jehn said, his eyes flashing with contained rage. “She is perfect. She is Kyreian, her house old and established but currently weak enough to be overlooked by most of those at court who wish to control the balance of power. She has just enough power to provide you the clout you need among the council without making you too threatening at present to either your brother or your father, but after the war is over, you both will have enough accumulated land—in three provinces, no less, as I intend to reinstate you to your full inheritance as a Halescorn—and wealth to become the most powerful at court if you choose.”

“Jehn,” Kael said tiredly. The warmth of the drought still cradled him in a fuzzy embrace, but his arm throbbed, his head ached, and he was bone-weary. He did not want to have this conversation now. He did not want to hear all of Jehn’s clever reasons for why he could not be with the woman he loved.

“Furthermore,” Jehn said, “Lady Valora’s father bred horses, and his estate has a very fine stock remaining. You could build an empire with that stock using your Estrian lands for ranching. He has some of the finest brindle bloods in the country, perhaps the world, if his letters to his sister before he died are to be believed. And he was a humble sort of man, so I do believe \_\_\_\_\_”

“Jehn!”

The prince’s mouth snapped shut. He turned to his friend and right hand, looking startled. His expression turned reflective.

“I’m not very good at empathy sometimes,” he said slowly. “But I know you are unhappy with my decision.”

“I do not wish to speak of it,” Kael said crisply. “Sir.”

“She is too volatile, Kael. Too volatile for me to properly place her in my plans for you, to fully calculate the risk—”

“I DO NOT WISH TO SPEAK OF IT.”

Jehn stared at him, wide-eyed. Kael stood stunned at his own outburst. A myriad of apologies sprang to his lips—he was not in his right mind from the draught for the pain, he was exhausted from fighting the assassin—but he swallowed them all back. He did not offer any excuses. He faced his friend—not his prince, his *friend*—with a weary resolution. Let Jehn have him flogged if he wished. Kael would not recant what he’d said.

Jehn’s left eye twitched. His hands opened and closed. He said nothing.

Kael bowed deeply, turned on his heel, and left.

Jehn didn't call him back.

Outside the prince's chambers, the wind caught the edges of Kael's collar and teased the ends of his hair. He squinted in the glaring sunlight, fighting the urge to go at once to the courtyard to train until his mind joined his body in numb exhaustion. Until he'd utterly banished any thoughts of her.

The physician said to rest.

Rest.

It was like a curse upon him.

Perhaps the physician was being overly careful.

His arm throbbed in response to that thought. Kael muttered a curse under his breath and stalked toward his chamber.

A servant intercepted him. "This came for you, sir." The man held out a letter, sealed with wax. The handwriting on the exterior said simply, *To the Right Hand*.

Kael's mouth was suddenly dry. He took the letter without a word and went into his chamber.

He broke the seal and unfurled the paper. Nath's neat penmanship covered the page, and Kael didn't need to get out his cipher to translate the code before his eyes. He and Nath had worked together long enough that he knew how to decipher their private correspondence code by memory.

Even though the letter was encoded, Nath still used vague references and alluded to private understandings. He was being meticulously careful.

*In N. K. at the moment. Three towns, bad food. She is learning Nyrese at her request, Mammish at mine. Sword training. Some headaches. Irritable, but resolute.*

*She misses you.*

—N

That was all. Kael read the letter three times, committing the contents to memory before he lit a candle and burned the paper to ash.

So they were in northern Kyreia. Nath was teaching her languages—good. Her education was still sorely lacking. She needed the instruction.

Headaches meant she was still experiencing issues with her powers. And she was cranky. Not a surprise.

The final line, whenever he thought of it, sent a dagger straight through his heart. He closed his eyes once.

He'd told Nath no personal touches like that. He was going to marry Lady Valora. This was not about holding on, not like that. He had a duty to keep track of the dragonsayer. She had always been his charge, and Jehn still expected it.

But the last sentence was out of line. He would tell Nath, no more of that. Stick to the facts only.

*She misses you.*

He swallowed. A knot tightened in his chest, and he fought the urge to head straight to the courtyard to train his body into submission. His arm ached. Curse that assassin and his cursed blade.

~

Valora walked the length of the center garden twice, sorting her thoughts and feelings and attempting to make sense of them. The fountains filled the air with a soothing sound of falling water, and the square of green grass was mostly empty in the blazing heat of midday, and thus she was alone and able to think.

Kael was a difficult man to read in any given situation, but he'd become downright inscrutable since he'd returned to Tyrr amid the news that they were to wed. He was always polite to her, but nothing else. They had exchanged exactly two smiles, one of which she would describe as perfunctory, when Jehn had announced to the court their impending nuptials. The other he'd given her as they'd sat together to watch a race between two nobles at the riding track. The nobles had bickered at breakfast about who was the better rider, and the whole court turned out to watch them settle the score. The louder and angrier of the two had fallen from his horse halfway around the track and risen bellowing that the other had cheated. She'd met Kael's glance and said something witty—she couldn't for the life of her recall what—and he'd smiled, a startled, genuine smile. Valora wished she could remember what she'd said to him so she could say something like it again.

She had never been a deeply romantic person, not by her personal opinion of herself or her family's. Her mother used to tease her that Valora would rather marry a man who could properly balance a ledger book than one who

was good at reciting poems and dancing. Valora wasn't sure why that was a joke—of course she wanted a man who could properly balance a ledger book. That was a useful skill. Poems were worthless, and she found them boring.

Kael had recited no poems to her. She respected that.

But they were to be married, and thus they at least needed to know how to have a conversation. She would need to produce an heir, of course, and she wanted children, but she refused to sleep with a man with whom she couldn't even talk. But she couldn't seem to keep him in the same room as her for more than a few minutes.

She wasn't stupid. He seemed disappointed in the match, to put it politely. But he was loyal to Jehn's wishes, as was she.

They needed to make it work.

He had never been anything but kind to her, if in a rather aloof way, but kindness wasn't enough. A house built on a soft foundation would fall.

Valora intended to have a solid house.

No matter what she had to do to ensure it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRST TOWN Briand and her traveling companions reached after their rescue of the yak herders was little more than a shanty town for trappers and gold miners, huddled against the pebbly shore of a great lake. The houses were lean-tos sloppily constructed from logs and branches and even cloth and broken remains of wagons. The only tavern in town was a ship moored at the edge of the water. Men bundled in furs pushed past them on the plank that led to the hold, where patrons hunched over uneven, sticky tables and spat on the floor between pulls on their pipes.

“I want to sleep in a proper inn,” Crispin complained, staring at a rat that scurried across the edge of the room. “Not a filthy floating hovel.”

“This place isn’t worth our money,” Nath agreed. “We’re going to get lice sleeping in these beds.” He glared around him as they sat at a table in the common area.

Crispin looked startled to have Nath’s support. He opened and closed his mouth. “Yes,” he said. “Lice. And probably the plague.”

“The plague hasn’t been seen in these parts in fifty years,” Nath snapped at Crispin.

Briand pursed her lips. “Would you rather sleep outside in the woods where we left Vox?”

“Yes,” Crispin said readily.

“Yes,” Nath agreed.

The two looked at each other again, each skeptical of the other’s agreement. Briand swallowed a smile and said nothing. She produced a coin from the purse they’d taken from the bandits and laid it on the table.

Nath looked around for a serving girl, muttered something about backwater establishments, and went to buy them something to drink. He returned with three frosty pints and a platter of greasy meat drowning in a congealing sauce. “The innkeeper says the water isn’t safe to drink.”

Briand took a sniff from one of the pints and drew back, her eyes watering. Crispin tried his and coughed.

“Don’t drink that,” he sputtered. “It’ll blind you.”

Nath chuckled and lifted his cup to his lips.

The chatter of raised, excited voices snagged their attention. A group of yak herders had entered the ship and were ordering a round of drinks.

Briand reached up and tugged the hood of her cloak over her eyes as Nath and Crispin both slunk lower in their chairs.

“—Attacked from the darkness!” the biggest of the yak herders was saying, his arms spread wide to demonstrate. “The bandits scattered like rabbits.” Their listeners leaned forward in rapt attention.

“And,” the youngest herder added. “It was a girl!”

“A girl?” someone scoffed.

Briand’s mouth curled in amusement.

The yak herder nodded solemnly.

“How could you be sure?” another asked. “Did you...?” He made a gesture to mimic lifting a skirt.

Briand’s smile vanished. She fingered her knife in irritation.

“Her voice,” the yak herder said, blushing. “It was a girl.”

“A woman,” Nath muttered under his breath.

The listeners chuckled in disbelief.

“She conjured fire,” the boy persisted. “Giant plumes of it.”

The trappers gathered around him listened with a mixture of amazement and skepticism.

“Conjured fire? You are mad, boy!”

“Was there a storm? Was it lightning?”

“How would I imagine that?” the boy insisted. “It was fire!”

Briand smiled again. “Speaking of fire, I’m going to go make sure Vox hasn’t eaten all of our provisions by now.”

She exited the ship, tugging her hood over her eyes as she passed the yak herders. They never even glanced at her.

“A girl who conjures fire,” one of the naysayers was saying in the excited group of listeners. “What on earth does it mean?”

“It’s the Scarlet Blade,” Nath said, setting down his pint with a thump.

The yak herders and their knot of listeners turned to look at him.

“Who are you?” one ventured.

“Just passing through,” Nath said. “Overheard your story. Surely you’ve heard the legend of the Scarlet Blade?”

Their faces told him they hadn’t.

Nath leaned forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “Well, the legend says this: A champion of the common man will appear from the north in a time of great need. She’ll bring with her—yes, her—fire and

destruction, and she'll wreak havoc upon our enemies for the salvation of Austrisia."

"And gold," Crispin added. "The Scarlet Blade will bring gold to the poor." The listeners' faces lit up, and they murmured excitedly. The yak herders looked at each other with significance, but they didn't mention the coins they'd gotten from the bandits. Likely so they wouldn't be badgered to share.

Nath kicked the boy's leg under the table. "Sure," he said. "Gold. But mostly fire and destruction."

The listeners gaped.

"Where did she come from?" the yak herder boy asked Nath.

"Legend doesn't say," Nath murmured. "Somewhere north."

"The Wild Lands?" The boy's eyes widened. "Is she one of the wild people?"

"Not that far north," Nath said.

"But if the legend says north..." the boy insisted.

"North probably means Kyreia," Nath said, annoyed now. He stood.

"Anyway, good day."

He swept out with Crispin on his heels. Briand waited for them at the tree line, her arms crossed and a smirk of amusement on her face.

"You look peeved," she commented.

"You're from the Wild Lands, apparently," Nath informed her with a grunt as he brushed past her for the forest. "And thanks to the boy, you're also dispensing gold to every dirty-faced ruffian between here and Tasglorn."

"I didn't say that," Crispin objected, hustling after them. "I said she was giving gold to the poor. They liked it. You need to have a positive, not just death and destruction."

"Well, that's how they'll tell it." Nath pushed a branch out of his way, releasing it in time for the bough to snap back in Crispin's face. "And I think death and destruction are ambitious enough for our dragonsayer without turning her into a treasure chest, too."

"I didn't say how much gold," Crispin grumbled. "Besides, we gave half our coin to those cow herders."

"Yak herders," Nath corrected him. "The point is, let me do the talking. Next time, you'll probably promise her hand in marriage to someone, and then where will we be?"

He realized his mistake too late. Briand turned away and began vigorously saddling one of the horses. She said nothing. Nath grimaced, and Crispin blinked at them both, his expression changing as understanding dawned. Nath made a swift motion with his hands at the boy, who clamped his mouth shut and didn't voice his thoughts.

"If we aren't going to spend the night here, shall we ride on?" Nath asked, his voice gentler than normal. "Where are we headed next, dragonsayer?" "Peak," she said. "I'm expecting a delivery."

# CHAPTER SIX

## KAEL WASN'T SLEEPING.

Without the sheer exhaustion brought on by his training regimen, he lay awake in the stillness of his room, listening to the occasional footsteps that passed outside as guards patrolled the corridors.

Finally, he threw back the blanket that was threatening to stifle him and rose. He paced to the window, where moonlight streamed through the carved wooden slats and painted his floor and wall with silver, then to his closet to find a shirt. He dressed quickly and then went out into the hall. If he couldn't train, at least he could inspect the walls and the gardens for any weaknesses or possible entry points for assassins.

The Tyrian air was like warm lagoon water over his skin as he prowled moodily through the shadowed paths of the garden. Guards straightened as he passed, and they nodded to him in greeting. Since his reinstatement as Jehn's right hand and favorite, he'd been treated with deference and respect by all of the soldiers.

The whole palace held memories of her. He passed the garden where she'd thrown the knife that had saved Jehn's life from an assassin, where he'd scooped her up in his arms and carried her away, certain she was bleeding to death and desperate to do anything to save her. He passed the column where he'd kissed her in a moment of utter weakness after discovering she was whole and well and the blood was not hers. The scene was branded upon his mind like a burn after a lightning strike.

He would not think of her. He would not.

Kael crossed the garden, heading for the stables.

A shadow parted from the bushes, the movements furtive.

He stopped, his hand dropping to the knife at his belt. "Halt," he ordered in a low voice.

The figure froze. "Kael?"

"Cait?"

The nobleman's daughter stepped into the moonlight, her eyes wide as she took him in. She knew him well enough that she didn't ask what he was doing in the gardens at night.

"I'm- I'm leaving," she confessed. "My parents don't know. Please don't tell them. They'll find out soon enough." She paused, and then added

fiercely, “You can’t stop me.”

She wasn’t a child. He couldn’t do anything to stop her. He inclined his head, and she relaxed.

“Leaving?” he asked then. “After Sabin’s death?”

Her brother had sneaked away to be a spy. The war had promptly killed him.

“I have to,” she replied. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears in the moonlight. “Sabin was willing to die for those he loved, and yet here I sit behind these walls, safe and well-fed. I have to do something. And this is something that only I can do.”

“And where exactly are you going to go?”

She flicked her gaze away from his. “I’m going to meet Briand.”

Her declaration was like an arrow to his heart.

All of the rest of those who loved her were free to think of her, to speak of her, to write to her, to go to her. He alone was like a prisoner here, unable to leave. Unable to grant himself rest.

The bushes rustled, and a four-legged shadow sneezed sparks.

“Sieya?” Kael said, surprised. “How long have you been hiding her here?”

“Since we arrived,” Cait admitted. “Not in the bushes, I mean—in my room.” She laughed nervously. “I’m taking her to Briand.”

Hearing her name was like a balm and a brand rolled into one. He exhaled.

“Do you need any assistance?”

She blinked at him. “You could help me get her in the crate.”

And thus, Kael found himself hoisting a dog-sized dracule into a crate in the stables in the middle of the night while the beast wriggled and scratched and blew smoke in his eyes. A spark landed on a patch of straw, and Cait stamped it out. Horses nickered in the warm darkness, uncertain at the noise and smell of fire.

“This would be easier—with—a dragonsayer—” he said, finally getting the creature inside and closing the lid. Sieya scabbled her claws against the wooden walls and then turned a few circles, making quizzical purring sounds. She poked her snout against the slats and snorted in a tiny spray of sparks.

“Stop that,” Cait scolded. “No flames, remember?”

Sieya answered with an unrepentant snuffle. She withdrew her nose and flopped down with a huff.

“Good girl,” Cait crooned, sticking a finger through the slats.

“How do you plan to get out of the country?” Kael asked.

“I bribed one of the boat captains. The ones that carry supplies to and from Austrisia, and smuggle in nobles fleeing for their lives.”

“And how are you planning to explain the dracule?”

“I told them it was an exotic Tyrian pet. Really, Kael, you’re treating me like your little sister.”

“You are like my little sister,” he teased, but in truth, he was impressed with her, and he told her so. “You’re very brave,” he said.

She stepped forward and squeezed his hand. “No braver than the rest.”

She led one of the horses from the stalls, and with Kael’s silent help, hitched it to the wagon that held Sieya’s crate.

She led the horse into the open air, past the riding track and toward the kitchens at the end of the palace orchard. Kael walked beside her, reluctant to see her go. He accompanied her all the way to the wall, where she met a pair of guards at the kitchen gate. When they saw Kael, they let her through without question.

A ship waited at the dock below, the surf that crashed around it glinting white in the darkness. Cait paused, the wind whipping her hair and cloak. She clasped Kael’s hands.

“Goodbye,” she called to him about the roar of the surf.

His reply caught in his throat.

Cait gave him one last smile and turned away for the ship.

Kael watched her go with a knot in his chest, in the place right below his heart.

~

Briand tried to read by the flickering light of the fire they’d built in the forest, but the words of the ancient dragonsayer text were beginning to swim on the page. She closed the book, taking a moment to trace the dragonsayer symbol etched on the cover—a circle with three ornate and intricately drawn lines slashing through it—before she stashed the book in one of her saddlebags with the others. Maera had rescued them from the house of the guardians in Tasglorn before it was raided and burned by the Seekers, and she’d given the books to Briand, who’d been struggling to make sense of them ever since. Much of the books’ content was written in a

language Nath claimed he'd never seen before. Even Crispin, the eternal intellectual braggart, had no idea of its origins.

The parts she could read were alternately boring or baffling. She was no scholar, and trying to understand these dry tomes had her wishing to drive her knife through her eyes.

Still, she read them—tried to read them, anyway—every night.

Nath and Crispin lay asleep on the other side of the fire when she finally crawled under her blankets and shut her eyes. She thought of *him* once—a bitter dart of longing mingled with furious rage stoked hot in her heart to quell the feeling, with dismal results—and then she was asleep.

And she dreamed.

The cell in that dreary dungeon was familiar as the backs of her eyelids by now—the rustle of damp straw under her, the briny smell of mud and reeds outside the slatted windows, the guttural croak of frogs in the night.

And him.

He sat against his wall and she against hers. A wall of metal bars and a locked door between them. They were prisoners to this game, how fitting that they should play it within the confines of a dungeon.

He glowered at her. Dark circles lay like purple bruises beneath his eyes. His hair was matted and unwashed. He wore no shirt, and she could see still-healing scars on his body from their fight in Tasglorn.

“You’re dirty,” he said finally. “Mud, not sand. Dark mud, not red. You must be north.”

“I had northern mud shipped to my location in a barrel,” she said. “I smear it on my hands and feet every night in case I dream of you, just to trick you.”

His mouth lifted in a smirk. “You think so much of me? I’m flattered.”

She answered that with an icy glare.

He leaned his head back against the stone wall and clasped his arms loosely around his knees. “What’s your deduction about me?”

“I’m not going to play your game,” she said.

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Come, come. We’re both stuck here, might as well enjoy it.”

“You only want to sift my mind to see what details I’m looking for so you can manipulate my perceptions.”

He clicked his tongue in disapproval. “Not everyone is like you, dragon girl. Some of us live honestly.”

She laughed at that. “Are you trying to make me feel guilty for tricking you? I am a guttersnipe, Auberon. I apprenticed under a thief-queen. I am not to be trusted.”

“Your friends seem to think otherwise.”

“Jealous?” she shot back.

His cheek twitched. He didn’t deny it.

He was.

She was struck silent at the realization.

What had he said before, when they’d gazed together upon the Citadel through a window in his estate?

*Seekers do not have friends.*

“That is a different matter,” she said.

“Is it?” His expression turned intense. He leaned forward as if to compel an answer from her. “How?”

“Because I trust them,” she replied.

That word—trust—wounded him. She could tell from the way he winced and turned his head that he didn’t want her to see how it stung.

He had presumed to think that she might trust him. His arrogance infuriated her. They were enemies. Had he really, truly thought they could be friends in spite of who they were? Had he thought himself so winsome, her so weak?

But there was more than that.

She couldn’t deny it, not here in this dream, in this tiny and dank room where she’d spent so many nights alone with her mortal enemy and the truth of them both.

She was angry with herself as much as she was with him.

She was angry because she’d thought the same stupid thing. She’d been tempted to empathize with him.

All right, she was lying to herself again. She *had* empathized with him.

Pitied him.

Cared about him.

And she was deeply conflicted about it now.

“Have you dreamed of my sister?” he asked.

Presumption. So much presumption. Presumption that she would tell him anything.

She had dreamed of Jade once, both of them in that sun-soaked room, both of them shaken and startled to see the other. Jade had touched the walls and

the floor in wonder at their solidness, and then looked at Briand as if she planned to rend her limb from limb.

“You’ve destroyed—” she’d begun, but then Nath had shaken Briand awake. *Our plans*, she supposed Jade was going to finish. *The coup. The revolution of the Citadel.*

Still, that unfinished, wrathful sentence haunted her.

But she hadn’t dreamed of Jade again.

“Why don’t you ask your sister?”

“Jade has gone to the front,” he responded. “She was summoned to heal the wounded.”

A pang of concern struck Briand before she could stop it, followed by a flash of a mental image—Jade, lying splayed on the battlefield in a pool of blood while Tibus or Maera stood over her holding the weapon that had delivered the killing blow. She banished the thought as soon as it appeared, but the emotions it had dredged up lingered, along with a bitter taste of irony. She worried about a Seeker, struggled to forget Kael, and seethed with fury for the true prince. Her world had truly gone upside down.

Fortunately, she was not one for philosophical crises of identity.

Auberon rose in a swift motion and crossed the room in two strides. He stood at the bars, his long, gloveless hands curled around them. His eyes glowed with an intensity that made her stomach coil.

“This isn’t over, dragon girl.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

BRIAND WOKE IN a tangle of blankets, drenched in sweat and shaking with fear, or rage, or possibly the cold. She rose and found a stick to poke the embers of the fire to life, then added wood until they were burning brightly again. She crouched close to the flames, relishing the warmth in the pale light of early dawn.

Across the fire, Nath opened his eyes. He watched her quietly, and she ignored him, choosing to stay marooned with her thoughts a little while longer. She knew he understood—he had his own nightmares to deal with. She often heard him muttered in his sleep, and sometimes he cried out sharply and woke in a panic.

They didn't talk about Kael, but she was certain he understood that too. Wordlessly, Nath rose and prepared breakfast. When the pot of coffee was sizzling, Crispin woke, his hair a snarl. The lad lumbered to his feet, yawning, and reached for the coffee pot.

Nath slapped his hands. "Water the horses first."

"She isn't doing anything," Crispin complained, pointing at Briand.

They both looked at him until he grumbled and turned toward the horses, scratching his left cheek.

"Why do we keep that lad around again?" Nath asked, dropping meat into a pan and prodding it with a knife as it sizzled.

"You like him," Briand said. "Stop pretending."

"He's an insufferable bother," Nath muttered. "Pretentious and useless."

"You used to think the same thing about me," she pointed out.

Nath snorted. "Not everyone is a diamond in the rough, dragonsayer. You're special."

Branches crackled as Crispin returned, his head down and his face set in a sour expression. He cheered up a little when Briand offered him coffee and some of the meat.

"Where are we headed today?" he asked, his mouth full.

"Civilization," Briand said.

~

The town of Peak sat high above the plains at the beginning of the mountain

chain that separated Kyreia from the Wild Lands, clustered around the rim of a crater that had once been, many thousands of years ago, a volcano. The ancient formation held water like a bowl, and the lake glimmered a peculiar blue-green color, like a gemstone on the necklace of a queen. The buildings were made of stone and logs, and they leaned precariously, as if a strong wind might blow them over, but Nath informed Crispin and Briand that that was simply the style of the architecture.

“Sturdy as the rocks that built them,” he promised.

A waterfall poured from the crater into a second lake below, where the second half of the city clustered. Cranes of wood and rope lifted goods to the top part of Peak. The sounds of hammers and the shouts of men working rang across the hills. Boats slid along the river amid floating logs with men balancing atop them, prodding the bobbing pieces of wood with pronged metal spears to keep them moving.

“Peak is an old city,” Nath told them as they rode toward the gates. “A slice of civilization in the midst of trader towns and miner slums. The river that flows in and out of the lake eventually becomes the Jessu, and thus this juncture sprang up after the third rule—that was when the succession changed from bloodline to appointment by the oracle—as a key trading point.”

Nath was always launching onto such snippets of history, as though his captive audience were pupils in a classroom. And Briand appreciated it, although she grumbled a bit at his didactic tone for show. She felt far too ignorant. She was clashing with princes and lords now—they had all the benefits of tutors and fancy educations; she did not. She had much ground to cover if she wanted to hold her own in this war.

Crispin, however, had zero appreciation for Nath’s lectures. “My tutor said that the War of the Silvers is what established Peak as a city, not gradual trade after the third rule ended.”

“Your tutor was an idiot,” Nath announced. “He must have read Pennet the Explorer’s books. They’re absolute garbage. Half of the text is an utter fabrication and good only for kindling. Any scholar could tell you that.”

“No,” Crispin shot back. “That’s what they used to think. But they discovered a parallel text by another explorer that corroborated Pennet’s claims. He wasn’t lying.”

“Don’t think that using words like corroborate is going to distract me from the nonsense you’re spouting,” Nath said.

They bickered all the way to the gate. Briand ignored their chatter after it turned from information to mere insults. She thought about Vox, hiding in a grove of trees near the river, and sent him a thought to see how he fared. The dracule answered with a visual of squirrel entrails and a burst of wordless excitement. Briand grimaced.

“What?” Nath demanded. “Are you in pain? Is something wrong with Vox?”

“Be glad you can’t see everything in the mind of a dracule,” she answered. “Also, Vox just killed his dinner.”

“Can you see everything they see?” Crispin asked. He rarely inquired about her abilities, although she knew he was curious.

“Not entirely,” she said. “Not with the dracule—with them, it’s more of a conversation using pictures and emotions, and sometimes words. Vox has learned a few. With the dragons...” She was momentarily lost in thought as she remembered it. The fierce, complete engulfment in those furious minds, the flashes of rage and hunger. “It’s like being enveloped by cold fire and dizzying clarity while plunging from a great height. It’s like... like a falling star might feel, if it could feel, or like a burning ember buried deep in a cave, or...” She stopped. That didn’t make sense, but a better description eluded her. Stars and buried embers were as opposite as could be, but somehow, they both encompassed the mind of dragons.

She shook her head, frustrated at her inability to put words to the experience.

Nath and Crispin were looking at her as if she’d told them the moon smelled like burned soup. Did she sound insane?

“It also cracked my mind open like an egg,” Briand offered, thinking that might be a better description than stars and embers. “Even the Seeker healer couldn’t do anything about it.”

That didn’t seem to reassure either Nath or Crispin. They both flinched at the mention of Seekers. Perhaps she shouldn’t have reminded them of that. “Anyway,” she said with a wave of her hand. “It’s healing now. My mind, I mean.”

The things Auberon had taught her were like cotton stuffed into a wound. She practiced constructing mental circles in her mind every night—first making a faint ring, then turning it hard as steel, then drawing her power into it. She’d learned how to coax the power in, like a kitten into a crate, and how to let it settle. Auberon’s descriptions of water and ice did not

resonate with her much. She found her power more analogous to fire, or something moody and scaly and a little bit angry. Perhaps that shouldn't be surprising that the power mimicked dragons even in its manifestation within her. But it did frighten her.

~

Valora sat in silence in the council room, her hands folded in her lap and her head turned toward the noblewoman speaking next to her, but her thoughts were running in circles despite her demure appearance.

She'd spoken to Jehn again, privately this time, and he had confirmed to her his plans. Nyr. And soon—the ships would leave within the month.

The council murmured like a restless sea as they waited for Prince Jehn to arrive. The gossips reported that he'd been attacked again, the aggressor beaten off by Kael. Lord Halescorn had already lauded the news as if he'd done the deed himself, which left Jacob Halescorn seething.

Valora met the young Halescorn's eyes across the table. His gaze sent a jolt like a dart through her chest. He was soon to be her brother-in-law. She needed to learn not to be so unsettled by him.

So, she stared back.

His mouth turned over in a threat that masqueraded as a smile before he looked away and shifted in his chair.

She felt a quiet measure of triumph at causing him to turn away first. It was a silly thing to feel victorious about, but Valora reveled in it all the same. She had learned to appreciate the small victories.

The doors opened, and everyone rose in expectation of Jehn, but it was only a nobleman arriving late.

As they sank back into their chairs, a stroke of chill touched the hairs at the back of Valora's neck.

Her magical sense of danger.

Something was wrong.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

VALORA STOOD AND walked to the doors, trying to move slowly so she wouldn't betray her sense of panic. She paused beside one of the guards and whispered to him, "Follow me. I fear the prince is in danger."

Then, she slipped out into the corridor—

—And immediately collided with Kael.

"Kael," she said, breathless.

He grabbed her arms to steady her, and he didn't let go right away. She looked up into his face and felt a flicker of confusion.

His attention shifted to the guard behind her. He raised a brow.

"Something's wrong," she said. "I felt a sense of imminent danger."

Kael searched her expression, then drew her aside and asked in a low voice meant only for her ears, "Does your magic apply to anyone you care about? Or merely people in the nearby vicinity?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the rules exactly," she said. "But there's no time to discuss it. Where is Prince Jehn?"

Kael stepped aside to reveal the prince, strolling toward them along the corridor with his guards around him. He smiled and inclined his head quizzically at the sight of them.

"Valora, is something wrong?" he asked.

She crossed to his side. "I feel danger," she said.

Jehn stiffened. He nodded to Kael, who had a hand on his knife. Kael gave a low order to the guards. Half of them closed around Jehn, and the other half spread out to sweep the area for any sign of assassins.

Jacob strolled from the council room. "Is a secret meeting convening out here in the corridor? You should have invited the rest of us."

Kael's eyes met Valora's as if to ask if Jacob knew about her ability.

She gave him the slightest shake of her head.

"There is reason to suspect Jehn may be in danger," Kael said to his brother. He spoke with cool detachment, as if Jacob were any other noble. As if they had no blood or bad memories between them.

"Oh?" Jacob said with equal reserve. "And what has given you that idea? The half a dozen assassination attempts?"

"In danger *at this very moment*," Valora said. Her magical sense of doom intensified, twisting her stomach in knots. She turned a frantic circle,

scanning the perimeter of the garden, straining to see the walls. Could an assassin be on the roof? Was he waiting, knife in hand, ready to drop down like a panther in the jungle drops on his prey?

Jacob smiled tightly. "Care to share your reasoning?"

She was not going to tell him about her magic powers. They were a secret. "A reliable source," Kael said firmly.

Valora's blood was screaming at her. Her heart slammed against her chest. The soldiers searching the area strolled toward a bank of bushes trimmed into squares. She pressed a hand to her mouth, terrified. Was an assassin about to strike?

Movement flashed from the shrubbery. The soldiers leaped back, swords drawn.

A bird fluttered into the sky.

Jacob laughed. "Is that your great threat?"

Valora's sense of danger winked out like a candle in a stiff breeze. She exhaled, trembling with bewilderment.

She looked at Kael and shook her head again.

His eyebrows drew together; she couldn't guess his thoughts.

She had failed her prince. She had brought confusion and doubt. The thoughts sank in her belly like stones.

Jehn stood in the middle of the corridor, his expression hovering between patience and exasperation. As Kael strode off to speak to one of the guards, Valora turned away from Jacob and folded her arms to disguise her shaking. "That was anticlimactic," Jacob said, moving closer to her.

Valora stared at the section of wall visible in the distance. She didn't acknowledge him, and so he moved closer, following her gaze to the wall. "You seem distressed. Did you want some excitement to break up this dull proceeding? Or were you the one who hired the assassin who failed to show?" His voice was a dangerous purr in her ear.

She whirled on him and stared straight into his eyes.

"Of course not, you fool. And you should take care in your insinuations now. I am engaged to your brother. Soon we will be like brother and sister, and as you know, any taint on one sibling can stain the other. So consider the effect of your rumors before you seed them among the court."

He took a step back, startled at her intensity. Displeasure twitched at the edges of his mouth, but it was gone in a moment, replaced by a smile that

he'd teased enough to make it look reluctantly pleased. She had no idea if that was genuine.

"Why," he said. "You impress me, sister. May I call you sister?"

"You may call me Lady Valora," she hissed, and brushed past him for the council room.

Footsteps rang on the stone path through the garden. The guards drew their swords again. Everyone froze.

"Lady Valora!" a voice shouted. A serving girl. "Lady Valora!"

Valora turned.

The serving girl reached her and doubled over, panting and choking. When she straightened up again, her cheeks were damp and her eyes puffy from crying.

"What's wrong?" Valora demanded.

Kael, Jehn, and even Jacob moved closer in concern.

The serving girl sobbed. "Your lady's maid... She was just found dead in your chambers."

"Iris?" Valora's head spun. "Dead?"

"She..." The serving girl bit her lip. "She took her own life."

Valora put out a hand to steady herself against one of the columns.

"She received news of her husband's death in Sythra this morning," the serving girl offered, as if reading Valora's thoughts. "We think that's why..." She trailed off.

Was this why she'd had that sense of doom? Not a threat to the prince, but a threat to the life of her dear lady's maid.

Valora put both hands over her face. She breathed in deeply, harnessing her grief and shaping it into something she could manage. She felt hands on her arms, gentle hands, and she lowered her fingers to see Kael's steady expression as he stood in front of her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She wanted comfort. She wanted someone's arms around her. She almost leaned into him.

However, they were standing before Prince Jehn and Jacob Halescorn, and Kael did not want to marry her. She did not think he would put his arms around her.

And she didn't want Jacob Halescorn to see her rejected by his brother. So, she straightened her spine, lifted her chin, and said to the serving girl, "What has been done with Iris?"

“The physician is with the body now, my lady.”

“I will come right away,” she said, and followed the serving girl away from the others.

~

Briand, Nath, and Crispin reached the gates of the lower half of Peak and entered the city beneath a weathered, headless statue covered in white birds that took to the sky as they passed.

“Paved streets and storefronts,” Crispin exclaimed. “Is that a bakery?”

Civilization at last! I could kiss these stones.”

The horses’ hooves clipped against the cobblestones as they rode past the curiously crooked wooden houses, past bridges and docks that lined the river. Lanterns hung from wooden stakes and dangled from the edges of the roofs. A second road wound through the rooftops, a boardwalk built of planks that arched across the roads below. Wagons rumbled all around, a deafening sound after the silence of the hills, and long-haired yaks lowed from within crowded paddocks. A little boy crossed their path, leading a shaggy, striped animal that looked like a horse with an absurdly long neck. Nath told Briand it was called a girabra.

Taverns lined the banks of the lake, some of them housed on boats like the one they’d visited at the miner’s shantytown. Others perched over the water on wooden stilts. Boats skimmed between them, carrying fishermen and traders. A steamboat’s horn blared in the distance as it approached from the river.

A thrum of some low undercurrent of power plucked at Briand’s mind. She turned her head, searching the sky for a raglok, although this did not feel like the thoughts of one of the reptilian scavengers. It felt like a gurgle of the overwhelming and unrelenting power she’d felt in Tasglorn that had caused such searing pain.

The sky was empty and blue.

Disquiet roiled in her stomach, but she resisted panic. She had no reason to suspect any Seekers were nearby.

Nath looked around and grunted. “We should be able to find an inn to everyone’s liking here. We can finally spend some of that coin on a little luxury.”

“Baths,” Crispin said reverently. “We could take baths.”

“You could use a bath,” Nath muttered. “You’re the only one who didn’t take one when we were by the river.”

“At least I don’t look like I rolled in a muddy creek bed,” Crispin shot back at the older man. “You’ve literally got a leaf in your hair.” He reached over and yanked it out, waving it before Nath’s eyes. Nath snatched it back and then swung at Crispin for good measure. Crispin’s horse danced to the side, moving him out of range.

Briand cleared her throat. “Perhaps this is the time to mention that we’re adding to our party—”

“What?” Nath said, pulling his horse up short and turning in the saddle to face her. His eyes narrowed. “Who?”

Crispin looked nervous. “Is it—” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “Is it a dragon?”

“Cait will be joining us here,” Briand said, laughing at his question. A dragon! As if she could simply summon them from the earth. “She’s bringing Sieya.”

“Who is Tate?” Crispin asked. “Who is Sieya?”

“Cait, you nincompoop,” Nath said to him. To Briand, he said, “We never discussed this.”

“She’s taking a ship up the Jessu River as we speak,” Briand said. “And we discussed that I was in charge, did we not? This was my decision. I need Sieya, and she agreed to bring her. And it’ll be nice to have her.”

“She?” Crispin sighed. “Wonderful. Now we have two women to protect.” Briand’s knife appeared in her hand with a sharp *shiiing* of steel. Her voice was frosty. “Tell me one more time how I’m in need of your protection, little boy?”

Nath laughed.

Crispin grumbled and looked away. He spurred his horse forward as if nervous she might hold the blade to his throat, and its hooves clattered on the stones. A few workers by the docks looked up and then away.

Nath lowered his voice with a glance at Crispin’s back. “Well, we will have two hungry beasts to leave in the woods now. What about that?”

“We may not be leaving anyone in the woods soon enough,” Briand said. She pointed. “Look.”

Roots, desiccated and twisting, snaked across the cobblestones ahead and up the side of a wall like some tentacled sea monster risen from the deep.

“And what is that?” Nath asked, his brow furrowing.

“I think...” Briand stepped closer and bent down to examine the gnarled growth forcing apart the cobblestones. “I think it’s part of an ember tree.” “A what?”

She crouched down and swept her fingers through the air above the roots. “They’re all over the capital, although all the trees are dead now.”

“Oh, those,” Nath said with a grimace. “Terrible things. Nothing gets their roots out of the soil—nothing. And they’re nearly impossible to burn or poison.” He paused. “What is one doing here? They aren’t native to this region.”

“Ember trees were important to the dragonsayers somehow,” Briand mused.

“The guardian family I encountered in Tasglorn had a live one. I think this could mean something.”

“Crispin,” Briand called, and he joined them, confused. Briand pointed to the roots.

“It’s... a tree?”

“Not just a tree, you slop,” Nath said. “It’s an ember tree.”

“Oh, those terrible trees that infested the capital and then died?” Crispin asked. “My father hates them. One of them practically strangled the west side of our house. What is it doing here? I thought they only grew in Tasna.”

“They’re connected to the dragonsayers,” Nath said haughtily, as if it were obvious.

“He learned that a moment ago,” Briand added when Crispin flushed angrily. “And the two of you ask identical questions. You’re more alike than either of you likes to admit.”

Both Nath and Crispin looked at her in horror.

“Absolutely not,” Nath said.

“I am nothing like him!” Crispin snapped at the same time.

They paused, abashed and glaring.

Briand swallowed a smile and looked back at the roots. The low hum of ambient power purred in the back of her mind again. It was like a quiet murmur, a ripple that nestled inside her bones.

What was it?

“I see the roots,” Crispin said, “but where is the tree?”

Briand reached out with her mind, searching for any flicker of thought from a dracule that might signal the presence of the guardian family they sought, but found only Vox’s mind again. He connected with her eagerly, his

rollicking thoughts filled with the excitement of his recent squirrel slaying. They made her dizzy.

She pulled her mind away from his and swept outward again. She touched the mind of some animal in someplace dark and dank—a rock dragon? A cave?—and felt a shiver of pain lance through her skull, as if she'd struck one of her teeth against a metal bar. She drew a circle around the pain, and it quieted.

Still, the quiet hum of power murmured in the background. It was not painful, exactly, but she was aware of it the way she might be aware of the painful prickles of a limb that had fallen asleep.

"I don't sense any dracules," she said to Nath, frustrated. "Well, except for Vox."

"Why don't we follow the roots?" Crispin suggested.

"Let the dragonsayer decide what we'll do," Nath said to him. To Briand, he said quietly, "Maybe we ought to follow the roots?"

"I heard that!" Crispin growled. "Stop pretending I don't have good ideas."

His face flushed, and he wiggled a little as if uncomfortable. Briand wondered if Nath were perhaps pushing their younger companion a little too hard, and resolved to chide him about it privately.

She nodded. "Come on."

They traced the path of the roots through the narrow streets, over walls, and past a well. The roots spread up the side of the mountain, they discovered, and so they climbed after it on one of the winding pathways that led to the upper half of the city at the rim of the great crater.

"This must be the largest tree in existence," Crispin grumbled, panting as he struggled to keep pace with Nath and Briand. "Is it the size of a mountain?"

"Noe told me the trees have vast root networks," Briand said, breathless.

The hum still reverberated in her mind, like a bee hovering behind her ear. She shook her head as if she could knock the sound loose, but it persisted. She paused as she reached the top of the climb. Before them, at the top of the crater, lay the perfectly round, blue-green lake. The buildings that ringed it were cut from the sides of the crater, and a statue of a woman with wings rose from the middle of the water. Here, only a few boats skimmed across the lake, all of them containing one or two passengers who fished with small, hand-held nets.

The roots ended in the middle of a green.

The crown and trunk of the tree had been chopped away, leaving a stump the size of a stable standing in the center of the green. Children played atop it, their shouts and squeals ringing through the air.

Nath reached the top of the climb behind her and made a gruff noise. "It's been chopped down."

"Now what?" Crispin asked, arriving on his heels.

The houses clustered around the green were tall and crooked, hung with lanterns and strung with drying laundry. The tree did not seem to belong to any particular house.

Briand didn't have an immediate answer.

"Maybe..." She paused, her eyes landing on the ember tree. She moved toward it, her horse clopping along behind her. The playing children looked up at her approach, and then scrambled off the stump and away to the other side of the green where they stood in a group, watching. Crispin shouted something to them, and they scattered, leaving the three alone in the middle of the green.

Briand stood before the looming stump, roots the size of dragon's tails snaking and coiling around her feet, her whole body tense with uncertainty. The hum purred. A question took shape in her thoughts, hardening into an impulse.

She wasn't sure what she was doing as she reached out one hand and touched the tree.

The power that leaped into her in response was like a gong went off in her head.

The hum turned into a shout, like dozens of voices raised in wordless song. Vibrations surged through every fiber of her body. She yanked her hand back, and the shout hushed back to a purr.

She stared at her hand and then the tree.

That painful power in her head in Tasglorn—had it been caused by all of the ember trees? She'd thought that power had emanated from the Citadel.

"Look," Crispin interrupted, pointing. "It's the same symbol as the covers of those books you have."

Briand followed his line of sight. At the farthest end of the green, a stone house pointed toward the sky like the frozen finger of a giant turned to stone. The cobblestones there were discolored, some of them gray like the rest, the others a reddish spotted color. They formed what might have been

a circle with three lines—if she squinted hard and turned her head to the side.

The dragonsayer symbol?

Nath grunted with begrudging approval. “Good eye, lad. It is the same symbol.”

“I’m not a lad,” Crispin said under his breath. Two spots of red color glowed on his cheeks as he looked at Briand. “Well? Are you going to knock?”

Sudden fear clenched in her stomach.

Was this the end of her search? Was she about to discover the rest of the hidden knowledge about the dragonsayers?

Briand handed the reins of her horse to Nath and strode to the front door with the saddlebag of dragonsayer books in her arms. Lifting her hand, she knocked.

Silence.

She turned to look at Nath and Crispin, who shrugged.

Briand turned back to knock again. She rapped firmly.

Footsteps sounded on the other side. Briand held her breath as the lock clicked. She fumbled with the saddlebag, reaching for one of the books. The door wrenched open.

Briand stepped back and put her free hand on her knife.

In the doorway stood a tall, disheveled woman holding a sword.

## CHAPTER NINE

BRIAND HAD BARELY drawn her knife when Nath was at her side, his sword in his hand.

“Put your blade down,” he snarled at the woman in the doorway. “You’re outnumbered.”

The woman sneered back. She wore an off-color shift that showed her sinewy arms. Her hair tumbled around her face and shoulders in uncombed tangles, and her eyes were the color of brackish water. “Who are you?” she demanded without lowering her weapon. “Why did you knock on my door?”

Briand realized the woman was drunk. The scent of ale wafted from her clothing, and she leaned against the doorpost with one shoulder as if bracing herself upright.

This wasn’t a house of guardians. She didn’t know who this was.

“It was a mistake,” Briand said. “Forgive me.” She shoved the half-revealed book back in the bag.

The woman peered at it with confusion. She took a step forward, still holding the sword. “What’s that?” she said.

“Kindly take a step back,” Nath responded.

Without turning around, Briand started toward the road.

“Stop,” the woman growled. Her voice was low and scratchy, as if she rarely used it.

Briand didn’t stop. Nath followed her, walking backward with his sword pointed toward the woman in the door.

“I think you had something to say,” the woman called after her. “You sure knocked hard enough.”

Briand kept walking.

The woman strode after them into the sunlight, squinting as if she rarely ventured outdoors.

“Hey!” the woman shouted, angry now.

Nath raised his sword at her approach.

The woman deflected Nath’s blow as if an afterthought, then thrust at the saddlebag in Briand’s hand. Her blade cut a slit across the leather. One of the books tumbled out and landed at her feet.

“What are you?” the woman demanded. She sounded furious now. “A thief? Did you steal these books? Why are you here? You think you can sell them to me for a few coins? Is that it?”

“No,” Briand snarled. She stood with the knife pointed at the woman’s face. Nath had his sword up again.

They stood a moment, locked in a standstill.

The woman put her fingers to her lips and whistled as they backed toward the horses.

Briand and Nath were almost to the horses when a creature burst from the house with a roar. Crispin, standing by the horses, shouted a warning.

Briand whirled, thrown off-balance at the blast of its mind hitting hers.

A rock dragon.

Briand reflexively threw out a hand as she grabbed the rock dragon’s mind with hers, yanking the creature to a standstill. Pain shot through her head and down her neck at the action, but she held firm. The rock dragon hissed and grunted as it skidded to a stop before them. It thrashed in place, its mind scrabbling against hers.

Briand held fast. Spots danced before her eyes, and she ground her teeth together at the pain.

The woman’s smile dropped.

“Fang?” she called. “Fang, what is it?”

The rock dragon made a whining sound like two stones grinding together. It pawed at the dirt and bared its teeth at Briand, and inside the grip of her mind, it lashed angrily.

Briand hissed as lightning-like fissures of pain shot through her neck.

“Call off your animal,” Nath yelled, his sword raised.

The woman gave a command. The rock dragon relaxed, but Briand didn’t release its mind. It didn’t move.

The woman looked from the rock dragon to them, and then the book on the ground between them. She held out a hand as if asking for a truce.

Nath lowered his weapon a little. Briand rocked back on her heels but kept her knife ready.

After a pause, the woman knelt and picked up the dropped book. She flipped it open to look at the pages, her brow furrowing. She raised her eyes to Briand.

“Where’d you get this?”

“That’s mine,” Briand said, holding out her hand. “Give it back.”

The woman scoffed. "This book is a thousand years old."

"So, you know what it is?" Nath asked, looking her up and down with an eyebrow raised.

"Are you...?" Briand lowered her voice. "Are you a guardian?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," the woman said, but her eyes widened as if she were frightened by the question. As if Briand had poked an old wound. Then, she added, "You have no idea what danger this is to you. You should burn it!"

"Danger," Nath repeated. "The book?"

The woman heard the skepticism in his voice and scowled. "Don't you know what the Seekers would do if they found this on you?" she demanded. Her whole face blanched when she said the word, and she shuddered. "You have no idea what those monsters are capable of."

Nath's mouth pressed in a tight line at the mention of Seekers, and he didn't reply. The corner of one of his eyes twitched. Behind him, Crispin winced.

"If you aren't a guardian, then who are you?" Briand asked.

"That's none of your concern," the woman said.

Briand reached for the book. The woman pulled it away.

This was getting ridiculous.

Briand reached out again to snatch the book back. Her fingers collided with the woman's, and a jolt of power surged up her arm like lightning. She cried out, and the woman's head snapped up. She stared at Briand hard, as if seeing her for the first time. And Briand saw the flash of understanding in the woman's face.

She knew something.

"What was that?" Briand hissed, stepping closer.

The woman lifted the sword. "What was what?"

"You know. You know a lot of things you aren't telling," Briand insisted.

She looked at the dilapidated stone house and scrubby yard. She turned her head to scan the street behind them.

"I know nothing," the woman gritted.

Nath and Briand exchanged a glance.

"I think this is a nice place to camp," Briand said. "That end of the street.

We could stay there, in the shadow of that house."

"Go away," the woman said. "Don't stay here."

"Tell me what you know," Briand countered.

The woman sighed heavily. "What, exactly, are you wanting from me?"

"I'm looking for the guardians of the dragonsayers," Briand said. "I have so many questions. I was sent this way by another family of guardians."

This piqued the woman's interest. "Another family?"

"Does the name Noe mean anything to you?" Briand asked.

The woman's nostrils flared. She blinked twice.

"Perhaps you'd better come inside after all," she said finally.

The interior of the house was dim, and the air smelled like ale and old food. Tattered curtains hung over the windows, blocking the sunlight, and stacks of plates and cups piled precariously atop a heavy wooden table. Something scurried away at their approach.

Crispin made a sound of disgust.

"I wasn't expecting visitors," the woman muttered as she gestured for them to sit on the benches around the table. "I haven't kept this house very clean, I suppose, but there's no one to mind except Fang."

The rock dragon, who'd followed them inside, lifted its head at the sound of its name.

Bottles lay scattered across every available surface, some half full, most empty. The woman lifted one as if to put it away, then stared at it a moment and put it down. Her sword, half-forgotten in her hand, made a scraping sound as she dragged it across the floor. She paced to the hearth and stared at the ashes, then to the door, which she locked. She stared at the handle and ran a hand through her tangled hair.

"My name is Grinna," she said, turning back to them. "And yours?" She looked specifically at Briand, both eyebrows raised.

"I'm Briand, and this is Nath and Crispin." Briand pointed at them in turn.

Crispin gave an awkward wave. Nath stared stonily at Grinna, standing stiffly as if he expected another attack from her at any moment.

"When I touched your hand," Briand said, "what- what was that? It was like a shock of power."

Grinna waved her free hand at Briand, revealing a ring on her middle finger. It was carved from wood, with a dark red stone in the middle and brassy metal curling around the sides. "An artifact. An ancient talisman. It was my mother's. It belonged to a dragonsayer once, and it was passed down in my family for generations. Only dragonsayers can feel its power."

She looked at Briand with something akin to wonder and disbelief. "And you clearly did."

Briand stared at the ring. She could hear it humming, the same as the ember trees, if she quieted her mind and listened.

Grinna withdrew her hand before Briand could get a longer look.

A brief, hostile silence fell over them all.

“Why are you here?” Grinna whispered. Her tone was flat, as if she already knew the answer, and was dreading hearing it confirmed. “How do you know Noe?”

Briand told her about the guardians in Tasglorn, how she’d found them and how they’d told her about the other guardians.

Grinna’s expression darkened as she heard of how the Seekers slew Noe.

She hissed a curse, her eyes straying toward the door as she gripped her blade.

“I came looking for the others he told me about,” Briand finished. “I need to know more. I don’t understand my powers, and they... they could kill me.”

Grinna scratched her head, her expression unreadable now. She shifted her feet. “I’m not sure how much I can help you.”

“Why not?” Briand said. She looked around the dirty room, a feeling of foreboding filling her chest. “Where are the others?” She saw no signs of life besides the rock dragon. “You said it was just you and Fang.”

The question crumbled some of Grinna’s obstinacy. Her lower lip trembled.

“Dead,” she said. “They’re all dead now.”

“Was it... was it Seekers?” Crispin asked.

“No, the Dzanian Influenza.” Grinna sank down onto the bench and put her hands on the table. Her shoulders sagged. “An outbreak swept through the whole city that year. First Ma, then Da, then my brother. I buried them all.” She stared at the floor. “I was only ten years old.”

“I’m sorry,” Briand said.

“I’ve lived here alone ever since,” Grinna continued woodenly. She rubbed a hand across her nose. “Hiding from the Seekers.” She pointed at the rock dragon, which had settled beside the cold hearth. “We’ve had Fang since I was a baby—Ma trained him, and he protects me. Seekers hate tainted things, you see.”

“So you’re not a guardian?” Briand asked.

Grinna made a sound that might have been a laugh. “Lords, no. They were going to teach me everything when I was old enough, they said, but they died before they got more than a few lessons into me. I still have the

books... except the ones I burned when I was angry, after they died..." She trailed off, lost in thought. "Or the ones I didn't have to burn for kindling last winter..."

"Those books were a thousand years old," Briand said, aghast. "Surely you could have found something else."

Grinna glared at her. "Don't you come into my house and presume to lecture me. The books belonged to my family. When they died, the books belonged to me." Her anger crumpled into an expression of deep regret. "My family looked and hoped for one of you for centuries. It's all they did. They hid here from the Seekers and hoarded their books and their secrets, and look where it got them. Dead," she added, as if there was any ambiguity. "It got them dead."

She spoke with accusation, as if Briand had caused their death.

"Didn't you say they died of influenza?" Crispin said in the silence that followed.

Grinna squinted at him as if she'd only just remembered he existed. "Yes." "I don't see what that has to do with dragonsayers," he continued.

Grinna tapped the point of her sword against the floor. "What was your name? Pigskin?"

"Crispin," he said, annoyed. His cheeks were flushed a dark red.

"Listen, Pigskin," she snapped. "You don't know a thing about it. So keep your mouth shut."

"I'm sorry about your family," Briand said, "but we need your help."

Grinna frowned at her. "How?"

"I need information."

"As I already told you, I can't give it to you," Grinna said. She made a slashing motion with her free hand as she spoke. "The books are burned. I don't know anything of value. You'll have to leave."

She pointed at the door.

"We can't leave. Only trees can do that," Crispin said. He grinned, but his eyes were glassy.

Everyone stared at him a beat. Nath frowned.

"We've come a long way," Briand said, choosing to ignore Crispin's weirdness for the more pressing matter. "Surely—"

"Nope." Grinna tapped the sword on the stones. "Can't help you."

It was that moment that Crispin collapsed and began to shake.

## CHAPTER TEN

“HE’S BURNING WITH fever,” Nath said, turning Crispin over and pressing a hand to the lad’s face. His voice was gruff with annoyance and what Briand suspected was a hint of panic. “No wonder he’s babbling nonsense. How long has he been hiding the fact that he’s sick?”

“He has been flushed today,” she said. “I thought he was angry with you.”

“He’s always angry with me,” Nath muttered. “Lords, lad, you stubborn fool.”

Crispin’s eyes opened a crack. “Didn’t want to slow us down,” he muttered thickly.

Grinna had backed up against her cold hearth. She stared at Crispin as if seeing a ghost.

Then, Crispin stiffened. His eyes rolled back in his head. His mouth foamed, and he jerked and thrashed.

“Where’s the physician in this place?” Nath demanded, nearly shouting as Crispin’s head lolled against his shoulder.

“Dead,” she murmured with a flex of her lips. “A tree fell on him last week.”

Nath growled something under his breath. “Isn’t there anyone else?”

“A few midwives, a hedge witch or two. They like to gossip. Folks like you don’t need to invite any scrutiny.”

Briand said, “My uncle’s estate—there was a gardener who was like this sometimes. Do you remember him? He was there when I was a child.”

“Aye,” Nath said. “Briefly.”

“He had episodes, he called them. He’d fall to the ground, thrash, and lose the ability to speak for a time. Do you think that’s what is wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Nath looked helpless, which was something Briand wasn’t used to.

Surprisingly, Grinna was the one to step forward and put her hands on Crispin’s flushed face. Her belligerent expression softened as she gazed down at him, so small and fragile-looking, and her voice, when she spoke, was brisk and firm. “He should not be moved at present,” she said. “But,” she added sternly, “you must leave the moment he is well.”

Briand and Nath exchanged a glance. They nodded.

“Now,” Grinna said. “Help me carry him. I’ve got a bed upstairs.”

~

They carried Crispin to the bed, the frame of which was ornately carved and looked like an heirloom. Threadbare quilts and dusty sheets covered a lumpy mattress. The whole room was strewn with clothes and bottles and papers half-scribbled with words and what appeared to be numbers.

“Do you have any medicines or herbs?” Nath was asking Grinna as Briand looked around.

“Some herbs,” Grinna said. “I don’t know what most of them do, though.”

“Bring them,” Nath ordered. He bent over Crispin’s flushed face, muttering, “This lad will be the death of us all. Did he eat the mushrooms in the woods? I told him not to eat them. I’d wager six duobis that he ate them anyway.”

“Don’t, Father,” Crispin mumbled. “The rypters have gotten into the garden and eaten all the rabbits.”

Nath drew back, turning pale at the mention of rypters.

Grinna lifted her head suspiciously. “What did he say?”

“He’s hallucinating,” Nath said.

“Seven red hats, please,” Crispin said, opening his eyes halfway and looking at Briand. “I’d like each one individually wrapped in paper and tied with string.”

Briand stepped closer to the bed. “How long is he going to go on like this?” she asked Nath.

“My hats, please!” Crispin demanded. His whole face was flushed red, almost purple. “Don’t forget the wrapping paper, girl.”

Briand spotted a discoloration on his wrist and turned his hand over. “Look, Nath. What’s this?”

Reddish-purple welts ran like claw marks up the lad’s forearm.

Nath pushed his tongue into the side of his cheek, thinking. “Some sort of plant could have caused it, I think. Something we encountered in the woods.”

“Like a cut from a thorn bush?”

“More like the oil of the stinging blueflower, but that wouldn’t be causing the fever and delirium.” He bent over the welts. “My former master had an obsession with dreadful botany, as he called it. He used to try to ingratiate himself with Cahan and the prince’s wretched poison gardens.”

Briand went still with surprise. Nath talking about his former life was as rare as water flowing uphill.

Crispin grinned at Briand, his hand still in hers.

“You’re much nicer than the dragonsayer,” he said. “The dragonsayer frightens me.”

“As she should,” Briand replied.

Crispin nestled into the quilts like a little boy readying himself for a bedtime story. “Will you kiss me?”

Briand withdrew her hand and gave him her best glare as Nath chortled.

“Not a chance,” she said.

Crispin sighed, crestfallen.

“Apparently, whatever he’s gotten into has a bit of an ability to inspire honesty,” Nath said.

“Or insanity.” Briand folded her arms and gazed down at the fevered young man. “What are we going to do, Nath?”

Grinna returned with several dark bottles in her arms. She placed them in a row on the bedside table and stepped back. “Shall I heat some water?”

“Whatever for?” Nath asked.

“I don’t know—doctors are always requesting boiled water, aren’t they?”

“We aren’t performing surgery.” Nath uncorked the first bottle and took a sniff. He set it aside and tried another, then made a sound of satisfaction.

“Crone’s claw, good for fever. This may help.”

Briand assisted Nath in propping Crispin up, and Grinna spooned some of the liquid between the boy’s lips. Crispin turned his head away with a mumble of delirious protestation, so Nath pinched his cheeks between his thumb and forefinger and held the lad’s face in place while Grinna stuffed another spoonful into his mouth.

Crispin grimaced at the taste. He lay back on the pillow when they let him, shivering now.

“That should fight the fever,” Nath said, “but we should give him more every few hours.”

Grinna nodded. She left the bottles of herbal preparations by the bed.

Crispin said sleepily, “I wish Nath didn’t hate me.”

Nath cleared his throat. “I don’t hate the lad,” he said to no one in particular. He sounded abashed.

Crispin turned on his side and began to snore quietly.

Nath patted the quilt with one hand and said gruffly as he rose, “He’ll be all right for now, I think.” But his expression was one of complete helplessness. Truthfully, they had no idea what was wrong.

Grinna watched them. “I’ve got my parents’ old bed, but that’s it. The two of you can sleep downstairs by the hearth,” she said. “You can use your bedrolls. I don’t have a lot of extra blankets.”

“Great,” Nath said under his breath. “We haven’t improved our station much by staying here.”

Grinna frowned at him. “You could sleep in the garden if you’d prefer. It’s nice and cold out there.”

“Grinna,” Briand said, sensing a fight and hoping to head it off. “Do you like to play Dubbok?”

~

Grinna did like Dubbok, as it turned out. She was terrible at it, but she knew half a dozen other games to play with the same deck of cards, and she taught them to Nath and Briand by the light of a flickering candle while darkness fell outside. She talked little, mostly asking questions about the lands they’d passed through. She got up twice to check the windows and doors, where she had set elaborate trip wires involving tin cups and twine.

“When the gray cloaks come,” she muttered, “I’ll be waiting for them.”

“Are they looking for you?” Nath asked.

Grinna jerked her head up. She stared at him as if it were a preposterous question that only a simpleton would think to ask. “Of course,” she snapped after a pause. “Those glove-wearing silver hoods would love to capture the last guardian in the north.”

“I thought there was another settlement,” Briand said. This was what she wanted to talk about. She fixed her stare on Grinna. “If they aren’t in the north, then where are they?”

“I thought you said you weren’t a guardian,” Nath added.

“Well,” Grinna said, “that bit about being the last guardian was a bit of an exaggeration for effect, and I don’t know where the other family is. We lost touch with them before my parents died. One day, the encrypted letters stopped coming.”

“Then how do you know they’re still alive?” Briand demanded. A pang of dread pierced her stomach. What if this woman was the last of the

guardians? This woman who had burned half the books for kindling? Grinna's eyes gleamed. She held up one finger. "Because about six months ago, I received this." She pushed back her chair and went to the mantle, where she rummaged among the bottles that lined it until she found a carved wooden box. She sifted through a pile of letters inside and found one. She waved it, triumphant. "See?"

"What is it?" Nath asked. Exasperation colored his words.

Grinna returned to the table. She dropped the letter on the playing cards spread across the tabletop and sat.

Nath picked it up. "What gibberish is this?"

"Our code," she said. "So the Seekers couldn't intercept our letters and know who we were."

"It's a language." He squinted at the scrawl. "But it's like a drunken goat herder wrote it."

Grinna shrugged. "Some of the families know Nyrese, and we made the code from there. The words are nonsensical otherwise."

She played with the sword on the table beside her, running one finger up and down the flat side of the blade as she spoke. Briand suspected the woman slept with it too.

"What does it say?" Briand took the letter from Nath and glanced it over. Grinna recited the words from memory. She didn't even glance at the paper, but closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair as if about to deliver a speech. "*We are well. When Pa smokes his pipe, the shrieker winds blow ash everywhere. It is very cold, but cold is better than dead.*"

"It's a code," Grinna explained to their confused faces. "Because they don't have a pa. He's dead. Just the mother and daughters now. And the father never smoked a pipe anyway."

"Code within code?" Briand asked.

"Can't be too careful," Grinna sniffed. "Gray cloaks are crafty bastards."

"Any idea what it means?" Nath scratched the back of his neck, frowning faintly at Grinna as if he thought she were mad.

"It means they are alive, or they were when this letter was sent. Shrieker winds are in far northern country. They are probably deep in Kyreia now, maybe even in the Wild Lands, somewhere where they can live without risking discovery."

"Did you meet them?" Briand asked.

“Once,” Grinna said, and then she tapped the cards. “Are we going to play, or just look at them all night?”

Briand picked up her hand and glanced at it. “I’d like to see what books you have left. The dragonsayer one you haven’t burned. What books have you kept from your family’s library?”

Grinna thumbed the top of her cards. “All right. There are a few. They’re down in the cellar with the bones I keep for Fang to gnaw on.”

Fang, hearing himself mentioned, lifted his head from his corner. The rock dragon had been keeping a healthy distance from Briand, his furtive mind a tangle of confused fear and simmering annoyance that caused faint ripples of pain in hers whenever they connected.

Briand thought of Vox. How long were they going to stay here?

The rock dragon rose and wandered close enough to make Nath recoil.

“Why do you keep this beast?” he muttered.

Grinna reached out and scratched the creature’s head. “Gray cloaks hate all tainted things. That’s why.”

Tainted.

Briand remembered Auberon saying months ago as they sat beside a flickering fire under a wild-starred sky, *I heard about what happened in Tyyr. You would’ve brought every tainted creature between here and Tasglorn down on my head if I didn’t muzzle you first.* “Tainted?”

Grinna gestured with one hand. “The creatures that share ancestry with dragons. Ragloks, rock dragons, milikas, beeldors... all sorts of nasty beasts. Their blood is tainted, we say.”

“What do you know about dracules?” Briand asked.

“My family had dracules,” Grinna said, a faraway look entering her gaze.

“The guardians all kept them in an effort to prevent total extinction of the species. But they all had died by the time I was born. I’ve never seen one.”

She glanced at Fang. “I am happy enough with my rock dragon.”

They finished the game, and Grinna left for her bed. Nath and Briand spread their bedrolls beside the fire as Grinna had suggested, Nath grumbling about the hard floor as he smoothed out the blankets and then lay down.

“This Grinna woman is mad as a hedgehog in a barrel,” he grumbled.

“Coded letters, traps at the windows. Are you sure about this?”

“No,” Briand said, “but what other choice do we have right now?”

Nath grunted. He arranged the blankets around himself and then sat up again. "I should check on the lad. See if he's fever has come down."

Briand stared at the dying flames after Nath left. Loneliness burrowed into her heart, and she was tempted to think of *him*. Instead, she reached out and touched Vox's thoughts; the dracule had killed another squirrel and was very proud of himself. Briand was once again thankful that the dragonsayer-dracule connection never caused any pain.

She bid him goodnight with thoughts of shooting stars and tasty squirrels, and before Nath returned, she succumbed to sleep from sheer exhaustion. And she dreamed. The cell felt inevitable tonight; she was beginning to wonder if emotional intensity drew them together. She was certainly spent after Crispin's sudden illness. She sat with her back to the stone wall and waited for Auberon to speak.

Dark circles bruised his eyes. He looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks. He stared at her with an intensity that made her stomach turn over.

"There you are," he said quietly. "Still running, I see?"

She didn't have to look down to know that she was muddy and ragged-looking.

Auberon, on the other hand, wore his usual sleeping clothes of black silk. He looked like a dark prince, rumpled and glowering.

She expected him to threaten her, but he didn't. He seemed exhausted. Worn down. Beaten.

"Tell me a story, dragon girl," he said.

The odd request somehow felt fitting. As if he were a little boy, begging for some shred of comfort in the middle of the night. And she understood. He was right about one thing, and he always had been. They understood each other. They shared that loneliness of being different, gifted by a curse of power, used for it, plagued by it... and empowered by it.

Briand pitied him. And she was too tired to be disgusted or worried by that feeling. She simply made space in her mind for it and let it settle beside the other dark and thorny emotions cluttering her head and her heart that she tried to ignore.

She was losing track of all the things she didn't want to feel these days.

"A story," she said, musing.

He nodded. His eyes were dark as pools of water beneath a midnight sky. His mouth trembled as if he held in words that described his secret inner pain.

She understood.

And so, Briand reached deep into the recesses of her memory and found a story about the time she captured the white doe they released in the forest on Winterval's Eve and won the prize, to everyone's astonishment, when she was still living under the thumb of her uncle. How she'd let the doe go in the end, because of the look in its eyes. It was a good story, something safe, something from so long ago there was no way it could threaten her now. Something with a pleasing ending, a burst of vindication for the tormented in her victory and the doe's liberation.

The story made Auberon smile three times.

When Briand reached the end, she remembered with a painful tug in the pit of her stomach that this had been the night she'd met Kael for the first time. Thinking his name sent a streak of pain through her. She exhaled, eyes burning, and fell silent. Auberon observed her as if he saw too much, things she didn't want him to see. He opened his mouth to speak, but the cell around them blurred, and then she woke on the cold hearth in Grinna's house, with Nath snoring beside her and the embers glowing faintly, casting a reddish light over her bedroll.

The pain in her heart remained.

Making a strangled noise of frustration, Briand threw the blankets back, tugged on her boots, and stood. She grabbed her cloak and wrapped it around her as she headed for the garden Grinna had mentioned earlier. The cold was bracing. She stood breathing deeply in the dark, clearing her head. The night glittered above her, purple-black and silent. A falling star streaked across the sky as she stared up, and an unnamed emotion twisted inside her.

What was he doing at this exact moment? Sleeping soundly in his chambers in Tyrr? Sharing an intimate conversation—or something other than conversation—with his betrothed? Discussing strategy with the prince? How could one feel such betrayal, such fury, and such longing all at once? She would give her left foot to throw a knife at him right now. She would give her left foot to catch a single glimpse of him.

She felt unhinged.

Did he ever think of her?

Briand wondered, and imagined a dozen scenarios that enraged her and gutted her and made her ashamed of her weakness. She was not alone or powerless, no matter how alone and powerless she felt.

She had Nath, Vox, and Crispin. She had letters from Maera. Soon, she would have Cait and Sieya too. She was not alone.

Briand let out a breath, the air cloudy as it left her lips, and then she went back inside.

~

Kael lay on his bed in the dark of his chamber, listening to the calls of frogs in the gardens outside and trying to keep his mind on anything but her. He was failing miserably. He, who had withstood torture.

This was torture too.

He rose and went to the window. He opened the wooden shutters to let in the breeze from the sea. A star chased across the sky as it fell to the earth, and he braced his elbows on the sill, dropped his head into his hands, and let out a deep groan.

He would master himself. He would conquer this.

He must.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHEN MORNING CAME, Crispin was still feverish and delirious. Nath spooned more herbs between the lad's stiff lips and sponged him with wet rags while Crispin thrashed and muttered about a pair of velvet trousers he wanted to buy.

"Who knew the lad cared so much about fashion?" Nath said, but he couldn't even bring himself to make a joke of it.

Truth was, they were worried.

Grinna produced a dusty tome about plants and said she'd browse through it for any descriptions of what Crispin was experiencing. She didn't seem to have much to do—she chopped firewood in the morning and burned a few eggs in the name of breakfast before retreating to the cellar of the house for a few hours. The rock dragon followed her, and for a short time, the house was quiet.

Nath cleaned the downstairs while Grinna was gone. He began with the bottles, gathering them all up and putting them outside in the garden. Then, he found rags, a bucket, and a scrap of soap and began to scrub every exposed surface. Meanwhile, Briand practiced the things Auberon and Jade had taught her. She made mental cages in her head and coaxed the power that burned in her veins inside. She tried visualizing straw inside and found that the power glowed hotly. But once inside the mental cage, it was not painful, only hot. Still, she could not hold it there forever. She held the Seeker knife in her palm and felt a ringing in her veins as the heat cooled enough to clear her thoughts. Through it all, the rock dragon's mind intermittently brushed past hers, painful as tree bark scratched over a sunburn. She carefully avoided reaching for his mind. She didn't need the pain right now.

She still had a long way to go as far as healing.

The hearth was clean and the floor gleaming by the time Grinna climbed the steps from the cellar.

Her face contorted as she beheld the transformed room. "What did you do?" she demanded, striding across the freshly washed floor to stand toe-to-toe with Nath.

"I cleaned it," he said. "You ought to try it sometime."

"You've- you've moved everything around!"

"I'm not living in filth," Nath said, dropping the rag onto the table with a wet plop.

"Filth?" Grinna sputtered. "How dare you?"

Nath scrubbed at a stain on the table instead of answering.

"Put it back!" Grinna shrieked.

"The dirt?" Nath asked. He paused to lift an eyebrow at her.

She marched past him to the garden and returned with an armful of empty bottles. She piled them in one corner and went back for more.

When she'd assembled them all together, she sat sulking beside them. Nath continued to clean, and Grinna occasionally shot a glare in his direction but otherwise let him mop and scrub without further protest.

Briand sponged herself off in the tiny water closet with one of the clean rags and a bucket of fire-warmed water, and then put on her cloak. She told Nath she'd return shortly, and then, before he had time to mount a protest, she left the house and the painful scrape of the rock dragon's thoughts behind.

The air was cold, the wind brisk. She set out on horseback for the docks in the lower part of the city, keeping her cloak over the lower part of her face to hide her features whenever anyone glanced her way. She felt paranoid this morning after seeing Auberon in her dreams. He wasn't talking about scouring the earth for her. That made her think he had a plan.

She reached the docks before noon and tucked herself into a corner to watch and wait.

The blast of the steamboat filled the air, and she stirred and stepped to the end of the pier as the ship docked. Passengers disembarked on a rattling gangplank.

At the end of the line was a slim figure wrapped in a dark blue cloak with a crop of curly hair blowing in the wind.

Cait.

Briand waited until her friend had stepped onto the dock before approaching her. Cait's eyes widened, and then she grabbed both of Briand's arms in greeting.

"You look like you've been bathing in river water, my friend," she said with a laugh.

"Welcome to your new life," Briand said.

Cait took a deep breath. She smiled tentatively. "I said I was ready for adventure, didn't I? And at least your clothing is scarlet. Well, I think it's

scarlet,” she said, frowning. “It’s hard to tell.” She peered past Briand.

“Where are Nath and that obnoxious fellow you told me about?”

“Back at the place where we’re staying temporarily.”

“Which is... a luxurious inn?” Cait raised her eyebrows hopefully.

“Not quite. Where is Sieya?”

“This way,” Cait said, and led Briand to where they were unloading the cargo. Pulleys and lifts swung over the waters of the lake, hoisting crates and barrels to the land. Cait pointed to a crate big enough to fit a man inside. Bits of straw stuck out of the slats, and as she watched, the crate wobbled on the lift that was conveying it toward them. Faintly, Briand heard a disgruntled snort. She reached out with her mind for the dracule’s. Sieya’s thoughts blasted into hers. The dracule was indignant, cramped, and HUNGRY. So very hungry. Hungry, hungry, hungry.

“You have been feeding her, yes?” Briand asked as they watched the crate grow closer.

Cait sighed in exasperation. “Lords, yes. She eats more in a day than a horse eats in a week. I’ve been feeding her fish, which she likes, and apples and turnips, which she does not. I think the sailors think I’m smuggling another passenger in this crate to avoid the fare.”

Men who were unloading the cargo grabbed the crate and deposited it on the dock with a bump. The crate wiggled. Sieya thought angry thoughts in Briand’s direction.

“Let’s get her out of here,” Briand said.

~

They arrived at Grinna’s house with a furious dracule and even more furious horse. Sieya had made the journey through the city wrapped in a spare cloak and slung across the saddle like a dracule-sized sack of beans. Briand had a throbbing headache—not from her powers, but from the stress of keeping the dracule still while the horse walked. The poor horse stood with its ears flat against its head, trembling at the wriggly, reptilian load on its back.

“We’re not doing that again,” Briand declared. “We’ll have to find another way to move her through the city next time.”

“Next time?” Cait exclaimed. “Can’t we just live here forever?” She turned to gaze at the house, and her smile faltered. “Hmm,” she said.

They stepped inside and were greeted by the sound of Nath and Grinna arguing. Smoke and the smell of something burning filled the air. A bottle clinked by Briand's foot, and she stepped over a pile of them gingerly. The rock dragon's mind scraped against hers like sandpaper over a healing wound, and Briand made a cage in her mind for her powers, but it was a shoddy cage. She was fatigued. Little sparks of pain burst in her head anyway.

"I take it back," Cait murmured. "I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to. What is this place? Is this where the guardians live?"

"Not quite," Briand said, wincing as another burst of pain ran through her head.

"You've said that twice now," Cait said with a frown. "You know, I used to find your reticence charming, but sometimes—"

Sieya wiggled free of the cloak and made a dash for whatever was burning over the fire. She thrust her snout into the pot and sneezed twice before beginning to eat.

"Hey!" Grinna and Nath shouted angrily at the same time.

Sieya ignored them.

The rock dragon lifted its head from where it was curled in a corner and made a growling sound. Sieya pulled her head from the pot, jaws dripping with what appeared to be stew, and snarled back. The rock dragon's thoughts were like fire in Briand's head. She ground her teeth together and pushed the creature back as it tried to lunge at Sieya.

"A dracule," Grinna said in astonishment. "Where did that come from? Did you go to the woods?" She caught sight of Cait and threw up her hands.

"What is this? I didn't agree to more people staying here."

Nath gave Sieya a shove with his foot, but the dracule only braced herself against the floor and ate faster.

"She was on her way when we came," Briand said, striding to the fire to peer in the pot. She sternly commanded Sieya to stop eating their dinner with the half of her mind that wasn't holding the rock dragon down, and the dracule answered with the mental equivalent of slamming a door in her face. Briand reached down to pull the dracule back physically, and Sieya protested with a whine in her throat. She gave a disgruntled sigh and moved away to examine every stick of furniture in the room piece by piece with her nose. The rock dragon watched warily. Spots danced across Briand's vision. Fear panged in her chest.

If she couldn't control one rock dragon and one dracule simultaneously without pain, what would a dragon do to her?

She grabbed her pack and rummaged through it until she'd found the Seeker knife and its magic metal. When her fingers touched the hilt, the pain soothed, leaving a ringing in its wake.

She desperately needed to find the final guardians and fill in the gaps in her knowledge so she could fully heal herself.

Meanwhile, Grinna still looked obstinate at accepting a new houseguest.

"It will draw more notice if she leaves now," Briand said. "Also, do you happen to have any raw meat?"

"I'm Cait," Cait interjected, summoning a smile and offering her hand.

Grinna looked at it but didn't extend her own. "Grinna. And I keep a supply of rats downstairs to feed Fang. But I have them carefully rationed." She eyed Sieya as the dracule flicked its tongue into one of the empty bottles in a flash of sinuous pink. The dracule snorted a spray of sparks and then bounded toward a stack of dirty dishes with a scrabble of claws and a swish of tail. Fang followed, cautious and bristling with indignity at this invasion. Cait put a hand to her chest at the mention of rats. "Live rats?" she inquired hesitantly.

"You think Fang wants to eat dead rats?" Grinna said with a derisive sniff.

"I hadn't really thought about it one way or the other," Cait said.

Sieya put her nose into a dish. Fang growled, and the dracule responded with a low hiss.

Briand leveled both a look and a mental reprimand at the creature. Sieya slunk toward her, tail lashing, and Fang stood his ground and watched her go. Grinna muttered something under her breath.

"Well," Cait said with a nervous laugh. "Where can I get freshened up? I'm quite grimy from my travels."

"My dear," Nath said solemnly. "You are going to have to get used to being grimy."

Then Grinna surprised them all by saying, "There's a place down in the cellar. I'll show you."

The place in the cellar turned out to be a shallow pool fed by a spring that poured from the side of the rock. Briand and Cait turned circles, staring at the expansive, cave-like place beneath the house.

Nath's voice echoed from the other side of the space. "Is this yours?" He gestured at a row of sparring dummies stuffed with straw.

Grinna nodded. "I practice nightly." She patted the hilt of her sword, which she wore at her waist at all times. "That's what my Da taught me, and if the Seekers ever come for me at last, I'll be ready for them."

One of the practice dummies, Briand noted, was draped with a gray cloak, and dark gloves had been tacked onto the bag of straw. This was also the dummy with the most slits in it.

Nath picked up one of the swords and made a few cuts in the air with it. He grunted and practiced a lunge toward one of the dummies.

Grinna leaned against a column to watch. Nath ignored her, slashing at the air. Gradually, she moved closer, and then when he swung once, her sword was there to block it, and then they were sparring.

Cait and Briand made plans to get a good scrub in the pool of water, and then they went upstairs again to see to Sieya before she destroyed the whole house in search of food.

~

Valora stood in the dusty heat of the burial chamber at the outskirts of the Tyrian capital, shading her eyes against the blinding sun with her silk fan as men in sand-colored robes scrambled up and down rickety ladders on the rocks in front of her, balancing pots of fresh mortar on their shoulders. The wind blew fiercely, bringing with it the scent of the sea and a spray of hot sand found its way into every ripple and fold of her clothing. To her right was the capital, standing against the wind in a solemn stretch of bronzed symmetry, and to her left was the desert, harrowing and beautiful in its flat expense. The brown line where the sky met the sand shimmered with heat. When she looked at that line, Valora felt lost, and her soul stretched and swelled as if the whole sky had slipped inside her and her body could not contain the painful volume of it.

She turned back to the tombs.

In Tyyr, they did not bury the dead in the ground, but enclosed the bodies in caves or tombs built of stone. She watched as the workers bricked over the entrance to the modest tomb she'd paid for to lay her lady's maid to rest, their hands so efficient as they closed away Valora's last glimpse of curly black hair and waxy cheeks.

A prickly feeling built in Valora's throat, threatening to burst out in sobs or a scream. She swallowed it and stood straight as the last brick went into

place, sealing the mouth of the tomb. Only then did she turn away. And she discovered a lone figure standing at the edge of the burial ground, his cloak blowing in the wind, his gaze steady as it held hers.

Kael.

He stepped forward toward her, and she him, and they met halfway with the endless sand swirling around them and the tombs behind them as witnesses. The workers had vanished; they were alone.

Valora lowered her hand so there was nothing between them but hot wind and relentless sunlight. She wanted to speak. A thousand words rose to her lips, but she leashed them and waited.

“I’m sorry,” Kael said finally, “for your loss.” He reached out and took her hand, placing something smooth in her palm. She looked down. A necklace of dark purple beads strung on a silken ribbon.

Mourning beads. An old Kyreian tradition. She still wore a strand of them around her waist for her father.

“I didn’t know that tradition was known by many,” she said. She wrapped the strand around her wrist, and the beads rattled together.

“It isn’t,” Kael said.

Another pause.

“I knew her husband,” Kael offered. He looked past her to the tomb, his gaze softening. “He was a good man and a good soldier. He loved her very much.” He paused, sighed as if reaching for comfort deep inside himself.

“They are together now.”

“Will you?” Valora found herself saying.

Kael’s eyes snapped to hers. He tensed.

He didn’t want her to pursue this line of thought.

She did anyway. She deserved to know. He couldn’t avoid it forever. They had to talk about it. They must. They were to be married. They couldn’t dance carefully around the most basic elements of their future.

“Will you love me one day?” she said. “Do I have any hope of that?”

The question lay baldly in the silence between them. Kael inhaled lightly.

The wind played with his hair, blowing it in his eyes.

“I will do what my prince commands,” he said. “That is my duty and my honor to fulfill.”

“But you will not love me,” Valora said. The truth rang painfully in her chest.

Kael lowered his gaze. “Who knows what the future might hold?”

The sadness caught in her throat sprang into her eyes in a sting of salty tears that did not fall. She stepped past him for the city gates, the mourning beads on her wrist clinking together.

Kael did not join her. She peeked back over her shoulder once and saw him pressing one hand against the door of the tomb as if paying his private respects to a woman he'd never even known. He took something from his pocket and set it in the sand.

Valora turned back toward the city and didn't look back again.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

BRIAND FOUND AN opportunity to ask Cait about the court while the young noblewoman bathed in the shallow pool in the cellar.

Briand practiced her knife throwing, hitting the target all around the edge as if she were sewing stitches with a needle. She kept her tone even, her posture casual, but inside, her whole body felt like a dam about to break. The rock dragon's thoughts whined in the back of her mind, causing a needle of pain that only added to her agitation.

Thankfully, the feel of the knife between her fingers, the release inside as it left her hand to hurtle through the air like a falcon in a dive, the satisfying sound of it striking the target—these things all soothed her and kept her focused enough to pretend she was not like glass slowly cracking.

Cait wrapped herself in a blanket as she recounted the recent assassination attempt on Jehn. “When they returned from the city, Kael’s arm was drenched in blood—”

“What?” Briand said. Her hand slipped; the knife missed the target entirely and embedded itself in the wall. She felt dizzy as she turned to stare at her friend. “Drenched in blood?”

“The assassin sliced Kael’s arm,” Cait clarified. “Shoulder, maybe. When they returned to the summer palace, it was on Jehn’s face too. Kael is recovering, but I believe the physician gave him orders to rest. He had been training every day in the courtyard, but I suppose the wound has slowed his regimen.”

Briand wrestled her panic under control. She forced herself to keep standing and speaking as though she were perfectly calm, even though she barely heard the words coming from her own mouth. “His regimen?”

Cait nodded and began to explain Kael’s training process, but Briand could barely hear her. In her mind’s eye, she saw Kael, his face contorted in pain as the assassin’s sword ripped through his arm, splattering blood across a sand-colored wall. And behind him, the cursed prince and puppet master Jehn, his face splashed with Kael’s blood.

If she had been in Tyrr, might she have fought alongside him against this assassin? Might she have stopped the attack before it wounded him?

No. She closed the door on such imaginings. Kael did not find her worth fighting for. He’d made that clear. He’d chosen his path, and he was a

capable and skilled fighter. He didn't need her.

He didn't want her.

She repeated the thought sternly to herself even though thinking it was like sinking her knife into her flesh. She grabbed hold of the hurt and wrapped herself in it. She would cauterize her weakness with the pain. She would force her devotion for him away with the knife point of the truth.

She realized the room was silent. Cait appeared to be waiting for a comment from her.

"That must be disappointing for him, to not be able to train," Briand managed. She crossed the room to retrieve her knife. Her face flushed, and emotions wrestled in her chest. Anger, grief, frustration, worry.

"Disappointing? Maddening, more like it. He has been obsessed with his training. But, it will give him more time to spend with his fiancée, perhaps," oblivious Cait remarked.

Cait meant no harm. She didn't know. Still, Briand felt a surge of anger. Her hand tightened on the knife's hilt. She braced her foot against the wall as she yanked it out with more force than necessary. "Valora?"

"So you've heard?" Cait said. She nodded. "Lady Valora and Kael. An odd match, I thought at first, but I think I see the brilliance in it now."

Briand made a sort of growl in assent. She stalked back to her place, sucked in a breath, and took aim. Her whole body quivered with rage.

Cait wrung water from her long hair. "They seem reserved with each other, though. I didn't realize either of them favored the other. Of course, you know how Kael is. He's so difficult to read. Valora too. They're quite the pair."

Briand threw the knife again too hard. She hit the target dead center. Dust shot into the air. "And the prince?" she practically snarled, unable to hear any more about Kael and Valora. "How does he fare?"

Her ears were ringing. She was flushed, too hot. She might vomit. She sucked in a few cleansing lungfuls of air.

"Jehn seems... sad," Cait said. "He is withdrawn lately. Snappish with his court. Keeping to his rooms. Avoiding lighthearted conversation. Of course, when is the prince ever lighthearted?"

*In private, Briand wanted to say. Over games of Dubbok by lamplight, when he lies and calls people who trust him friends. They are merely puppets. Pawns. He does not have friends. He has soldiers, and he sends them into battle with promises he does not intend to keep.*

But she did not say this. Instead, she said, “There is a war going on. Perhaps he feels the pressure of it.”

“The gossips say the council is urging him to find a wife, someone of suitable political clout. There was some talk of a Tyrian princess, but I heard that she and Jahn did not care for each other in the slightest.”

“Last I heard, that wasn’t necessary for a good marriage in Jahn’s opinion,” Briand said. In her mind, she felt a nudge from Sieya upstairs, who had been sleeping near the fire. The dracule was hungry.

Cait worked her hair into a long, wet braid. “I think you’re right. But perhaps it mattered to the Tyrian princess.” She paused, staring into space. “I’ve also heard that in Mammot, noblewomen sometimes take two husbands, one for political reasons and one for love. Perhaps he could marry a Mammotite princess, and then it wouldn’t matter if she liked him or not.”

“And Jahn? What about who he likes?” Briand got a bit of perverse enjoyment out of the idea that Jahn would have to marry someone who ignored him.

Sieya nudged her mind again, more insistently, thinking of pies and sweetmeats.

Cait shrugged. “You know what they say about the prince.”

Briand shook her head.

“He isn’t particularly interested in women.”

“He’s interested in men?”

“No, no. Hardly anybody, I think. No concubines, no mistresses, no paramours. Some think he doesn’t have the appetite for it; others say he has some kind of fear—”

A howl of rage came from upstairs, and Sieya’s mind flooded with happiness at the human food she was eating.

Briand took the stairs two at a time to intervene and left her questions unasked.

She found Nath entering the front door, a sack in hand.

“Where have you been?” Briand asked, not stopping as she rushed to drag Sieya away from Grinna’s pot of burned... something.

“Went out to buy some supplies,” Nath said, lifting the bag to punctuate his words. “Seeing as we’re burning through all of ours.”

She had a feeling it wasn’t all he’d gone to do.

~

Kael stood outside the council chamber door, his hand on his sword and his eyes on the sky. He could hear the murmur of voices inside rising to a feverish pitch, and he knew Jehn must have made his proposal that they move the court to Nyr.

Despite the circumstances, he doubted the notion would be a popular one. Truthfully, Kael ought to be inside and among them. When Jehn reinstated him at court, Jehn had offered to make Kael one of the council. But Kael was a man of action, not mincing flattery, and there was already one too many Halescrons at that table. And so he stood outside, waiting for his prince to emerge so he could speak with Jehn as Jehn had requested earlier by message.

His arm was mending, but still stiff, and it was still preventing him from his rigorous training regimen that kept his mind and body too tired to think too much, too tired to long for things he could not have. Thus, he'd continued to prowl the gardens and walls at night, unable to sleep, unable to rest.

The door to the council chamber swept open, and Kael's father emerged. Lord Halescorn cast an imperious look at the waiting guards before his eyes fell on his disowned son.

"Kael," he said with a stiff nod of acknowledgment. "How is your arm?"

"Mending, sir," Kael responded. He stood straight, looking Lord Halescorn in the eye. They were equals, and Kael forced himself to remember who he was—the right hand of the prince—and not a cowering child.

The other nobles streamed from the council around them. Lord Halescorn paused as if he wanted to say something else, but before he could speak, Kael's brother, Jacob, emerged with Kael's betrothed on his arm. Jacob's eyes glittered with some unspoken and vindictive emotion, and Valora was stiff and silent as if she had been goaded into accepting the escort.

"Lady Valora," Lord Halescorn said, greeting her with a shallow bow. His mouth flexed with some private thought of amusement as he looked at her and Jacob, then Kael.

Kael wanted to sigh. Their father was forever pitting them against each other, using threats real or imagined to stir jealous. He restrained himself. Valora released Jacob's arm and curtsied in return. "Lord Halescorn." She was the picture of gracious nobility as she bowed to the man who had

openly scorned her before she became engaged to his now-favored son. She crossed to Kael's side and took his arm instead.

Kael and Jacob locked eyes but did not bow to each other. Jacob had been standoffish to Kael since his return from his last mission. Kael suspected that his newfound rise in position did not sit well with his half-brother, or the favor Jehn so obviously bestowed upon him.

Last of all, Prince Jehn emerged, with two concerned nobles speaking on either side of him.

Jehn spotted Kael with what might have been relief, although, with his diplomatic expression firmly in place, it was hard even for Kael to tell what the prince was thinking.

"Kael," the prince said. "Walk with me."

Kael bowed to the others and paused to kiss the back of Valora's hand in the appropriate farewell before he followed Jehn away from the council chamber. The feel of his lips to the back of her cold hand haunted him.

They had almost reached Jehn's chambers when the prince let out a breath and the words he'd been holding in. "Idiots, all of them," he said under his breath. "If they had their way, we would walk into Tasglorn and present ourselves for arrest because the capital has better bread."

"I take it they do not care to move to Nyr?"

Jehn laughed. "No, they do not care to. But they shall. My foolish, flippant, foppish court will do as I say this time."

Kael thought he heard a whisper of footsteps just out of sight, and he drew his knife and whirled, but it was only the wind.

As always now, when his heart was pounding and his body at alert for danger, he thought of her. Was she safe? Was she happy?

And then, he did his best to lock the thoughts away.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ON THE THIRD day of their stay with Grinna, Crispin opened his eyes and spoke lucidly.

“I would like some spiced chocolate,” he said to Briand and Nath as he stared at them across the quilt.

Well, semi-lucidly, anyway.

“Lad?” Nath asked, leaning forward over the bed. “Do you know who we are?”

Crispin squinted at him. “I think I remember your name. Nasty? Something like that.”

“Nath,” the tutor snapped, his mouth dropping to a scowl. He drew back in irritation.

Crispin’s mouth quirked in a dazed smile.

“You’ve been sick,” Briand said. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Crispin’s eyes widened. “Um, not her,” he said, and Briand followed his gaze to the doorway, where Cait entered carrying a tray of herbal remedies.

“Oh!” she said at the sight of Crispin. “You’re awake. Hello, I’m Cait.”

“I’m Crispin,” the boy said, puffing out his chest and attempting to sit up.

“I’m an important person in the Monarchist army.”

Nath snorted and pushed Crispin back down on the pillows. “You’re a hair shy of a deserter, and you’re still very ill. Lie still.”

Cait set the tray on the bed. “I brought you some herbs.”

Crispin opened his mouth obediently as she poured a foul concoction on a spoon. He shuddered as he swallowed it. “Ugh! You are all trying to poison me!”

“I think you managed that on your own, lad,” Nath remarked. “What did you touch that morning in the woods? Anything at all that you can remember?”

Crispin thought. His forehead wrinkled, and his hands moved restlessly on the quilt in front of him.

“Well,” he said thoughtfully. “I did use a few leaves of a fuzzy plant with white berries to wipe myself when we had stopped to camp by the river.”

Briand sighed and rubbed her forehead. “That could be it,” she said to Nath. Nath muttered something under his breath. “What was the color and shape of this leaf?”

Crispin's forehead wrinkled as he thought about it. "Purple," he said finally. "With reddish veins. The edges were pointed—"

Grinna, who was leaning in the doorway listening, straightened and said, "Oh lords, no. You didn't. And you said the leaf was fuzzy?"

Crispin nodded. "Like an animal pelt. It was soft. I thought it would be perfect to..." He trailed off, staring at her.

"What?" Nath growled at her. "What did he just describe?"

"Feverbeet," she said, and started to laugh. It was a thin, reedy laugh, more like a cackle. "He wiped himself with feverbeet?"

Crispin wiggled on the bed, embarrassed. "I didn't know," he grumbled.

"What, exactly, is feverbeet?" Briand demanded.

Grinna wiped tears from her eyes. "It causes fever—"

"Naturally, given the name," Nath snapped.

"And it can kill a man if he gets too much of the oils on him. The infection on the skin looks like a purple rash with distinctive white dots in the midst of it. Just like the leaf and the berries, they say. It's the feverbeet calling card."

"He didn't have a rash like that," Briand said. "On his arm..."

She and Nath exchanged a horrified glance.

The silence stretched. Crispin reddened.

"I'll do it," Nath said heavily. He went to the side of the bed and sighed.

"Turn over, lad."

Crispin rolled onto his side and stared resolutely at the wall. Nath lifted the covers and squinted.

"Purple rash, white dots," he confirmed, dropping the blankets.

Grinna started to giggle again.

"Is there a specific treatment?" Briand asked her.

The woman nodded, biting her lip to contain her mirth and failing miserably. "An herb called pruppia grows in the wilderness around here. Purple flowers, just like the feverbeet's leaves. If you stew them and apply the mixture to the affected area, you will soothe the rash."

"Do you have any of this herb?"

She shook her head. "No, but I can draw you a picture of what it looks like."

Briand looked at Nath. "I'll go. I need to check on Vox anyway."

It felt good to be in the open air after days in that stifling house. Briand rode into the forest at a gallop after leaving the city, calling for Vox in her head. The dracule gave her a purring response, and sent an image of a bird he was hunting.

Briand wondered briefly how Vox and Sieya would take to each other. But that was a problem for tomorrow. First, she had to find the purple flowers Grinna had described.

She dismounted in the silence of the woods and searched. Grinna had said the flowers grew near water, and so she found the river and scanned the banks.

She finally found the flower growing in a brackish puddle beneath a fallen log. She picked enough to fill the satchel slung across her shoulders, then called to Vox in her head. The dracule crashed through the forest noisily, frolicking and whipping his tail in delight at the sight of her. He looked well-fed and happy, but he had several cuts on his back that made Briand frown.

She knelt down beside the boisterous dracule and ran her hand across the wounds. Vox shivered and snapped gently at her in protest. He sent her an image of a wild cat.

Briand closed her eyes. They needed to get the dracule somewhere safe, and soon. She thought briefly of the possibility of moving Vox to Grinna's house.

That seemed like an utter nightmare.

"We'll be moving on soon," she promised the Dracule.

As she returned to Peak, her thoughts were once again on the guardians they had to find. The encrypted message Grinna had received mentioned the Shrieker winds, so Briand supposed they ought to head toward the upper settlements next. She felt weary at the prospect of more searching. Her mind buzzed with quiet discomfort as some creature in the sky brushed against her thoughts.

She didn't see the Seekers until she was almost upon them.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE DOOR SLAMMED behind Briand as she entered the house at a near-run, her heart thudding against her ribs and her breath tight in her throat. She paused in the hall to calm herself before facing the others.

As usual, something was burning over the hearth, and this time, Nath and Cait were arguing. There was no sign of Grinna or her rock dragon.

“Just because I’m female doesn’t mean I can cook any better than the rest of you,” Cait snapped as she brandished a spoon at Nath. “I’m a nobleman’s daughter. I’ve never held a ladle in my life—”

She stopped talking when she caught sight of Briand’s face.

“What is it?” Nath asked. “You look like you’ve seen a—”

“Rypter,” Briand breathed. She sank down on the bench beside the table and put a hand over her eyes. “There’s a rypter in the lower city. It’s Auberon’s henchmen. He’s looking for us.”

Nath went white to his lips.

Cait asked, “Who’s Auberon?”

“The Seeker that kidnapped the dragonsayer a few months back,” Nath explained in a low tone. He jerked his chin at Briand’s satchel. “Did you get the flowers?”

“I got them.” Briand withdrew a handful and passed them to Cait. “Here, we might as well start brewing them while we decide what to do.”

“W-what’s a rypter?” Cait asked. She found a pot and filled it with water from the rain barrel. Her fingers trembled.

Sieya’s claws clacked on the floor as she came to Briand’s side and laid her nose on the dragonsayer’s knee. She whined deep in her throat. Briand patted the dracule’s head.

“You’ll never forget one if you’ve seen it, my father always said,” Grinna said from the doorway.

Everyone froze at the sound of her voice. Nath met Briand’s eyes. His eyebrows moved.

“They’re pets of the Seekers,” she continued, “but maybe pet is the wrong word. How can such a nightmare be a pet? It senses thoughts and hunts people based on their emotions. And then, it eviscerates its prey. My mother said rypters feed on the intestines of those they kill. And now, there’s one here in Peak.”

Briand and Nath said nothing. Cait shifted nervously from foot to foot. Grinna straightened, one hand resting on the hilt of her sword. The rock dragon stood beside her, looking bristlier than usual. As Grinna strolled into the room, he followed her, bumping against her leg.

“You were going to keep it a secret from me, weren’t you?” she said, looking at each of their faces in turn. “You were going to pretend you knew nothing, and bring Seekers down on all our heads with your selfishness.”

“We know a way to—” Nath began.

“Shut up,” Grinna snapped. She prowled to Briand’s side and leaned down.

“Rock dragons, like all creatures with tainted blood, despise rypters. One whiff of these nightmarish minds and the tainteds get agitated. Fang has been trained to alert me. Your lies never had a chance.”

“We know how to fool the minds of the rypters,” Briand said. “Crispin knows.”

“You mean your friend who lies unconscious upstairs? He is going to save us all?” Grinna made a sound of derision. “I think not.” Her fingers tightened around her sword. Nath’s eyes were trained on her hand. He subtly pulled back the edge of his coat, resting his hand on his weapon. Grinna smiled faintly. “Get out. All of you.”

“What about Crispin—?”

“I was beyond generous to let you stay in the first place. You’ve officially overstayed your welcome.”

“But the rypters—” Cait said helplessly.

“The rypters can rend you in the streets for all I care,” Grinna growled.

“Gather your things and go.”

The rock dragon snarled to punctuate her words. Sieya responded with a guttural purr that promised violence.

Briand stood. She put a hand on the dracule’s bony shoulder to still the creature and sent a thought of command to stand down. Sieya snorted sparks and didn’t budge.

“Is there anything we can say or do to change your mind?”

Grinna sneered. “Nothing.”

Briand nodded to Nath. “Let’s get our things, then.”

~

They left at twilight. Crispin, bundled in a blanket and clutching a bottle of

pruppia tea, groaned as he climbed onto one of the horses. “Think... animal thoughts,” he muttered thickly to them.

“What animal?” Nath asked. He ran a hand through his hair as he looked around them at the gathering darkness. “A bird? A rat?”

“Rat... is fine.” Crispin lowered his head to the horse’s neck.

“We’re not fit to travel,” Nath muttered to Briand. “Do we dare try to get a room at one of the inns?”

She shook her head. “We’ve got to get out of here, Nath.”

He sighed. He knew she was right.

They stole through the city, leading the horses, sticking to alleyways and back streets as they made their way toward the gate. Burning torches cast flickering shadows over the cobblestones. Once or twice, Briand thought she saw the flutter of a silver cloak out of the corner of her eye, but it was only her imagination. Her pulse pounded in her head, and the back of her neck prickled, anticipating a shout for them to halt at any moment. She focused on the cobblestones, keeping all other thoughts from her mind. Beside her, Cait’s breathing was loud in the stillness.

The streets were nearly empty. A few wagons rumbled past. They paused, waiting until the passersby had vanished before descending into the lower city down the winding staircase of crumbling stone that crawled down the mountainside like a great gray snake.

The lower city glowed beneath them, lit by torches and lanterns, the floating inns and taverns on the lake echoing with music and laughter. Sieya, wrapped in a blanket atop one of the other horses, made worried noises from her precarious position. The horse shied and snorted, kicking pebbles down the steps in front of them, and Nath put a hand on its neck and muttered to it grimly.

They reached the gates, lit by flickering lanterns that hung from points across the cross beam, and everyone relaxed slightly.

No sign of rypters or Seekers.

Ahead was the wilderness, stretching dark and silent beneath a wild and starry sky. A falling star blazed through the air above them, and Cait inhaled faintly.

Briand reached out with her mind for Vox and called to him. She felt his shiver of delight at the summons, and caught a mental whiff of the dead fish he was eating beside the riverbank.

“Let’s go,” she said to the others.

A sound scraped the road behind them. A talon dragged across a stone. Briand turned.

Standing in the moonlight, its naked body glowing pale as the body of a dead fish, was a rypter.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE RYPTER'S BLIND, opaque white eyes blinked as it turned its head toward them and emitted a clacking call into the night, its throat bulging and its nostrils flaring. It was hideously ugly, its body like a giant vulture plucked of all its feathers, its head like a lizard. It couldn't see them. It couldn't smell them. But it could sense their thoughts if they weren't careful.

Cait stiffened. Briand stretched out a hand, shaking her head at all of them to hold still, to think thoughts of cobblestones and dirt like rats scrabbling in the garbage heap beside the gate, and behind her on the horse, Crispin muttered, his voice a pebbly, sickly rattle in the otherwise ringing silence. He was repeating a string of words—commands—under his breath.

Everyone else breathed in and out in frozen terror.

The rypter cocked its head. Its lip curled, revealing needlelike teeth. Briand and her friends remained still. They barely dared to breathe. One of the horses nickered.

The rypter huffed in their direction and turned away.

They backed toward the gate, and then Nath's foot slipped on a piece of garbage in the street. He staggered, swearing under his breath.

The rypter whirled back around with a growl. It released a shrill cry, and two dark shapes emerged from the alley. Briand's stomach fell at the sight of them.

Men dressed in black cloaks with bandoleers slung across their chests and swords at their hips.

Auberon's henchmen?

"Run," she gasped out, the word a strangled sound forced from her lips. Nath slung himself into the saddle behind Crispin and grabbed the reins as he kicked the horse into a run. Cait climbed onto the last horse and pulled Briand up after her. She clicked her tongue and dug her heels into the animal's side, and the horse didn't have to be told twice. They galloped for the forest beyond the city. The rypter screamed behind them, the sound like a knife across glass. The henchmen shouted something, but the wind scattered his words.

Briand called out to Vox in her head. He answered with a snort, leaping up from his fish dinner and tearing through the woods in their directions,

bounding over fallen logs and dashing around trees. She was half in his head and half in her own, feeling his claws digging into the damp earth at the same time that she felt the lurch of the horse beneath her as it settled into a steady lope when they reached an even stretch of field. Peak fell away behind them, and the sound of the rypter grew faint.

When the horses were foaming with sweat and blowing hard, they slowed to a walk. The sky was a starry dome above them now, the world around them black and empty. Briand reached for Vox and felt him growing nearer, following her mind like a thread leading him through the land.

“Have we lost them?” Cait asked.

Nath turned in the saddle to scan the way they’d come. “For now, but don’t relax just yet.”

Crispin had slumped against the neck of the horse he rode. His hair was plastered to his forehead, and his face was pale in the moonlight.

“We need to get him somewhere safe,” Briand said to Nath, who nodded in agreement. “Somewhere where he can recover without having to be moved every few hours. Are there any Monarchist sympathizers who might take us in nearby? Where are we?”

Nath pointed back the way they’d come. “The Jessu is back that way, so we’re headed east. The mountains are above us. If we continue on this route, it’s only mining towns and a few trading outposts between here and the Wild Lands.”

“What if we go north?” Briand asked.

“We need someplace with lots of people,” Crispin mumbled faintly. “It’s harder for the rypters to track us that way.”

“He’s right,” Nath said. “Those beasts will have a difficult time sorting our thoughts from several thousand other folks.”

“What’s the largest city or settlement north of Peak?” Briand asked.

“A place called Gillspin,” Nath said after thinking a moment. “On the edge of a great lake.”

Briand laughed bitterly. “Gillspin,” she repeated, as if the word left a bad taste in her mouth.

“Do you know it?” Nath asked.

“Yes, and I never thought I’d return.” She sighed. “Gillspin, then. I hope you are ready to mingle with thieves and derelicts, Nath.”

Nath snorted. “I haven’t stopped mingling with derelicts since I met you, guttersnipe.” But he smiled at her, and she knew he was utterly devoted to

her, and that his words were only affectionate. And there, under that wild night sky, with the taste of the wind in her teeth and the smell of the grass and horses in her nose, and the threat of danger fading at their back, she suddenly missed Kael so fiercely that she lost her breath. He ought to be there with them. It was wrong without him. She felt as if she'd lost a limb, and the pain throbbed through her chest and made her inhale sharply.

Nath's eyebrows quirked up, and he studied her face.

"I miss him too," he said softly.

"Who?" Crispin muttered. "Who are you talking about?"

"Hush, lad," Nath said. "Stop listening to others' conversations and go to sleep. You'll need your strength for the ride." To Briand, he said, "What are the costs like in Gillspin? Do you think we have enough coins to house everyone in an inn until the lad is well?"

"I know a place we can stay for a good price," Briand said.

"All right, then." Nath looked at them all. "Keep your eyes open for any signs of the rypter as we travel—"

"I thought we'd lost it," Cait interjected, alarmed.

Nath shook his head. "Rypters are not so easily shaken off. We need to ride fast, and stay wary until we reach the city."

"Then let's go now!" Cait dug her heels into the horse's side, urging the animal to a brisk trot.

No one argued with her.

~

When sunrise touched the rooftops of the palace, Kael had already been awake for hours overseeing the loading of the ship that would carry Jehn and him to Nyr. Workers staggered past, bowed under a load of crates that Jehn was having brought with him. One of the workers dropped a case, and when the lid popped open, silks spilled out. Clothing. Piles of it, yards and yards of shimmering fabric and embroidered collars and jackets. The laborers hurried to stuff the garments back into the crate as one of the stewards swooped in to scold them for the mistake.

Kael was mystified by this sudden interest in fashion on Jehn's part, but it was Jehn, and thus, he wasn't surprised. The true prince no doubt had some secret agenda with it all.

Kael felt his father's presence at his back. He kept his eyes focused on the ship and the twisting line of laborers loading it. All the muscles in his back tensed.

"How is your arm?" his father asked in a conversational tone.

"Nearly healed," Kael said.

"I haven't seen you in the yard as of late."

"Yes, the physician said I need to rest from all strenuous training for at least another week, and Prince Jehn agreed with him."

Lord Halescorn nodded once. A pained silence followed as both men kept their eyes on the ship and the waves that crashed around it.

Kael ground his teeth together. His father had attempted to repair their relationship lately, but to what end? He was suspicious.

"And your betrothed—does she travel with you to Nyr?" Lord Halescorn asked after a pause.

"She will stay here for another month, and come with the rest of the court," Kael answered, his tone perfectly polite. Inwardly, he wondered what his father was playing at. Lord Halescorn's spies were some of the best, and Kael and Valora's travel plans were hardly a secret. His father already knew everything about their planned journey. Why was he making stilted conversation about it?

Before they could say any more, Kael spotted a retinue of ladies making their way down the path on the cliffs toward them, the bronzed palace walls at their back, their dresses fluttering in the stiff wind blowing off the sea. He spotted Lady Valora in the midst of the others, her dress staying put as if she'd given it a stern warning beforehand not to misbehave, her hair pulled away from her face in a knot as if she were preparing for battle. Her cool eyes met his and then glanced away. He looked back at the sea as a furious swell of emotion tore through him. She was a fine woman. A good match. But she was not what he wanted. She was not who he wanted. He could not seem to wrestle his desires into submission, and he loathed himself for it. He bowed low as they noblewomen reached them, and kissed Valora's hand. They walked a little way along the path toward the sea, leaving the others. Birds wheeled in the sky above them, and the surf hissed and seethed at their feet.

Valora halted beside the water. One tendril of hair had escaped her elaborate bun, and it danced around her lips. "What did Lord Halescorn want?"

“Truthfully,” Kael said, “I don’t know. He asked about your plans to travel to Nyr—things he already knows, without a doubt.”

“He has excellent spies,” she agreed, and paused, thoughtful. Across from them, one of the laborers dropped another crate. More silks spilled out.

“Perhaps he aims to unsettle you,” she said. “Or perhaps he truly wants to make amends.”

Kael found it impossible to believe, but he said nothing.

“You’ve been to Nyr before, haven’t you?” she said then. “You were an ambassador to the queen on behalf of the true prince?”

“Yes,” he said, remembering it briefly.

“Will we find a receptive place there?” she asked, and Kael realized she was anxious. Her arms were clasped across her front as if to hold herself steady against the wind.

He wouldn’t lie to her to soothe her nerves. “Nyr will be less welcoming than Tyrr was. The Nyrians are not all of one mind about Cahan and Jehn, and the queen’s decision to allow us sanctuary is, according to reports, a deeply controversial one. We’ve been fortunate here, perhaps more than we realize.”

Valora nodded. “Do you think we will be safe?”

“I will give my life to ensure it,” he said firmly.

At that, she raised her eyes to his. He could see that she had things she wanted to say, but she didn’t voice her thoughts. After another moment, she walked back toward the others.

A dark spot appeared on the horizon, growing steadily larger. Kael saw the glint of metallic wings in the sun. A mechbird.

The bird flew to the palace, and Kael excused himself from the ship-loading and made his way with haste through the gardens baking in the heat of midday, through the corridors deep and cool with shadow, past servants hurrying toward the docks with more crates and bundles for the ship. He reached the door to his chambers and paused, his heart in his throat, and then he unlocked it and let himself inside.

A fluttering shadow clung to the wooden lattice. Kael opened the shutters, and the little mechanical bird hopped inside and spat a rolled up paper into his hand.

He uncurled the paper hands that trembled and scanned the brief lines.

Nath’s neat script was encrypted in their private code that they’d used for years, and Kael understood it as well as his mother tongue.

*Staying in N. Kyreia for now as C. is sick from contact with feverbeet.  
She is safe.*

Those last three words hit him like a punch in the gut. He read them again, each word searing into his mind.

*She is safe.*

Not even her name.

Still, he trembled.

He crushed the paper in his fist and leaned his forehead against it.

Jehn would want to know this update. He needed to inform the prince.

But Kael read the message again before he burned it, just to see the words again.

## **Part Two:**

# **Blood on the Cards**

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BRIAND AND HER company stopped to rest the horses at dawn. They dismounted beside a creek in a hollow surrounded by trees and large gray rocks covered in lichen. One of the rocks was scratched with old writings and carvings, and Nath told them that the words were left by hunters and trappers traveling the trade routes through the north.

Crispin slid from his horse with a whimper of pain, and not even Nath teased him about it. He limped to the closest rock and sank down in a huddle.

Sieya, who had been loping alongside the horses, flopped down beside him to doze. Cait and Nath dismounted, Cait murmuring something about relieving herself. The young noblewoman disappeared into the bushes while Nath dug through one of the saddlebags for Crispin's herbal concoction. Briand rode her horse out of the hollow to scan the horizon for any sign of pursuit. The cool light of dawn stretched across the wild hills, whipping her hair away from her face and making her mount's mane dance. The cold, clear air smelled like ice. A jolt of longing shot through her as if she'd touched the mind of a dragon, but it was only the absence of Kael ringing through her once more.

No sign of rypters or Seekers.

She returned to the campsite and dismounted, her muscles aching from the night-long ride. Nath handed her a piece of jerky and a canteen of water.

"Fresh from the stream," he said. "No fire—we don't dare."

Briand ate and drank without tasting anything. She wanted to lie down and sleep for a week. Somehow, everything hurt more because everything felt deeply wrong without him. She was angry that she was on the road and he wasn't here. She was angry he was marrying someone else. She was angry that she couldn't seem to shake him loose from her head and her heart, no matter what she did.

But all she could think all night long was how they could have been killed by that rypter, and how much she hoped she saw him before she died.

A rustle came from the bushes, and she tensed. "Cait?"

Nath froze, his face going white.

A blur of talons and scales burst into the clearing, and Briand laughed, startled. Nath relaxed. Not a rypter.

“Vox!” she said. “Why didn’t you call out to me?”

The dracule bounded to her, touched his nose to her hand, and then darted away in a spurt of rambunctious energy. He streaked around the campsite, making the horses snort and pull at their lead ropes. He ran to the saddlebag Nath held and stuck his nose in it before Nath elbowed him away. He even sniffed Crispin, blowing the lad’s hair back with a smoky snort.

Then Vox skidded to a stop, his ears pricked forward and his tail curving up. He’d spotted Sieya.

The dracule’s whole body quivered with surprise and curiosity. He held still, back arched, head cocked. His thoughts were a burst of wordless questions crackling with a hint of fire.

Sieya lifted her head. She looked at the other dracule with narrowed eyes and made a single crooning, querulous purr deep in her throat.

Vox dashed at her.

Sieya leaped up, her tail lashing, sparks shooting from her nose. Her lip curled as she snarled, revealing her glistening teeth.

Vox stopped an inch from her and stretched out his head. He sniffed her delicately. Sieya’s ears pricked forward, and she sniffed him back, still growling.

Briand and Nath exchanged a glance.

Cait, returning from the bushes, paused and smiled. “What do they think of each other?” she called.

Vox shifted his gaze to look at Cait at the sound of her voice, and that was when Sieya pounced. She sprang on the other dracule, pinning him to the ground and biting him hard on the neck. Vox let out a high-pitched squeal and thrashed to get away. He scrambled against the dirt, twisting and wriggling in his efforts to escape.

“Sieya!” Briand shouted. She ran forward and grabbed the female dracule by the tail. The dracule hissed at her but didn’t let go.

“SIEYA.” Briand sent a swift, furious thought at the dracule, who finally released Vox with a huff and stalked away to one of the rocks, where she settled herself and sulked, tail swishing back and forth angrily.

Vox shook himself with a whimper and padded toward Crispin. He curled himself into a ball behind the lad and made soft, unhappy sounds.

“How tragic,” Cait said as she walked back to join them. “They’re the only two things like each other in the world, and they hate each other.” She shook her head sadly.

“Will they learn to like each other, you think?” Nath asked Briand.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” she said with a sigh, wishing again that she had a guardian, another dragonsayer, anyone to tell her what she ought to do when it came to these things.

With that, they remounted and rode on.

~

Briand had forgotten how vast the sky seemed here at the top of the world. A dome of throbbing, cloudless blue arched over their heads, wheeling with birds that screamed and dove at the rocks in the distance. Nath told them all that the birds were snatching up tiny brown rabbits to take to their young. Then, he explained that the rabbits had a massive network of tunnels beneath the surface so they could travel safely. He was talking a lot, and Briand wondered how nervous he was about the rypter they’d seen.

“They aren’t rabbits,” Crispin said from his miserable huddle against his horse’s neck. He was barely visible underneath the blanket he was wrapped in. “They’re called rickles, and they’re not rabbits.”

“Yes, they are,” Nath snapped. “Have you ever been to eastern Kyreia or the Wild Lands before now?”

“No,” Crispin said, his voice stubborn even though it was only a whisper.

“But I’ve read extensively—”

“Talk to me again when you’ve caught one for dinner and skinned it,” Nath replied with a scowl. “Then you can tell me they aren’t rabbits.”

“They’re not,” Crispin insisted. “They’re related to mice. They have long ears, sure, but they aren’t rabbits.”

Nath made a noise of annoyance. “I liked you better when you were unconscious, lad.”

The dracules ran ahead, sniffing at the rocks and chasing the animals that might or might not be rabbits into their burrows. Whenever Vox got too close to Sieya, she whirled on him with a hiss and a snap, and he shied away with a yelp. Briand sent a mental command to Sieya to behave, but the dracule only paused to scratch an itch on her haunch furiously with her teeth, ignoring Briand altogether.

Their journey took them over rolling hills and through scrubby grasslands with massive rocks three times the size of the horses protruding from the ground like teeth rising from a rotting jawbone. Some of the rocks were

carved into fantastic shapes—headless men on horseback, and great snarling cats, and dragons. Some simply looked like giant faces half-buried in the grass.

“What are these?” Cait asked.

“Remnants of an ancient age,” Nath said. He looked at Crispin as if he expected the lad to disagree, but Crispin only pressed his lips together irritably. “The Barrow Bridge was another relic from the same time.”

“Was?” Cait asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” Nath said with a grin. “We collapsed it.”

“Oh! Yes! With the dragons.” Cait looked at Briand. “Do they look like these?” She pointed at one of the rock carvings.

“Bigger,” Briand said, and Cait pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Not the lower hemisphere dragons,” Crispin said. “Those—at least the ptsari—are quite small, maybe the size of three horses put together. They’re fast, though. They look a little like birds—”

“I’ve had enough of your lip,” Nath started angrily. “Correcting me is one thing, but telling a blasted *dragonsayer* what dragons look like—”

“Wait,” Briand interrupted. “What did you call them?”

“Lower hemisphere dragons,” Crispin said. “Ptsari. Maanu.” He looked a little smug as he shot a glance in Nath’s direction.

“Where did you hear about these?” Briand asked. She urged her horse closer to his and fixed her intense stare on him.

Crispin blinked, a little cowed by that stare. He reddened but didn’t look away. “My father’s master—the Seeker—had a library full of old books. I used to sneak into his study and read them during the day when he was gone and my father was busy with the rypters. He had a book about dragons. It was so old I thought the pages were going to fall apart in my hands. It told all the types. The ones from the Wild Lands are called Monarch dragons, you know. They’re the biggest in the world now, although there was an ancient type that was even bigger than no longer exists. I don’t know what it was called. The book was missing those pages.”  
Briand wanted this book.

~

Briand didn’t realize she’d dozed off on the back of her horse until she found herself in the cell, the cold, damp stones beneath her and the dank

odor of river water in the air. She looked up and saw Auberon scowling at her from across the room, where he sat with his back against the wall and both arms propped on his knees. He exuded a brooding irritation with every movement of his body as he leaned his head back against the wall and muttered, “Not even in daylight am I safe.”

But his sneer fell flat, and the venom in his voice was unconvincing. He looked tormented.

She stayed against her side of the cell, and he against his. No threats, no posturing. Auberon seemed exhausted today—his face looked pale and gaunt, his hair tangled. He wore a silver robe as if he’d fallen asleep fully clothed and in the midst of Seeker business.

“Caught napping?” Briand asked. “I didn’t know Seekers had such time. Certainly not ones that spend their days scouring the countryside for dragonsayers.”

He gave her a nasty look. “I’m not searching for you.”

“Liar.”

He laughed, the sound bitter. “Believe what you want. I have other, more urgent matters requiring my attention, dragon girl. I can’t waste all my time on petty revenge.”

“So you no longer need my blood?” she said. Her thoughts spun. Was he lying? Was he telling the truth? Then what of the rypter and the henchman they’d seen? That seemed an unlikely coincidence.

“Ah,” Auberon said softly. “I need it. But I don’t need you in order to have it, now do I?”

She shuddered. Was he going to send an assassin after her?

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” she said quietly. “We were friends in Tasglorn—”

“Don’t you dare try to change your tune,” he snarled, his jaw tightening and his whole body going rigid. “You said before that we were not friends. You mocked me for thinking so. And now, fearing for your safety, you whisper your poisonous lies again.”

She fell silent.

Auberon, looking startled at his outburst, leaned back against the wall once more. He crossed his arms over his body, all pretenses of sulky disinterest gone. He was shaking. “You call me a liar,” he said. “But you were the liar. You used me, you tricked me, you made me—” He abruptly stopped talking and shook his head. He didn’t finish his thought.

“Aub—”

“No!”

He looked so young, so vulnerable, so pained. As if she’d stabbed him in the back, and he was still bleeding from the wound. Regret passed through Briand, and she fiercely rebuked herself for it. But the emotion wouldn’t withdraw regardless of how she fought it.

She’d hurt him, and she was sorry about it. Enemies or not.

“Fine,” she said. “Not friends. But perhaps we can come to an agreement?”

He made a noise of derision. “An agreement,” he repeated with disgust. “I think I’ve had enough of agreements with you.”

“I have something you need,” she said simply. “And you don’t know where I am.” She paused after saying it, studying him to see if he gave any clue as to the truth of that statement. But he only looked at her impassively.

Briand thought of the book Crispin had mentioned. She wondered if Auberon would know of it. She bit her lip, thinking.

“And,” she finished, her stomach dropping with the sensation of falling off a cliff, “you potentially have something I need.”

Auberon scoffed at her, his eyes flashing. “I’m done giving you lessons—”

“Not that,” she said.

He was quiet. He hadn’t expected that. It had cut off his protest at the roots, and so he stayed silent, turning his face away from hers.

Water dripped from the ceiling, plinking loud in the stillness. Auberon seemed content to study the ceiling. Maybe he was considering what she’d said.

She waited, hoping.

The silence slipped past. Auberon’s throat bobbed as he swallowed.

*Not even in daylight am I safe*, he’d said.

She realized with a start that he’d been sleeping during the day to avoid her. What was it Cait had said about the dracules?

*How tragic. They’re the only two things like each other in the world, and they hate each other.*

Her anger softened into something gentler. Sadder.

“Auberon,” she said quietly, and when he didn’t respond, she said, “Ari.”

He turned his head toward her, his expression startled.

“Please,” she said. “We’re the only two things quite like each other in the world, I think. You’re the only one who understands what it’s like for me.”

His eyes glistened. He was still, waiting for her words to fall. As if he expected her to shatter him with them.

Then, someone was calling her name, and the cell vanished around her as Briand woke.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BRIAND WOKE TO discover she'd fallen asleep slumped against the neck of her horse, her whole body stiff and sore. Cait rode beside her, one hand outstretched toward her shoulder.

"Briand," the young noblewoman said, tapping her again. "Wake up."

Briand straightened with a groan and looked around.

They were in the midst of a great plain of reddish-purple grass that came to the horses' knees. Ahead of them, Vox and Sieya were barely visible except for their tails, which flashed in and out of sight as the dracules bounded through the grass in front of the horses. The sun had begun to sink beyond the hills, casting golden streaks of light across the land and making the trees at the edges of the fields glow as if aflame.

She saw why Cait had woken her.

At the horizon, a line of campfires burned, their smoke curling upward to stain the sky.

"Trappers?" she asked Nath as they pulled the horses to a halt.

Lines creased his face as he squinted, scowling, at the dark figures in the distance. "Maybe. Could be traders. Or bandits." He pointed. "See how they've posted guards? As if they're expecting trouble."

"Or maybe they're worried about bandits," Cait suggested.

"Maybe," Nath said. "It's nearly dark anyway—I suggest we hang back and then see what we can discover under cover of darkness tonight before we approach them."

~

Dark descended on the wilderness. Briand and her company waited around a fireless campsite in the shelter of a grove of evergreens, eating from the saddlebags and drinking water from their canteens that they'd refilled earlier. The dracules lay on opposite sides of the clearing from one another, Sieya with her head resting on her long front legs, her posture imperious and disinterested, Vox with his ears perked forward and his nose pointed in her direction. Cait sat beside Crispin, who was huddled on the ground in misery, still wrapped in his blanket. Briand and Nath conferred quietly about their plans and then fell silent. They listened to the call of strange and

distant animals—a crooning, melodic wail that sent shivers down Briand's spine that Nath said was a rock sprite, and then a raspy call like a woman screaming that Nath identified as a fox.

"I'm frightened," Cait confessed into the quiet. "Do you think it could be Seekers? Bandits?"

"Don't be scared," Nath murmured. "It's probably only a few trappers, but we can't be too careful right now. We've got a sick member of our company in tow, and few warriors."

Cait nodded, but when she brushed her hands over her skirt, her fingers trembled. "I feel utterly useless," she muttered. She sorted through the saddlebag for Crispin's herbal remedy, pulling out a cooking pan and a pack of food in search of it. She laid the things on the ground, and Vox snuffled hopefully in the direction of the food.

"No," she said firmly.

Vox dropped his head with a longsuffering sigh.

Briand cleaned and checked all of her knives before putting each back in its place. The Seeker knife she wore next to her skin, strapped to her wrist. Its touch sent a soothing slither of power up her arm that curled around the cacophony of magic in her head like a healing balm.

Finally, when it was too dark to see her hand in front of her face, Briand signaled to Nath. He rose with her and headed for the long grass. She sent out a call with her mind to the dracules, who leaped up eagerly and plunged into the darkness ahead of them. Briand sent them both stern instructions to listen to her every command, and they didn't try to argue—their minds were focused and their attention sharp as knife blades. They seemed to sense that this was no time for play—Briand's harsh command for their attention ensured that—and they responded to her directions as though they were seasoned hunters.

Crouching low in the grass, Briand and Nath crept forward, moving from rock to rock in a near-crawl. The grass scratched Briand's face and tugged at the braid she'd curled around her head.

"This brings back memories," Nath whispered fondly as they paused behind a rock. He peered around the edge at the fires in the distance, his mouth splitting in a brief, grim smile. "I remember, Kael and I—" He stopped, and the silence that filled the space was apologetic.

"Let's go," Briand said, her voice rough.

The campfires ahead flickered with a friendly glow that beckoned to Briand's chilled and weary body. She was still sore from sleeping while riding. Her shoulders ached, and her pelvis felt bruised. Moving across a field in a crouch was the last thing she wanted to be doing right now. She just wanted to sink into her bedroll and close her eyes, except that she knew the moment she did, she would be thinking about him. At least this provided distraction from the raw pain that was always within reach, waiting for her thoughts to brush against the bleeding wound that was his absence.

Briand and Nath reached the strangers' horses, picketed at a short distance from the fires. One of the horses nickered softly at them in greeting; another stamped its hoof as if expecting to be fed. Briand froze and sent a silent command to the dracules to stay away as not to frighten the animals. She could hear the murmur of male voices now amid the pop and crackle of the fires, half through her own ears and half through the thoughts of Vox and Sieya, who waited behind her in the field, their gazes focused on the flames with the attention a baby bird gives a worm in the beak of its mother. She felt Vox's shivering impatience and Sieya's exasperation, but neither dracule disobeyed her order.

The conversation didn't pause. The men around the fire hadn't noticed the horses' reaction.

She and Nath moved closer, and the liquid hum of the men's voices began to take shape into words and distinct laughter. A cluster of men sat around the nearest fire, dressed in brown spun cotton and wearing hats of animal fur with tails hanging from the back. Some were drinking, others smoking pipes. There was talk of the road ahead, and a debate about whether it was going to rain in the morning based on the sunset. In the distance, a cluster of wagons stood in a circle.

Nath relaxed. "Traders," he mouthed to her, and started to stand.

Briand grabbed his arm and pointed wordlessly.

Two men approached the others, bringing a girl between them.

She was in chains.

Nath and Briand exchanged a wordless glance.

The men threw the girl in the dirt beside the fire. Briand was close enough to hear the girl's soft grunt as she held in a cry as her body thudded against the ground. She was scrawny, dressed in furs like the ones the yak herders

from the floating tavern had worn. Her long, dark hair was woven into dozens of braids tied with string. Her mouth was a defiant line.

The men seated around the fire leaned forward as the girl scrambled up, her chest heaving, her throat pulsing in the orange light that flickered over her features. One of the men pushed her down again.

“That spirit will fetch a good beating in Bestane, girl,” he said. “Best let go of it now.”

“You’ll pay for this,” she shouted back. “My father and brothers will come for me.”

The men laughed.

“Slavers,” Nath breathed into Briand’s ear.

She swallowed.

“Do we stay or do we go?” he asked, but it was a perfunctory question.

They would stay.

Briand grinned at him in the starlight.

These slavers were about to get a nasty surprise.

He slipped away from her in the tall grass, a blade in his hand, and Briand called the dracules in her mind. They streaked to her silently, each flanking her on one side. Their minds focused on hers with intensity, waiting for her next order. Their thoughts burned like dual flames at the edges of her awareness, and she suddenly saw through three sets of eyes at once. She could tell from the dracules’ surprised thoughts that they saw the same. She was dizzy and clear-headed at the same time. Her chest tightened with a sense of rightness, and she knew in her bones somehow that this was how ancient dragonsayers had hunted. With their minds mingled with their dracules’. She and the dracules both seemed made for this.

One of the slavers reached down and hauled up the girl by her elbow. He put his hand on her face, pinching her cheeks together with his hand, forcing her lips open. Chuckling, he put his thumb in her mouth.

The girl stiffened.

“She’ll bite you,” one of the men by the fire said, and he laughed.

“She won’t bite me,” the man said with lazy confidence. “Will you, girlie?” A tear fell from the girl’s eye, the trail it left on her cheek glistening in the firelight.

Briand pulled the edge of her scarlet cloak down over her eyes. She drew two of her knives.

The sentries were facing the other way.

She touched the minds of the dracules, calling them to attention. Then, she stood. The firelight bathed her in a reddish glow. The men jumped and swore at the sight of her rising from the darkness. “Take your hands off that girl,” Briand said.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SLAVERS FROZE, and then they laughed.

“Who are you?” the man holding the girl by the elbow demanded. Up close, she saw that he was beautiful—dark eyes, a sensuous mouth, a straight nose. His face looked like it belonged on a prince. He was like a poisonous flower, she thought. He probably used his good looks to lure girls before he captured them. “Where did you come from?”

“I’m your worst nightmare,” Briand said.

“Is she from your village?” the handsome slaver demanded of the girl, giving her a shake.

The girl didn’t answer. She stared at Briand.

“Probably followed us, hoping to get her friends back,” one of the men muttered.

“Look,” another of the slavers said with an indulgent smile. “She’s got knives. It’s like a baby holding a sword.”

“Why don’t you put those down, sugar, and you won’t get hurt,” the first man said. He released the girl with a shove and took a step toward Briand. The other men stood. In the distance, the sentries had turned and were watching. One walked in their direction. He didn’t see the other fall to his knees and disappear into the long grass in a silent struggle.

None of the other slavers saw it either. They were too busy laughing at Briand.

“Don’t try to run, girl,” one of them said with a cruel smile. “There’s no one here to help you.”

She waited as the other sentry dropped into the grass.

“I’m not leaving,” she said, but it seems your sentries have.”

The men’s smiles vanished. They turned to look, and that was when Briand told the dracules to attack.

~

The fight was short. The slavers were easily disarmed—they seemed like the type of men who were more skilled at leering than wielding weapons, used to prey that was too weak or scared or small to fight back, and without their paid muscle to fight for them, they dropped to their knees in tears. The

dracules were like shadows as they pinned the men down, snarling, and Briand tied them up like turkeys and left them lying on the ground beside the fire. The dracules, at her command, melted back into the shadows to prowl the perimeter of the camp.

After the slavers were incapacitated, Briand turned to the girl, who stood beside the fire, her eyes wide with amazement.

“Where are the others?” Briand asked. She still hadn’t removed her scarf. Better to be safe than sorry.

“This way,” the girl said. She led Briand to the wagons.

Briand yanked open the canvas covering.

Five frightened pairs of eyes stared back at her. Girls, some of them prepubescent, wearing animal skins and homespun, with rags bound around their boots and string tied in their knotted, curly hair.

“You’re safe,” Briand said. “Come on out.”

She reached in and cut their bonds with her knife. The girls crawled from the wagon one by one, blinking at the scene of the tied-up slavers before them. One of the girls giggled, the sound high-pitched with hysteria, while the others gazed solemnly at their captors.

Nath appeared from the shadows and beckoned to Briand. She left the girls standing in a huddle and strode to his side. His face was muddy, and a cut above his left eye dripped blood.

“I killed one of the sentries,” he said heavily. “It was inescapable. The man tried to strangle me.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “And the other?”

“Trussed up in the grass,” he said. “Did any of them see your face?”

“No.” She nodded at the bound slavers. “I don’t think they knew what hit them when it came to the dracules’ attack either.”

“Good.”

She and Nath rejoined the girls, who eyed him warily as they told Briand their families lived north, in a village on the edge of the mountains.

“We don’t have time to take them home,” Nath said in her ear.

“These are northern girls,” Briand said in reply. “They don’t need us to take them anywhere.”

One of the girls, overhearing her, smiled. “Aye,” she said. “We’ll make our way just fine, thanks.”

In the end, Briand gave the girls the slavers’ horses and wagons and told them to send the villagers back for the slavers who were still alive.

“Tell your families,” Nath said, “that you were saved by the Scarlet Blade.” The girls nodded worshipfully. One of them grabbed Briand’s hand and pressed her forehead to Briand’s knuckles before they scampered away to the horses. They rode saddleless, like burrs stuck in the horses’ manes, their legs dangling.

When they were gone into the night, Briand and Nath returned to the campsite to collect the others.

“Not friends,” Nath reported with a sigh as they rejoined Cait and Crispin. “Really?” Cait replied. She was seated beside Crispin, dabbing cool water on his brow while he moaned dramatically. “I thought surely they were, given all the screaming I heard.”

Nath raised his eyebrows at her. “I didn’t think noblewomen were sarcastic.”

“Oh, Nath,” Cait responded. “You sweet, summer child.”

Briand called the dracules to her side, and they came at once, Vox bounding and wriggling with enthusiasm, Sieya slinking behind, still riled and suspicious of the dangers that they had incapacitated. Briand fed them each a piece of dried meat as a treat, and both of them mourned the smallness of the morsels. Vox sat beside her horse hopefully, thinking thoughts of Briand smiling, and Briand laughing, and Briand petting his head.

Briand gave him a look. “Stop trying to weasel more treats out of me.”

“You know,” Crispin murmured from where he was huddled, “it’s creepy how you talk to them in your head.”

“You wiped your backside with a poisonous plant, lad,” Nath retorted. “You don’t get to judge.”

“Come on,” Cait said, pulling him to his feet. “Time to keep riding.”

“Gillspin is only a day’s ride from here, I think,” Nath said to Briand.

She nodded and swung herself into the saddle. “Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

KAEL WATCHED FROM the deck of the ship as the Nyrian shore slid away, and with it, Lady Valora and the rest of the court in exile. The wind curled around him like a cloak of cold and then spun away, and the spray of the sea wet his boots. He stared at the retreating summer palace, his feelings wrestling within him. He breathed out through his nostrils as he called the feelings to order. The feelings rebelled. Kael tapped one hand against his leg in frustration. He could treat his thoughts like an army regiment; why not his emotions?

At least soon he would be able to drown them out with exhaustion once more. His arm was nearly healed.

Boots sounded on the deck behind him, and Kael didn't turn. He knew it was Jehn.

The prince laid both arms on the rail and gazed down at the surf. "You received a personal mechbird earlier."

"Yes, from Nath," Kael said. He didn't bother to ask how Jehn knew. He recounted the message word for word, keeping all emotion from his voice. Jehn listened, then tipped his head to the side thoughtfully. "North Kyreia, and their traveling companion has sickened from contact with feverbeet? They must be near Bern or Jaglorn. Perhaps as far as Peak. That swath of countryside is the only place it grows."

Kael was silent.

"How is your arm?" Jehn asked.

"My arm is fine," Kael said. The pain was mostly gone now, except for a twinge now and then. He planned to resume training.

"The physician said—"

"My arm is fine, Your Grace," Kael said firmly.

Jehn stilled. His left eye twitched, betraying subtle emotion that most wouldn't catch, but Kael did. Kael knew him well.

"So that's how it's going to be now?" Jehn said. "Your Grace? Your Worship? I am a prince, not a friend?"

Kael let his eyes close for a beat. "Sometimes it is difficult to see you as both, sir."

Heat glowed in Jehn's gaze. "I told you when we began this mad plan to put me on the throne—do you remember what I said?"

“I remember,” Kael said.

“I told you it would require absolute loyalty and absolute trust.” Jehn stared at Kael as if he could pull Kael’s thoughts from his eyes. “I did not pretend otherwise. And you—”

“And I swore my life and my loyalty to you,” Kael said. He struck a hand across his chest in a warrior’s salute. “I have not wavered, Your Grace.”

“No?” Jehn said.

A muscle flexed in Kael’s jaw. “No. I have not.”

“Have you not dropped everything to find a girl on her own mission for me when you thought she was in danger?”

“I have not wavered in my loyalty to you,” Kael said just as angrily. But even as he spoke, he was torn inside. Had his love for the dragonsayer hindered him in his duty to the prince?

He had no answer for himself.

Jehn turned away toward the sea and was quiet a moment. His nostrils flared, and his chest rose and fell in a quick breath, as if he were reining in his temper. When he turned back to Kael, his face wore a milder look, one that wanted to ask for peace but wouldn’t stoop to voicing the desire.

“Brother,” Jehn said softly. It was a question. He held out his hand, an old gesture they had shared since they were boys.

But Kael did not take Jehn’s hand and clasp his shoulder, nor did he press his forehead to the prince’s. He only turned and walked away.

~

Briand and her company left the dracules in the woods again with strict orders to behave before they reached Gillspin. They smelled the city before they saw it—the stink of the docks and fisheries, the dank odor of the dark water of the lake, and the stench of the tanneries blew toward them on the wind like a putrid calling card.

“Ugh,” Crispin muttered from where he slumped against the neck of the horse. “Did something die? What is that smell?”

“The tanneries,” Briand said. “Lots of game is skinned and tanned here before being sold downriver. You’ll get used to it,” she added.

Crispin pressed the sleeve of his shirt to his nose, his expression skeptical. Beside him, Cait looked like she wanted to do the same, but she didn’t. She lifted her chin as if she smelled worse stenches daily.

They stopped at the crest of a hill. The city spread out below, half of it crawling up the mountainside beyond, the rest sprawling down to the shore and halfway onto the lake in some places, with crooked docks and wooden plankways weaving a wooden maze over the brackish water. Half of the buildings were constructed with logs and pitch, the others made of rough-hewn rock, their roofs covered in moss. Muddy streets crisscrossed between crooked stone houses and taverns. Some of the buildings had been crafted from broken pieces of boats. A shanty town at the edge of the water held rows of hovel houses made from old sailcloth and driftwood.

“This is why Kyreia is so beautiful,” Nath said with a half grin. “They took all the ugly and put it here.”

Unhappy memories washed over Briand as the horses loped toward the city at the edge of the lake. The smell of rot intensified, and she remembered the first time she’d come to this forsaken place, alone and on foot, so hungry she could barely think straight. The Hermit had been murdered, and she’d set out on her own, playing Dubbok in taverns and inns to keep herself alive, earning enough from the stingy traders and grubby trappers to survive. She’d descended to the city on shoes that were about to fall off her feet, and immediately, two ragged men had cornered her and tried to drag her to the nearby brothel.

In Gillspin, you weren’t safe if you were alone. You had to be part of something larger—a guild, a madam’s group of girls, a beggar’s enclave—something.

Briand had joined the thieves.

They entered the city, horses at a walk now. Crispin had fallen asleep again and was snoring lightly. Throngs of people crowded the streets, leading mules laden with pelts, driving wagons trains, or shoving past on foot.

A flash of silver caught Briand’s eye, and she pulled her horse up short as a pang of panic shot through her stomach.

Seekers.

They stood on the corner of one of the intersections, their gray cloaks fluttering in the faint wind. The crowd moved around them without looking at them, giving the dead-eyed cloaks a wide berth.

Nath cursed quietly. “Here too?”

“It’s too late to turn around and go back,” she replied quietly. “We must find someplace for Crispin to rest.”

“Well,” Nath muttered, never taking his eyes from the Seekers, “let’s get out of their sight, at least.”

Briand led the others down a side street. Children in rags played in the road, some of them with bandages around their heads or over their eyes. A few were missing limbs, and Briand saw Cait’s shocked expression before she turned her head away politely.

The children looked up at the approaching horses, and one little girl who was missing an arm cried, “Guttersnipe!” as she pointed at Briand.

“Mind your manners, child,” Nath barked, but Briand laid a hand on his arm to quiet him.

“Hello, Pebble,” she called to the girl. “How goes it below?”

“We all thought you were dead,” the girl said. “Or that you’d run off with Rook. He disappeared the same time as you and never came back.”

Briand’s mouth twitched at a few memories involving Rook, who had betrayed her to the Seekers before being unceremoniously killed at their hands. She remained silent on this, however.

“What happened to your arm?” she asked. Sometimes, the children who ended up in Rags’s company had had their limbs cut off to make them more pitiful and therefore more effective at begging. Pebble had been in possession of both arms when Briand last saw her, and Rags wasn’t the limb-cutting kind.

The little girl’s gaze faltered. “An accident,” she whispered, and then clamped her lips together as if she didn’t want to say more.

Briand’s gaze sharpened, but she didn’t press the child.

“Is the Blue Chestnut still the best place to stable horses?” she asked the girl.

The beggar girl shook her head. “Changed hands. The new owner’s a crook. Try the Maiden.”

In thanks, Briand tossed Pebble a coin. The girl caught it and bit the gold. Half of her mouth lifted in a smile.

“Watch out for the gray cloaks,” she called after Briand.

“You have more of a history here than you’ve let on,” Nath observed under his breath as they rode on. “Where are we headed, guttersnipe?”

“To see a queen,” Briand said over her shoulder.

The sea was as smooth as blue-green glass. The sun beat down hot. Kael stood on the deck, stripped shirtless, holding a practice sword as he tested the range of motion of his injured arm. Only a twinge of discomfort came from his movements, and so he proceeded with relish, losing himself in the brutal regimen he'd been following for his training since he'd returned to the court and Jehn's side. He pushed himself through the moves until his muscles trembled and sweat poured down his face and chest.

He'd finished when he heard a clatter on the deck behind him.

"Kael of Estria."

He hesitated, then turned. Jehn stood, clad only in trousers and a clean linen shirt that billowed in the wind, watching him. The prince held two practice swords in his hands. He dropped one on the deck and kicked it forward with his boot. The sword spun to a stop in front of Kael.

Kael gazed at the prince without speaking. He didn't look at or reach for the sword.

Jehn raised an eyebrow. "Once upon a time," he said, "you wouldn't have hesitated to cross swords with me when angry. You'd have found it cathartic, I think."

"Yes," Kael said, "when we were boys."

Jehn didn't seem to hear him. "You would have called me all the names you won't call me now."

"And it would have been only a manipulation on your part, just as it is now," Kael growled.

A flicker of something indecipherable passed through Jehn's eyes. It might have been hurt.

"Fight me," he said.

Kael picked up the practice sword. He stood straight, sword down. He waited for Jehn to strike first.

Jehn swung hard, and Kael parried him easily. The sound of their wooden swords clattered above the roar of the sea against the ship. Jehn grunted, drew back, struck again. Kael parried again. When Jehn lunged a third time, Kael knocked the sword from the prince's hand.

Undaunted, Jehn picked it up and lunged yet again. He pressed close, forcing Kael back this time.

"You're holding back," he accused, panting. He wiped sweat from his eyes with his wrist.

In answer, Kael disarmed Jehn again, this time pressing the wooden tip of his own to the prince's throat. "Because you're a terrible swordsman," he said in Jehn's ear. "I don't want to injure you."

Jehn locked eyes with Kael. His mouth quirked in a rueful smile. But before he could reply, a shout came from the sailor in the crow's nest above them.

"Approaching ships!"

Kael and Jehn ran to the rail.

Dark shapes lurked on the horizon, heading for them fast. They were still too far away to make out.

Kael caught Jehn's eye, their fight forgotten for now. Their ships were armed, but not enough to fight off an enemy fleet.

"Are you expecting a Nyrian escort?" he asked quietly.

"No," Jehn murmured, eyes locked on the horizon.

More ships appeared in the distance, slipping across the sea like dark birds.

Kael called to the cabin boy on the deck above him, who rushed to bring him a spyglass. He held it to his eye.

Their sails were black. Red flags flapped in the stiff wind.

These ships weren't Austrisian—they were too bulky, too square. They weren't the black, low vessels of Bestane. No, these were something else. Hybrid bastardizations of the military ships that sailed the international waters. He counted cannons bristling from the sides of the closest ship, eyed the blood-colored flags.

Kael swore under his breath as he counted at least six ships, bearing down on them at full speed. He handed the spyglass to Jehn.

Jehn looked and then confirmed what Kael was thinking.

"Pirates."

"You'd better find a real sword," Kael said to Jehn, and then he turned on his heel and strode across the deck to find his.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

THE CANNONS ON Jehn's ship bellowed as they unleashed a barrage of deadly fire. Smoke covered the sea with a black cloud, and yet the ships came, relentless in their approach. They fired back, the sound like thunder. The spray from the enemy fire hitting the sea in front of their ship hit the deck. Boots thudded as men ran past, carrying weapons and preparing to fight.

As Kael strapped on his belt and lifted his sword in preparation for battle on the deck, one thought filled all the places in his mind that weren't preoccupied with the best way to protect the prince.

Her.

As he sheathed two knives in his boots, he was thinking of all the times he confiscated knives from her, and the way her mouth turned when she was angry. As he straightened and strode to Jehn's side, he was thinking of how she moved, lithe and careful, as if she were a dancer always expecting the ground beneath her to collapse, but knowing she would catch herself when she fell. Catfoot.

The wind caught his hair, and a spray of water stung his face, and Kael thought of how she tasted.

He drew his sword.

The first of the ships reached them, swinging sideways to meet them. Ropes hissed through the air, the grappling hooks tied to them scraping across the deck with a terrible dragging clunking sound as the enemy pulled them back until they caught and held. Men began to swarm across them like ants. Kael thought of her, deep in the north of Kyreia, riding beside Nath and Cait with mountains to one side and plains to the other and a wild, beautiful blue sky above her. He felt a searing, exquisite joy laced with pain. Joy that she was safe. Pain that he might never see her again.

Jehn stood beside him, gripping a sword.

"Kael—" he began.

"Any chance this is just another one of your plans?" Kael said. His voice was calm, but inside he was adrift on a stormy sea. He shifted his grip on his sword. The cannons boomed around them. The smoke stung his eyes and covered the deck.

"No," Jehn said. "I'm afraid it isn't."

The first of the pirates appeared through the clouds of smoke that smothered the deck, and Kael and Jehn moved in unison to meet them. Kael's sword crashed against the weapon of the first pirate he reached, and the blow sent a shock down his injured arm. He ran the pirate through and lunged to meet a toothless man who was locked in battle with Jehn. Kael felled the man, and Jehn panted a "thanks" before they both whirled to face another wave of enemies.

~

At the Maiden, where the beggar girl had directed them, Briand paid to stable the horses and stepped back into the courtyard to join her friends when she felt a blade at her neck.

"Hands up," a male voice breathed, low and raspy.

Briand lifted her hands slowly, calculating in her head how long it would take her to draw one of her hidden knives and whirl around. Where were the others? Was this a random mugging, or something more sinister?

Cold sweat broke across her skin.

Had they been found by the Seekers?

Hands dropped a hood over her head, and someone bound her arms.

"What do you want?" she demanded, her voice muffled by the cloth.

"No questions," ordered another voice. Female.

Briand's captors grabbed her by the elbows and hustled her forward. She stumbled on the cobblestones, using the moment that she fell to get her fingers on the knife in her boot. She slipped it into her sleeve before they hauled her up again and dragged her away.

~

Kael and Jehn stood shoulder to shoulder, bloodied and exhausted, surrounded by dead and dying men strewn across the deck of the ship. The pirates kept coming through the smoke, swords drawn.

"Give me your ring," Kael said to Jehn. "And the medallion. That way, if they're here merely to kill you, then they'll kill me instead, and you might have the chance to escape."

"Kael—"

"Do it!" he snarled.

Jehn pulled the heavy gold band encrusted with jewels from his finger, then pulled the heavy gold medallion from around his neck and flung the pieces at Kael before he moved to meet the next pirate that charged at them, swinging his sword with a shout.

“I do not intend for you to die this way!” Jehn yelled hoarsely.

“Am I not your right hand?” Kael countered. “It is my duty—” His sword clanged against a pirate’s before Kael slew him. “—And my pleasure to serve to the death.”

Jehn’s face contorted with anger. He shouted, a wordless cry of rage, and hacked with fresh vigor at the enemy he fought. He ran the man through and stepped on to the next.

But the pirates kept coming, relentless, and soon, they were vastly outnumbered and surrounded.

Pirate men and women with winking gold teeth and weathered faces, their bare arms darkened by the sun, hemmed Kael and his prince in with a forest of sneering faces and drawn swords that dripped with the remnants of their battle.

Kael didn’t lower his sword. He stood beside his prince, wary and exhausted, ready to die in defense of Jehn, burning inside as he clung to the strength his duty always gave him. He’d stared death in the face dozens of times before. Why was this time different?

He knew why.

The horde parted to admit a woman of about forty, with dyed red hair in thick, ropey braids that hung down her back with bells of gold on the ends, dressed in loose, ragged men’s trousers and a white cotton shirt cinched with a belt of knives. She stopped before Jehn and Kael, hands on her hips, and looked them up and down.

Kael didn’t lower his sword, but the muscles in his back unclenched slightly. She was here to talk, not to fight.

They might just survive this.

“I’m looking for Prince Jehn,” the woman said, her eyes shifting from Kael to Jehn. “And his right-hand man, Kael Halescorn of Estria, the one who was called a traitor. I understand they set sail aboard this ship from Tyyr.”

“And who is asking?” Jehn replied coolly.

Kael didn’t say anything, nor did he plan to. He kept his sword ready, scanning the faces of the pirates that surrounded them. The first time one of them made a move, he would spring back into battle. Jehn, on the other

hand, was focused on the woman and the words he was planning to wield in whatever conversation they were about to have. He kept his sword up, but he wasn't paying it much attention. He would be overpowered easily should a fight break out.

Kael was thankful, at least, that they'd spread that rumor years ago that Jehn was a master swordsman.

The woman smiled at Jehn's question, revealing a mouthful of teeth capped with gold. "Why," she said, "His Lordship Denicio Val Mathmud."

"Longbeard," Jehn said softly, arching an eyebrow. "The famed pirate king of the southern sea."

The woman tipped her head. "The very same. You've heard of him? He will be pleased." She paused, touching her fingertips together lightly. "He wants to meet the prince and his traitor companion, and invites them to join him as guests. He has a proposition for them both."

"Couldn't he have sent a missive instead of... this?" Jehn gestured at the carnage around them. He spoke as lightly as the woman, but anger burned in his eyes.

"You fired first," she said. The wind blew between them, clearing some of the black smoke.

"On ships bearing attack flags," Jehn hissed.

The woman only turned her head to look at the sea behind them, as if she were impatient with the conversation. The gold bells on the ends of her braids clinked.

"Does this proposition include a guarantee of safe passage?" Jehn said.

The woman smiled again as she turned back. It was a weasel's smile. "Of course."

Jehn looked at Kael and raised a brow. Kael nodded once in response.

What choice did they have?

"I am Esmelda, his best sweeper," the woman said.

"That's what he calls his privateers," Jehn said to no one in particular.

"Very good," Esmelda said. "Someone has been reading of our exploits. Now, which one of you is the prince?"

Kael put his hand on his prince's shoulder.

"I am Prince Jehn," Kael said firmly. "This is Kael of Estria."

Esmelda looked them over, both of them wearing simple trousers and white shirts, both of them bloodied from battle. Virtually indistinguishable. Then, she saw the ring on Kael's finger, and she nodded.

“Well then, Prince Jehn. You and your man, come with me.”

The pirates had laid a plank between the two ships, and they escorted Kael and Jehn across. The ship set sail, leaving the broken and burning vessels of the prince’s convoy behind.

~

Briand was dragged down steps into somewhere dank and cool. She was underground. A cave? A cellar?

Muffled sounds met her ears through the hood they’d thrown over her head. Voices. A burst of raucous laughter. Footsteps. She was disoriented. She’d tried to keep track of the turns they’d made, but she had lost count.

Finally, they stopped. Her captors wrenched the hood from her head.

Briand blinked in the sudden, dim light.

She stood in a round room, the stone walls stretching up and up to a hole in the ceiling where light poured in. Men and women ringed the walls, some watching her, some looking away. They were all waiting for something. Before her was a pile of barrels and crates, stacked into a throne.

Upon the throne sat a woman dressed in layers of ragged clothing, her face thin and angular, pockmarked with scars and lined with a layer of grit, her hair knotted and silver-white.

Rags, thief-queen of Gillspin.

Rags leaned forward and grinned crookedly at Briand. The kind of smile that promised punishment.

“Hello, Guttersnipe.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“HELLO, GUTTERSNIPE.”

Briand gazed up at the thief-queen on her throne.

“Rags,” she said coldly. “Do you want to explain why I’ve been dragged here in bonds with a hood over my head?”

Rags laughed. It was almost a cackle. “Don’t play stupid, Guttersnipe. You would have run the first chance you got. I wanted to be assured of our meeting.”

Briand flexed her wrists. The ropes were tied tight. “I thought you liked me, Rags. Why would I run?”

The thief-queen leaned forward. “I said, don’t play stupid. You know what you’ve done.”

Briand looked around the room. Some of the others gathered to pay their tax or beg shelter gazed at her curiously; others avoided her eyes.

She remembered something Kael had told her once. Remain silent, and you will coax others into revealing what they think as they rush to fill that silence.

She was no pawn. She stayed silent, holding Rags’s gaze.

When Briand didn’t say anything, the thief-queen went on: “You ran without paying all of what you owed me. You and Rook. But you gave him the slip in the end, didn’t you? He was found days later, his throat slashed, dead.”

“That wasn’t me,” Briand said.

“No? Didn’t he steal coins from you just before you vanished?”

“Yes,” Briand said. “Which is why I would never conspire to run away with him. He was a leech.”

“Sounds like a lovers’ spat to me,” the thief-queen said with a grin.

“I didn’t kill Rook,” Briand said again. “The—” She paused. Telling the thieves that she had been captured by Seekers might open up more questions than she wanted to answer.

“I don’t care if you did,” Rags said. “He was a leech just as you said. All I care about is the money you owe me. And he owed me.”

“Where are my friends?” Briand demanded. “What have you done with them?”

Rags motioned to one of the thieves, who disappeared into a dark doorway. He emerged a few moments later with Nath and Cait, both of them bound. Nath bristled with fury, and Cait was pale and wide-eyed.

“Briand!” she called out.

“Where’s Crispin?” Briand asked, scanning the shadows for any sign of the lad.

“The sick one is still in the holding cell,” one of the thieves spoke up. “He wasn’t well enough to move.”

“Let them go,” Briand said, turning back to the thief-queen with anger burning in her voice. “Your quarrel is with me. Not them.”

“Perhaps not, but I thought you might need a carrot,” Rags said. “I want my money, Guttersnipe.”

“Fine,” Briand spat. “I’ll pay you, even though, to be clear, I did not steal from you. I’d paid all my dues.”

“Not for the day you left,” Rags snapped. “You owe me a part of every cent you earn in this town, girl. Without my protection, you would’ve been snatched up by slavers the first day you limped into this hellhole, alone and abandoned. You were a vulnerable mess before I found you. You can’t cheat me what I’m owed.”

“I was—I left that morning,” Briand said, swallowing her accidental almost-reveal of her kidnapping by the Seekers. “I hadn’t gone to play at the taverns. And isn’t this a lot of trouble to go to over a few dubois?”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” the old thief-queen said, her eyes narrowing. “If word gets out that I let folks cheat my hospitality without consequence, they’ll run roughshod over me.”

Briand took a moment to gather her thoughts and keep her voice steady. The room was filled with thieves, all of them armed. Most of them were the sort of people who liked to keep out of arguments that didn’t concern them, but a few loved violence for the sake of it, and enjoyed the sight of blood spilled. All it took was one knife to Nath or Cait’s throat...

She touched the tip of the knife hidden in her sleeve with one finger. She licked her lower lip.

“I earned fifty silvers on my best day at the taverns,” Briand said. “If you’ll untie me, I’ll pay that sum. Just so that there’ll be no question of cheating.”

“No,” Rags said, her voice a dangerous purr.

“No?” Briand lifted an eyebrow. Sweat slid between her shoulder blades and trickled down her spine, but she did her best to channel Kael and Maera

and every other calm and ruthless player she knew in the game of kingmaking.

"I'm not interested in being tossed a few silvers," the thief-queen said. "I had something a little more... poetic... in mind."

"Such as?" Briand cut a glance at Nath and Cait, who stood—Nath furious, Cait terrified—amid the thieves guarding them.

"A contest. If you win, you go free, and you keep your money. If I win..." Rags's smile widened. "Then you are my prisoner, and I give you over to those who seek you."

Briand's stomach dropped.

She knew. Somehow, the thief-queen knew that Briand was running from the Seekers. How she knew was anyone's guess, but she knew.

Briand pressed the tip of her finger against the hidden knife. She eyed the thieves all around them, then flicked her gaze back to Nath and Cait, trying to calculate some way to escape this.

"What kind of contest?" she asked to buy herself a little more time.

Rags tucked her hand into her tunic and pulled out a deck of cards with a flourish.

"Dubbok."

~

Kael stood at the bow of Esmelda's ship, hands bound, with Jehn beside him and Esmelda beside Jehn. She didn't say much, the woman, but she had the aura of one who observed keenly.

The pirate king's fortress stood in the middle of a cluster of islands that rose from the sea suddenly, jagged and lush with green. Palm trees lined a white beach shaped like a half moon, and high in the mountains, Kael glimpsed the silver glimmer of a waterfall plunging down in a white mist.

They passed the beaches, traveling deeper into the island cluster. Walls of rock slipped past, draped in vines. Monkeys chattered at them from the trees above.

The narrow inlet widened into a lagoon.

Sentry towers of rough wood that looked like huts on stilts lined the sides of the cove. Three long piers of stone protruded from the shore, and behind them, a castle of logs rose from the jungle. The black roof was steep and bristling with wooden spikes, and hammered steel covered the doors.

The ship docked at the longest of the piers. Kael looked at Jehn, who gazed ahead at the castle.

“You know about this pirate?” he asked quietly when Esmelda left their side to speak with one of the other pirates.

“He’s called Longbeard,” Jehn said. “He’s known for his marauding from the eastern edge of Tyrr all the way down the coast of the warlord countries. He’s also known for killing those who displease him. He likes to have them impaled.”

Kael glanced at the beach that lined the lagoon. “There’s some evidence of that.”

A skeleton lay stretched across the sand, the bones bleached by the sun, the arms reaching out as if pleading for mercy. The eye sockets gaped at them. A stake protruded from the unfortunate dead’s ribcage.

Esmelda returned, her boots thudding on the deck. “Ready, my lords?” Her tone was sarcastic when she said *lords*.

Jehn and Kael disembarked from the ship with a company of pirates hemming them in. They crossed the pier and the sandy spit of beach before arriving at the castle. Two women with downcast gazes, dressed in flowing white, opened the metal-plated doors, the hinges groaning.

The interior of the castle was dark and damp. A stone hallway lined with wooden pillars led to a broad staircase, also stone, leading upward into darkness. The hall had no windows, and was lit by fire pits at regular intervals. Smoke clogged the air, mingling with the smell of animals and unwashed pirates. The roof sloped high above their heads, and a monkey screamed at them from the rafters. Peahens scattered before them, darting into corners to hide.

“Come,” Esmelda said, striding toward the stone staircase without pausing. She didn’t seem to find the monkey or peahens out of place.

Up the staircase, past rooms for cooking and washing and eating, they reached another great hall, this one with a round, table-sized window of yellowed glass set at the end. Beneath the window was a throne of heavy, dark wood, standing upon a dais. A pack of large dogs lay at the foot of the dais, and they lifted their heads and perked up their ears at the group’s entrance.

On the throne sat a man with a long, curly beard and a shrewd gaze. Above the thick beard, his nose was small, almost dainty, and when he smiled, his teeth were straight and white. He wore a leather vest over a shirt of black

silk, and rings of gold and silver covered his fingers. A white plume of a feather curled over the brim of his hat, the tip brushing his shoulder. Esmelda stopped before him and said, “I bring you Prince Jehn of Austrisia and his right-hand man, Kael of Estria.”

The pirate king looked them over with a scowl. “Which one is the prince?” Esmelda pointed to Kael, who stepped forward. He did not bow.

“Your Grace,” the pirate king said with a mocking attempt at a bow. “So good to have you visit my humble court.” He spoke with an exaggerated drawl of an accent, as if toying with them by playing at a crude idea of a pirate king. He laughed.

“Let’s not mince words. If it’s money you want,” Kael said, “you shall have it.”

Jehn might have played a game of minds with this man, but Kael could tell that Longbeard was a straightforward, cruel kind of person. The kind that didn’t indulge in delicate verbal sparring matches. The kind that lopped off limbs if he felt the whim.

Might as well skip the wordplay and go straight to the point.

“Excellent,” the pirate king said, dropping his exaggerated accent. His voice was low, the accent faint but familiar. Kael couldn’t place it. “We’ll write a letter to your court.” He smiled a crooked smile. “In the meantime, I want a word with your man.” He looked at Jehn, whose face was unreadable. “The one who betrayed you.”

He jerked his chin, and three pirates stepped forward to take Kael by the arms. One was pale as a barbarian, skinny, with red hair and three rings in each ear. The other two were dark and muscular—one looked Tyrian, the other like a Mammotite. Their expressions were hardened, their faces like carved stone.

The biggest one seized Kael’s elbow.

“That won’t be necessary,” Kael said to them. The pirates shrugged, but they hemmed him in as they walked him down the stairs and to the left of the great hall, leaving Jehn behind with the pirate king. Here, a wing of the castle formed a block of cells. Straw covered dirty stone floors, and arched gates lined the cells with steel bars. Sunlight streamed inside through holes in the ceiling spaced along the walkway between the cells, and through them, Kael glimpsed blue sky and white clouds. The cell block was nearly empty—three drunken women glared sullenly at him from the cell closest to the door, and in the farthest cell at the other end, a dark-skinned young man

dressed in white robes huddled on the floor, a chain around his ankle. The women hissed and called insults at the pirates, who ignored them, but the young man didn't move or speak.

As they reached Kael's cell, one of the pirates, the skinny pale one, pulled a knife and slammed Kael against the bars. The rattle echoed down the hall, and a few prisoners lifted their heads to look. The pirate pressed the tip of his knife into Kael's cheek as he leaned in close, his foul breath brushing Kael's ear.

"Give me yer fancy necklace," the pirate hissed. "Or I'll cut that pretty prince skin of yours."

The other pirates escorting him stood back and looked away. Clearly, they had no interest in stopping this. Or helping.

"Perhaps," Kael said evenly, still pinned to the bars, "you could give me a weapon, and we could fight for it like men."

The pirate pulled back and giggled, a high-pitched sound that reverberated through the room as he caught the eyes of his fellows. "Fight for it, he says. Like men." He leaned back. "I'd run you through in two strokes, fancy prince. I've got a cousin who worked in your palace. She said you was a fop."

Kael eyed the knife still pressed against his cheek. "This medallion is important to me. It confers royal—"

"Is your face important to you?" the pirate growled. "How 'bout one of yer eyeballs?" He jerked the knife, and pain blossomed along Kael's cheekbone as he felt the wet trickle of blood run down his face.

Slowly, he pulled the medallion from around his neck and extended it to his captor.

The pirate cackled as he wrenched the medallion from Kael's extended hand. He tucked the jewelry into a pocket on his belt and then grabbed Kael by the arm, clicked a pair of manacles on his wrists and ankles, and then shoved him backward into the cell.

Kael caught himself against the far wall as they slammed the cell door and walked away, still laughing.

As soon as they were gone, Kael paced the cell, examining every crack and crevice as he plotted how they might escape.

Briand sat across from the thief-queen at the plank table the thieves had set down across four barrels in the middle of the round room. Sunlight poured down from the hole in the ceiling like light down a well, and it made a pool of gold on the rough boards and the cards spread across them. Rags had removed her threadbare coat and stripped off her woolen gloves and hat. She was sprawled comfortably on her barrel, legs spread, elbows on the table.

Briand sat straight on her barrel, shoulders back and chin high, gazing at her cards with casual confidence. In previous years, she presented herself as uncertain, timid, even ignorant of the game, but there was no point in such a farce here. Her Dubbok skills were known among the thieves. Already, the others were murmuring. Briand was famously skilled, and Rags had only a passing fancy for the game.

Rags, however, seemed unable to stop smirking. As if she knew exactly how the game were going to go, and she found the ending delightfully cruel in a pleasing way.

Briand kept an eye on her as she studied her hand. Rags might try to cheat, given that she was acting so pleased with herself, and the fact that the thief-queen was not known to be a strong player. She'd called the challenge poetic. Was that the point of this game? That Rags would publicly cheat Briand out of a win as she felt Briand had cheated her?

Briand did not intend to be cheated, no matter what Rags had up her sleeve. "Nervous, Guttersnipe?" Rags asked. "You're frowning."

"Not in the slightest," Briand said. She shuffled the cards and dealt the hands, then set the deck in the center of the table with a slap. She caught Nath's eye, and his mouth pinched in an almost-smile from where he stood with his back to the wall and a thief's knife at his throat. His eyes gleamed. He had faith in her.

Let it not be misplaced, she wished.

"Let's play," she said.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE PIRATE GUARDS returned with Jehn after almost an hour. Kael, who had been sitting with his back to the wall, rose to his feet at the entrance of the prince. The pirate locked the cell door behind Jehn, who stood looking a bit lost inside the cell. He was wearing manacles on his wrists and feet like Kael, but otherwise was none the worse for wear.

“Your face,” Jehn said, flicking his gaze over the cut on Kael’s cheekbone.

“What happened?”

“They took your medallion,” Kael said.

“Hmm,” Jehn said. “I think that cut on your face is worth at least a small manor in Tasglorn, don’t you think?”

Kael smiled briefly, too pained and frankly, still too angry with his prince to indulge in joking with him. “I will get your medallion back.”

“It’s a hideous thing,” Jehn said. “I’ve always hated it.”

“It belonged to the last king,” Kael noted. “I will get it, sir.”

Jehn’s expression slipped, and for a moment, hurt flashed in his eyes. “Still sir,” he said lightly.

Kael didn’t answer.

Jehn stepped past him, examining the cell from all sides. He tugged on the bars—all solid—and kicked back the straw with his foot.

“Hoping to find a trap door underneath?” one of the drunken women in the other cell called with a snort.

“It does sound rather silly when you put it that way,” Jehn said. He crossed to the side of the cell closest to them. “Hello. What are your names?”

“I’m Petunia,” the one who’d called out to him said. She was a large, stunningly beautiful woman with ample curves and dark brown skin. “This hers is Nia, and that over there is Loma.”

Nia and Loma only grunted in their direction. They both were lying down in the cell, legs propped up against the wall. None of the women looked particularly distressed to be there.

“We’re in the trap for public disorderliness,” Petunia explained.

“You’re pirates,” Jehn said. “Isn’t disorderliness somewhat expected?”

Loma laughed. “Not when you fling monkey feces at the man who took up with another woman behind your back. Well, not if that man is second-in-command to Longbeard.”

“Ah,” Jehn said.

Loma sat up and squinted at them. “Are you really a prince, handsome?” she asked Kael with a winsome smile. “He’s never held a prince for ransom before.”

“Who does he usually hold for ransom?” Kael asked.

The woman shrugged with one shoulder. “Lords and nobles, mostly. Sometimes merchants. Scholars, like that one, if he’s unable to find anything better.” She pointed at the man in the white robes at the end of the cell block. “They only fetch so much in gold, the scholars. They are nearly a waste to feed.”

The wooden door to the cell block groaned open, and a male pirate with long black hair strode inside. He stopped before the cell containing the three women and put his hands on his hips.

“Have you three sobered up?” he said with a note of tiredness in his voice. Petunia spat at his boots in response.

“I see,” the man said. He wore velvet trousers and a hat with a feather. He made a face at the spittle dripping from his boot. “My love—”

“Don’t call me your love,” Petunia snarled. “You’ve been cavorting with that doxy for months, Daneal! I know what you’ve been doing. You’ve been going down to the sewers under the great hall and meeting her at the mouth to the lagoon.”

“I never—”

“I saw you!” she shouted. “She had a tattoo of a snake on her neck. Looked like some island whore.”

That shut Daneal up for a moment. Kael watched him, noting the keys in the man’s hand. Perhaps, if the man came a little closer, Kael could lift them from him and hide them under the straw. No, that would not work. Perhaps if he overpowered the man, they could steal a boat and row away.

“Months,” Petunia repeated. “All the while you were wooing me.”

“Three weeks—” Daneal began.

“Go away,” she bellowed. “I like it just fine in here. We’ve got a handsome prince to look at. Much better than the likes of you.”

The man left angrily. He didn’t even give Kael and Jehn a second glance. When he’d gone, Kael put a hand on Jehn’s elbow and steered him to the back of their cell. “Your Grace,” he said in a whisper so the others wouldn’t hear. “What did the pirate king say to you?”

Jehn's forehead wrinkled as a rat darted across the cell and disappeared beneath the straw. The prince pressed himself against the bars and closed his eyes as if rallying his courage. "He invited me to betray you. Said he'd heard of my time with the Seekers. He seemed fascinated by that history and asked me lots of questions about whether they sleep at night and what kinds of foods they ate. It seems he's looking for someone to consult with about them. I made everything up, of course. Told him they eat snails and cooked toads, and that they sleep on beds of stone to toughen their resolve." "It might be inadvisable to make jokes at the expense of the man holding us captive, sir," Kael whispered.

"He seemed to take my words seriously." The rat stuck its head from beneath the straw and squeaked at them. Jehn pressed his lips together at the sight of it and turned his head.

Kael asked, "Does he want to try to capture one for ransom?"

"That, or he wants to assure himself that they're human. He seemed terrified of them." Jehn gave Kael a sideways smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as he settled himself on the straw beside the wall and leaned his head back. "I saw you looking at the pirates' keys earlier. Don't wear yourself out with plans for escape just yet. Let us see what happens. This might be as simple as paying the gold this man demands."

"I have a bad feeling about it, sir," Kael said. "We should be developing a plan."

"Sometimes, the answer isn't hacking at things with a sword," Jehn said. He studied the ceiling of the cell above them. "Sometimes, a little diplomacy will suffice. If Longbeard finds that we've done anything, he'll kill you. It isn't worth the risk."

Kael followed the prince's gaze and saw that he was looking at the hole that let in sunlight and a gust of fresh air. Insects buzzed around it, and beyond, the sky was a deep and stunning blue. The sunlight shone on the bars of their cell, making striped shadows across Jehn's face.

Another rat rustled in the straw in the empty cell across from theirs.

Jehn's mouth tightened as if he was holding back fear.

"Sir," Kael said. "Respectfully, I disagree. As one who has—"

"Who has experience?" Jehn cocked a brow at him, though he kept his eyes on the rat. "You have more expertise in this arena, I'll grant you that. But I am your prince."

The tension stretched between them. Kael was thinking of a night months ago in a forest in Tasna, and the broken look in the dragonsayer's eyes as Jehn had shattered her heart.

"Sir," Kael said, submitting to his prince's words with a clasp of his closed fist to his chest. He was weary. Bruised. The cut on his face had dried, but it still hurt.

Jehn didn't comment on the *sir* this time.

Kael shut his eyes; his body needed rest.

But all he could see or think about was her. He'd dredged her up with that memory, and now, she lingered like a ghost in his mind and his senses. He only hoped that, right now, she was safe.

~

Briand looked down at the cards in her hand, then back at the cards on the table.

She was winning. On the table, she'd just played a thief.

And yet, Rags was smiling.

The cards in her hand—a priest, a traveler, and a queen—gave her several options on her path to victory. If Rags had an orphan, she could best Briand, but that was unlikely, and besides, Rags would have to know exactly when and how to play it. She'd have to get lucky.

Really lucky.

Briand knew the thief-queen didn't believe in luck.

The room was packed, thieves and beggars standing shoulder to shoulder against the wall, every eye focused on the table. The sunlight had turned orange with sunset, and someone had lit torches at the perimeter. Two burned behind the throne of barrels and pallets, and they cast a lurid shadow of it onto the ground that half-encompassed Rags, leaving her face partially in shadow.

Rags laid down another card, and then Briand.

Around them, the onlookers leaned forward. No one said a word.

Tension shivered across every face.

Briand didn't look at Nath and Cait, but she felt their presence. She had played many games and laid her life on the line more than once, but this time, she played for the lives of her friends too.

But somehow, the pressure and fear faded as she played the cards. Sound deadened, except for the rasp of the cards against her fingertips. She saw only Rags and the game between them. The room beyond and its pressures faded. Everything outside of the table dimmed; everything at it was illuminated.

Time slowed as Briand reached her final play. She selected her card—the queen—and put it in her hand.

If Rags wanted a poetic end, then she'd give the thief-queen a poetic end in the form of a defeat by the queen and the thief together.

Briand stretched out her hand to lay down the card. Rags caught her wrist before she could reveal it.

“Any last words, Guttersnipe?”

Their eyes met. Rags's glimmered with a strange excitement.

The Briand felt it.

A cold rush of power running through her arm and up to her head.

The probing reach of a Seeker.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRIAND STIFFENED AS the cold tendrils of Seeker power reached her mind.

Images slipped into her head along with the attempt to read her mind—memories of the Citadel, of classes and walks on the bridge, of gray robes and late nights studying.

Rags had been a Seeker student. Rags, the thief-queen.

A failed student.

The images after that turned dark, soaked in blood and crime.

So, this was the reason for the thief-queen's confidence. Rags intended to steal the play from Briand's head, and then win the game with her knowledge.

Rags's fingers tightened on her wrist. The thief-queen smiled wider.

Briand smiled back.

The power tightened around her skull. Briand let it gather, gather, gather. And then, when it was pulsing across her mind, but unable to penetrate that ice-like dragonsayer mental shield, Briand pushed back.

Rags flew across the room as if backhanded by an invisible giant. She hit the wall and fell to the floor facedown.

Everyone looked at Briand for one spinning moment before they rushed to the thief-queen's side, the game forgotten.

Briand rose and began to move through the crowd toward Cait and Nath. Now was the perfect time to try to escape. They'd have to find Crispin, of course, but—

“She’s dead!” a voice cried out.

The room filled with mutters and whispered words that rustled and fluttered around Briand as she stood frozen. The thieves loomed, dark enemy shadows. She was surrounded.

She pulled the hidden knife from her sleeve and palmed it in her hand as she faced the men and women closing around her.

They gazed at her, faces impassive.

Briand’s heart pounded. She shifted on her heels, preparing to fight.

Then, one woman shouted, “Long live the thief-queen!”

And hands scooped Briand up and carried her to the throne of barrels and pallets. A throne lit by fire.

~

The sky, visible through the holes in the roof, reddened with sunset as Kael dozed, and then darkened to deep purple. He woke as hooting and laughter came from the main hall.

“What’s going on?” Jehn asked the women, two of which were still in their cell. One appeared to have been released already.

“A pit fight, most likely,” Loma said, stretching. “Longbeard loves ‘em.” She squinted at the light. “He gives orphans knives and pits them against each other.”

A group of pirates swaggered into the cell block. Apparently, it was free range for all of the pirate king’s underlings. One of them pointed at Kael and Jehn.

“You two,” he said. “Come with us.”

“What about us?” Petunia called as one of the pirates unlocked Jehn and Kael’s cell. “We’re thirsty.”

“Lorne said you told him you liked it in there,” the pirate replied.

“Not if you take our handsome prince away!”

The pirates ignored her. They hustled Jehn and Kael from the cell and through the door into the main hall.

Smoke clouded the air. Braziers burned everywhere, and men and women perched atop barrels and on overturned crates, some drinking and eating, others smoking or laughing. A massive crowd was packed into one of the corners of the room, jeering and calling out, and every so often they’d erupt into cheers. The pirate king stood on a stack of crates above the rest, drinking straight from a bottle and cackling at whatever was happening in the ring below him.

Kael thought of what Loma had said—orphans—and a sick feeling clenched in his gut.

Their escort chained them to a ring in the wall and abandoned them. Kael leaned over to speak in Jehn’s ear.

“Have you a plan for escape?”

“Well,” Jehn replied without taking his eyes from the group that surrounded the fight. “We’ll need a way to get out of these manacles, and we’ll need to find a ship, provisions for the journey, and a way to navigate.”

He turned his head to look at the fellow prisoner, who sat cross-legged a few feet away, his expression somber as he took in the carousing around him. As they watched, a female pirate stopped to drop a plate of food at the young man's bare and dirty feet. The plate rattled, half of the food spilling to the floor as she strode away. The young man snatched it up with a trembling hand. He ate as if he didn't know when he would eat again. When he'd finished, he leaned back against the wall, his chest heaving as if he'd run a great distance.

"What's your name?" Jehn called to him above the fracas.

The scholar swung his head toward them. His brows pulled together, and his whole body seemed to shrink beneath their scrutiny. He had dark black skin and tight curls cut close to his head. He looked young, barely more than a boy, but his eyes were hollow and sunken as if he'd seen horrors he could not forget. Scabs covered his face and neck, and his white robes, upon closer inspection, were dirty and torn. Splashes of dark brown splattered his lap with what Kael surmised was dried blood.

"You're the Austrisians," he said slowly, moving his lips as if half-afraid to speak. "The prince and his guard."

"And who are you?" Kael asked.

The young man glanced around the room before he lifted a bandaged hand to tap his chest. His chains rattled as he moved. "I am Remi."

"Where did you come from?" Jehn pressed.

Remi licked his lips. He seemed terrified. "If I talk to you, they might beat me."

"Everyone is watching the fight," Jehn urged.

"I served an apprenticeship to one of the great scholars of Mammot for the past four years, studying to take his place. I was on my way to my cousin's wedding in Tyrr when the ship I was journeying on was captured by these demons."

"Were you the only one captured?" Jehn asked.

"No—they took six of us," Remi said. "Three of the others were ransomed already."

"And the others?" Jehn frowned as if he knew he wouldn't like Remi's answer.

Remi lowered his head. "They killed them."

"Does anyone try to rescue the prisoners instead of paying the ransom?" Kael asked.

“One of my fellow prisoners’ family—a noble house from Mayar—refused to pay. They tried to send soldiers to rescue their son. But we are hidden here. No one knows where we are. There are hundreds of islands along this coast. This place is a maze. And the pirates—when they caught wind of the plan, they cut the prisoner’s head off.”

Kael and Jehn exchanged a glance.

“How long have you been here?” Kael asked.

“Six weeks. I fear I don’t have much time left. The scholar’s guild is not as wealthy as a foreign court.” Remi said something else, but a burst of shouting broke out across the room, drowning out his words.

The woman who brought the plate to Remi approached them, carrying two more plates of food. She kicked at Remi. “No talking.”

Remi pressed back against the wall with a shudder and turned his head away. When Jehn called his name again, he refused to look at them.

The woman dropped plates at their feet, first for Kael, then Jehn. Kael waited for his prince to begin eating first, and his mind turned over the information Remi had given them.

Two killed.

The crowd watching the fight roared in approval at the outcome of the match. The pirate king guffawed, hoisting his drink high over his head, sloshing some of it on his sleeve. The bystanders began to disperse, and Kael caught a glimpse of a sandy pit wet with fresh blood. A pirate strode past carrying a small child, unconscious and bloodied, whose head lolled to the side.

Kael’s stomach turned over, and he was sick with rage.

Beside him, Jehn went white.

Neither of them spoke.

The pirate king leaped down from the crates and strode toward them. Some of the other pirates followed after their king, a strange, bloodthirsty eagerness in their faces that made Kael uneasy.

The pirate king fixed his dark eyes on Kael as his lips slid sideways into a sneer. “So,” he said when he reached them. “I hope, for your sake, your court is willing to pay for your release, Prince Jehn.” He pulled a roll of parchment from his vest and shook it. “I’ve written a ransom note. Do you think your life is worth ten thousand dubois to your court, O True Prince of Austrisia?”

Kael stared back at him with leashed fury. He didn't answer. He held himself still as the other pirates laughed and jeered.

"Sometimes the recipients of our letters think we don't mean what we say," the pirate king said. "We've learned, over time, what works best to, ah, induce an understanding of the situation. Your court might think they have time to deliberate, to drag their feet in collecting such a sum. Let's give them a little incentive, shall we?"

The pirate king drew a knife from his belt. Steel rasped against leather with a sound like tearing flesh. The pirate king's eyes gleamed with a cruel expression.

"What are you doing?" Kael managed, fighting to keep his voice even. Longbeard chuckled. "You don't need ten fingers to lift a scepter, prince." Kael tried to step back, but rough hands seized him and held him fast.

"Hold his hand down on the stones," the pirate king called out.

Two muscular men grabbed Kael by the shoulders and shoved him to his knees.

Kael struggled blindly, but there were too many of them, and he was held fast by the chains on his wrists and his ankles. The pirates crowded around him, shoving him onto the ground, prying open his unyielding hand.

Someone stamped on his wrist, another forced his fingers flat on the filthy floor.

He threw back his head to look the pirate king in the eyes as panic clawed in his throat. His pulse slammed. His vision darkened. He was hurtling down a dark tunnel, he was falling and falling inside his skin. The floor was cold and hard beneath his palm, and his legs were trembling. Something dripped from his forehead onto his wrist. Sweat? Blood?

He had dealt with torture before. He knew pain. But this would cripple him. He might never wield a sword again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KAEL'S HEART SLAMMED in his chest. He tried again to fight, to throw off the arms forcing him into submission before the pirate king and his knife, but the pirates had him held as securely as a bull tied up for slaughter. One thrust a bottle against his lips, and the drink burned as it flowed into his mouth and down his resisting throat. He coughed and gagged.

"Frightened?" the pirate king purred. "Don't worry. It won't hurt. That draught will see it that. Besides, most faint before too long." He brushed the knife against his vest, the sound of it scraping over the leather sending shudders across Kael's skin. "You should be feeling more relaxed now." The crowd jeered and chanted for the knife. Their voices filled Kael's ears, along with a high-pitched buzzing. He braced himself, chest heaving, muscles tightening as he steeled his body and mind for what was about to come—

"Stop!" Jehn shouted above the fray. "Wait. Wait—please!"

The pirate king held up a hand. The shouting quieted to a grumble.

Kael stared at his prince as if through a mist. The buzzing still rang in his ears, muffling sound. His tongue was numb now, and his mind soggy with whatever they'd drugged him with.

Jehn's eyes blazed. His voice was quiet, but it had a hysterical pitch to it.

"You need a finger," he said.

The pirate king nodded, his mouth dropping into a speculative frown.

Jehn's throat convulsed as he swallowed. "Take-take mine instead."

Longbeard lifted a brow. "You would offer your own finger for his, traitor? Perhaps I have misjudged your loyalties."

"Just do it," Jehn snarled. A sheen of sweat shone on his brow, and he was so pale that he looked like he might faint. "Please."

Kael tried to protest. His tongue moved thickly. What was the prince doing? "No," he breathed. "No."

"Your sire tells you no," the pirate king said, his eyes moving from Jehn to Kael with a speculative glint. "Aren't you going to listen?"

"And I'm a traitorous bastard, aren't I? Take my finger instead!" Jehn insisted. He was shaking as if fueled by rage and some unknown well of bravery that he feared would dry up any moment.

"No," Longbeard said after a screaming, eternal pause.

The hands gripped Kael's shoulders and pressed him down once more. Someone yanked his fingers straight.

"Stop!" Jehn shouted. "I am the prince, you fools. If you send the wrong finger, you won't get your ransom."

The pirate king's eyes glittered. His mouth turned. "Finally, you tell the truth, prince."

Jehn's eyebrows drew together. "You knew."

"My father was the Tryellese ambassador to the Austrisian court," Longbeard said. "I grew up among your ilk, prince, and I knew all the rich, sniveling brats whose fathers ran the country. I remembered you immediately. I never forget a face."

"Neither do I," Jehn said, and Kael could see he was searching his memory for any scrap of recollection of Longbeard. His forehead wrinkled with puzzlement.

"Oh," the pirate king said. "I doubt you'll remember me. I looked... different then." He laughed and made a gesture with his hand, and the pirates dropped Kael and rushed around Jehn. They dragged him forward, and Jehn didn't resist. His eyes widened as he stared at the knife, and he turned even whiter.

"Hold his hand down on the stones, then," the pirate king growled. The horde forced Jehn's palm flat. His fingers looked thin and fragile there against the floor, and Kael wanted to vomit. His prince, kneeling before this monster, taking a stroke meant for him.

"No," he said. He stumbled; someone caught him and held him back.

"Don't I get a draught?" Jehn asked. He was terrified, Kael could tell, his whole body trembled, but he managed a smooth smile anyway as he lifted his head to look at the pirate king.

"No," Longbeard said. "I want this to hurt."

The crowd closed around the prince and the pirate, and Jehn made a sound of raw, animalistic pain. The scream went on and on until it stopped abruptly, and then a cheer rose, and a fist lifted a bleeding finger into the air.

"Throw them back in their cell," Longbeard said.

~

Jehn lay unconscious on the straw of the cell, his hand dark with blood. Kael dropped to his knees when they shoved him inside the cell. The drugs

still surged through his system, making him weak, making him disoriented. He crawled to Jehn's side and lifted the prince's head into his lap.

Jehn didn't stir.

"Sir," Kael gasped. He felt the prince's pulse. It was weak and fluttery. He picked up the wounded hand—his left, the index finger cut off at the knuckle closest to his palm, the flesh around the wound charred where they'd cauterized it.

"My prince," Kael breathed. Then, "Jehn." He pulled off his shirt and wrapped his prince's hand in the fabric, binding it carefully with his trembling fingers.

Jehn moved his head, a groan escaping his gray lips. His eyelids fluttered but did not open. His breathing was labored.

Kael laid the prince's hand down gently and crawled back to his shoulders. He lifted Jehn's head and rested it on a lump of straw.

Jehn's breathing became faster, shallower. His body went rigid with pain, and his eyes snapped open. They darted around the cell as his chest heaved, and he ground his jaw tight against the pain. A cry wrenched from him as if yanked out of his mouth.

Kael wanted to break the cell bars with his bare hands.

"My prince," he whispered. "Why?"

Jehn looked up at him in a daze of pain and half-smiled.

"It is as he said. I don't need ten fingers to lift a scepter, my brother." He drew a shuddering breath. "You have risked and given much for me. It is—it is my pleasure—" Jehn clenched in pain, his words breaking off. He breathed rapidly for a moment, and then he continued painfully, "My pleasure to do the same for you, my brother."

Kael pressed his forehead to Jehn's and wept.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BRIAND SAT IN shock atop the grungy throne of barrels as the thieves filled the room below, waiting for her to speak. The sunlight had died, and a few stars were visible above in the patch of sky. The torches flared and flickered. A few thieves removed Rags's body. The rest looked at her expectantly.

Was she the thief-queen now? Dimly, she recalled from her time living among the thieves that succession to the barrel-built throne was based upon the killing of the previous thief-queen or thief-king in a duel of the reigning ruler's choice. Rags had chosen to play Dubbok, and Briand had killed her during the game.

This made Briand the new thief-queen.

She looked at the faces of the thieves. Some appeared skeptical, others wary, and some angry at the sight of a scrawny guttersnipe intruder sitting upon the throne over them. They were still murmuring about the way Rags had flown across the room. She heard "magic" muttered on more than one pair of lips.

At the back of the room, Briand saw a few familiar faces. Crag, a rough older man who'd always been kind. Beside him stood a slender girl, taller than Briand remembered. Lark. Briand had paid for the girl's freedom from her uncle before the Seeker's had abducted her and taken her south.

Lark beamed from ear to ear.

Briand looked at her friends. Her pulse pounded. If she gave an order, would the thieves obey it? Or would they laugh, pull her from the throne, and kill her for Rags's murder?

"Let them go," Briand said firmly, pointing to Nath and Cait.

The thieves guarding her friends stepped back and sheathed their weapons. Cait exhaled. She took a tentative step toward Briand, and when no one stopped her, she ran to the throne and peered up at Briand.

"What's happening?" she whispered. "How did you do that? Are... are you in charge now? Because you killed her?"

"I think that's about the sum of it," Briand murmured back. "Where is Crispin?"

"Still in the dungeon. He was too weak to stand, and so the thieves escorting us left him behind."

Briand met Nath's eyes. He was standing with his arms crossed, his expression curiously inscrutable. What was he thinking?

She climbed down from the throne and took Cait's arm. "I will speak with my friends alone. Someone—you there—" She pointed at a nearby beggar. "Bring the lad to Rags's old chambers. And, ah, someone show me the way to them."

Lark rushed forward. "I shall," she said.

Briand, Nath, and Cait followed her into the gloom of the tunnels. The thief-queen's empire existed in the ancient aqueducts and water tunnels that were built centuries ago for the city that Gillspin stood atop of—a far grander city than the putrid squalor that existed now. They traveled through a maze of stone corridors supported by carved arches and columns, stepped over and around cracked floor tiles and leaping across dry waterways.

Torches burned in sconces, illuminating the damp stones and the pale lichen growing in the dark. Lark darted ahead of them, nimble as a mouse as she scrambled up the final staircase to a wooden and iron door set in the wall. Briand paused before the door, then tried the handle. To her surprise, it was unlocked. The door swung open at her touch.

A scrawny man with close-cropped black hair and a patchy scruff of beard stood inside, a bag in his arms. He started at the sight of her, his bloodshot eyes widening, and then he looked around wildly as if he planned to flee. "Drop the bag," Briand said coldly, drawing her knife. "And give back the key. I assume you took it off the body?"

The man blinked at her. He looked at the knife in her hand.

"You saw what happened to Rags," Briand said with a snarl. She reached out her other hand, palm and fingers outstretched the way she'd seen Auberon do, and he dropped the bag with a rattle of coins and thrust the key into her fingers.

Immediately, Briand felt a sting of revulsion at mimicking the Seekers, but she shrugged it off. It had worked, hadn't it?

"What's your name," she demanded.

"Weasel," he muttered.

Behind her, Nath snorted.

"Can't blame me for trying to grab what I could before everything goes to chaos," Weasel said. "Don't know if you're even going to make a proper thief-queen. It's a hard job." But he flinched, expecting a blow.

Briand studied him. "It is a hard job," she agreed. "And you seem like a forward-thinking kind of person, Weasel. I don't remember you from my time here."

"I'm new," he said, thrusting out his chest. "Came to Gillspin when slavers killed my sisters."

"And your parents?"

"Dead from sickness for years," he said.

"I was alone when I came here too," Briand said.

Weasel watched her without responding.

"I'm going to need people I can trust, people who can be my eyes and ears."

Briand stooped and picked up the bag of coins, shaking a few into her hand.

"Here. Keep this, and whatever you've got stuffed into your vest and pockets. I want to hear everything the others are saying about me by tomorrow. Now go."

Tog gave her a sly smile at the comment about his vest and pockets, confirming her suspicion, and then he slid out the door and was gone.

Briand hung the key around her neck and bounced the bag of coins in her palm thoughtfully. "Here," she said to Lark, offering the girl a coin.

"No, Guttersnipe," Lark said. "I am the one who owes you a debt."

"A thief who doesn't want coins?" Nath asked doubtfully.

"I'm no thief," Lark declared. "I earn my money selling the things I scavenge from the shore." She looked steadily at Briand. "Crag and I will support you, and we aren't the only ones. Rags may have saved many of our hides by offering us a place of shelter, but she wasn't kind. There are many who have barely scraped by in this place. You... you were kind to me. Maybe you can find a way to help them too."

When the girl had gone, Briand looked around, taking in the room. This must have once been a water tank, she thought. The walls were stone. No windows. Moss grew on some of them. Dusty red tapestries hung across one of the walls, and a vast and lumpy bed sat in the middle of the room, flanked by a writing desk and a table and chairs. A cabinet stocked with wine bottles stood in the corner, and Briand crossed to it and opened the doors, looking for weapons or poisons. She had no doubt the deceased thief-queen had both somewhere in this chamber.

"What exactly happened during that Dubbok game?" Nath asked.

"She tried to read my mind with Seeker power to cheat, and I turned it back on her as I did with Auberon when we were battling him in Tasglorn,

remember? The old crone must have had a weak heart.”

“The thief-queen had Seeker powers?” Cait exclaimed.

“I’m as shocked as you,” Briand said. She found a cache of knives hung on the inside of one of the cabinet doors and smiled tightly. As she took one down to test the feel in her hand, she noticed Nath and Cait were staring at her, and she felt hot and self-conscious. What must they be thinking?

“What?” she said finally.

“Dragonsay—er, I mean Guttersnipe,” Nath said. He paused and made a face of amusement as he thought about something. “You called yourself Guttersnipe when you came to live with these scoundrels? They didn’t give you that name?”

Briand shrugged with one shoulder. She threw the knife and hit one of the pillows on the bed, dead center. A puff of feathers shot into the air, along with a clinking sound. She frowned thoughtfully at the clink. “Everyone takes a new name when they join the thieves. Calling myself Guttersnipe made me feel close to you and the rest of the company.”

Nath’s eyes glittered with a flash of fierce emotions—regret, sorrow, admiration. “Such loyalty even though we’d left you behind. And you were all alone. Nothing and nobody to take you in but a bunch of ragged thieves.”

Briand crossed the room and picked up the knife. She probed the pillow, then tore it along the hole she’d made. “I’m not alone now,” she said. His words both warmed her and humbled her. She was abashed. She ripped the pillow apart with vigor to hide it.

Coins spilled out onto the bed. Gold dubois.

Nath swallowed, his throat bobbing. He spoke the next words with conviction. “And you never will be again. I swear it to you.”

Briand turned away to hide the tears that filled her eyes. She was exhausted, and her head was still spinning. Nath’s fervent words struck her harder than normal. She was not usually so soft, was she?

She rummaged through a chest at the foot of the bed, finding more coins stashed among the ragged clothing that she was convinced Rags wore more for the effect than anything else. The woman certainly had enough money to buy some new garments.

Cait stepped to her shoulder. “You astonish me,” the young noblewoman confessed.

Briand reached under the mattress and drew out another bag of coins, then another. She knew Cait must be in complete shock at the grime and dankness of the place Briand had called home for years. “I know it’s a far cry from the Monarchist court here.”

“Not that. I meant... You have the command and gravitas of a queen,” Cait said.

Briand paused, caught off guard. She lifted her eyebrows as she crouched down and felt under the bed for more bags of dubois. She laughed, a gruff huff to hide her emotion. “A queen of beggars.”

“No, truly,” Cait said.

Briand stopped and looked at both of her friends. They were watching her with the sort of quiet respect she was used to seeing Kael and Maera receive. Warmth glowed within her, pushing away the fear for a moment. “Thank you,” she said, stumbling over the words. “Both of you. For your friendship and your loyalty.”

A rap came at the door. The thieves had brought Crispin. Briand threw a blanket over the coins she’d uncovered and called for the thieves to enter. They laid him on the bed at Briand’s command.

Crispin stirred after the thieves left.

“I must be delirious again,” he said. “I imagined that they were calling you a queen. And this bed is painfully lumpy.” He reached beneath him and pulled out a handful of coins, and he looked at Nath and Briand with such confusion that everyone snorted with laughter.

“What’s going on?” He scowled at Briand. “Stop laughing and tell me what happened!”

“Hey,” Nath said sharply. “She’s a queen now. Show the proper respect.” He winked at Briand as he said it, but she could tell he was only half-joking.

The rest of them were cheerful, but Briand was secretly filled with apprehension.

How were they going to extract themselves from this mess?

Another knock came at the door. When Nath opened it, a horde of children stood on the other side, some as young as three years old, crowding around Lark with hopeful, dirty faces.

“What’s this?” Nath asked gruffly.

“Guttersnipe,” Lark said boldly. “I want you to see them. The forgotten ones.”

Briand came to the door. The children studied her, their bright eyes sharp and wary.

"I've been rescuing them," Lark said. "Many were being sold as I was. I followed your example. I saved my coins and bought many of them. Others I stole or helped escape. They've been sleeping here, but they aren't safe. Rags forced them to beg, and they were harassed and attacked and sometimes kidnapped back off the streets. Can you do something for them?"

Briand chewed on her lower lip. She was exhausted. Her head was still throbbing from the trick Rags had tried to pull.

She thought of all the gold hidden around the room. Surely some of it could be spared for these children?

One of the little girls, dark and curly-haired, with a stare as sharp as a sword, made Briand think of herself a dozen years prior. When she was completely alone, with no one to care for her.

The memory tugged at her heart, and Briand sighed. "Do they have a safe place to sleep tonight?"

"Usually we sleep in the dungeon," Lark said, jutting out her chin as if daring anyone to criticize such accommodations. "Crag locks us in every night so no one can bother us."

Briand closed her eyes for a moment. The dungeons. "Bring them inside." She locked the gold she'd found in the cabinet and hung the key around her neck. She watched as Lark settled the children on some of the blankets. The littlest one whimpered, and Lark patted him on the back.

"It's all right, Pip," Lark whispered soothingly, but the little boy continued to cry. He looked about three years old.

"He's new," Lark said to Briand. "It's been hard on him. He's afraid of the dark."

"I want my da," the little boy called Pip sobbed.

The other children watched him emotionlessly or simply turned over and went to sleep.

"Usually, Crag comforts him before bed," Lark began. She looked at Nath, who paled as if she'd asked him to swallow a scorpion.

"All right," he muttered. He picked his way through the children and squatted down beside the little fellow.

The boy, still sniffling, burrowed his head into Nath's chest, climbing into his lap very nearly by sheer force of will. Nath held the boy awkwardly as

Pip quieted and closed his eyes.

"Orphan," Lark said in a whisper. "Most of them are. A lot more children fill Gillspin's streets these days because Cahan's army has been moving north. Too many try to fight back when the soldiers take everything to feed the army, and the children are left without parents. Like Pip here." She looked at Briand beseechingly. "Can you help them?"

"Get some sleep," Briand said. "We'll talk about it more tomorrow."

Lark settled herself among the orphans, and Briand laid down beside Cait on the other side of the room.

She had much to think about.

Somehow, she still fell asleep almost immediately.

~

Jehn quickly succumbed to fever in the filthy dark of the pirate dungeon. His forehead burned to Kael's touch, and he thrashed fitfully on the straw. Although his skin was as hot as fire, he shivered as if he were freezing. Kael slammed his manacles against the bars to make a ringing sound loud enough for the pirates outside to hear. The drunken women were long gone from their cell, but Remi raised his head briefly from his before putting it down again.

After what felt like an age, two pirates appeared and spat at Kael.

"Quiet," one rasped. "Yer bellyaching is disrupting our Dubbok game."

"He needs food, water, and medicine," Kael said. "Fresh bandages. Soap to clean his wound."

The pirate who'd spoken peered at Jehn, who lay on his side at the back of the cell. "What's wrong with 'im?'"

"He's burning with fever," Kael said. "Do you want him to die? You'll get nothing of the ransom if the sickness kills him."

The pirate shrugged and began to turn away. Kael reached through the bars and grabbed the man by the lapels of his dirty coat, slamming him against the cell door.

"Bring water, food, and medicine immediately," he snarled, his face inches from the pirate's grizzled cheek and tattered ear. "And fresh bandages and soap for his wound. Or I will personally flay your skin from your body when I escape. I was tortured by Seekers. I know what they do to a man. Don't make me give you a demonstration."

The pirate spat in Kael's face before he wrenched away and adjusted his coat as the other one jeered at him. "Don't touch me again, you lout," he said. But he scuttled away as if frightened, even though Kael was the one in chains.

Kael stood at the bars another moment, spittle dripping from his cheek. Across the dungeon, Remi stirred again.

"My friend," Kael called quietly. "Are you awake?"

Remi lifted his head. "I'm awake."

"How many do they take fingers from here?"

In answer, Remi lifted his bandaged hand. "All," he said.

"Did any die from infection?"

Remi was silent a moment. "Three of the ones rescued in my group grew sick. I do not know if they recovered after they were ransomed."

Kael wiped his cheek with his wrist and returned to Jehn's side. He dropped to his knees, took the prince's uninjured hand in his, and gripped it tightly. Jehn gave him a faint squeeze in response.

"Are you awake, sir?" Kael asked.

Jehn's eyebrows moved up a fraction of an inch. He didn't open his eyes. "I am conscious in this nightmare, yes." He sighed softly. "Is there any water?"

"No," Kael said. "But we shall have some soon."

He hoped Jehn was too sick to see through his lie.

The prince sighed again. "I have calculated and theorized how I might be killed in this war many times, trying to account for and prevent all foreseen threats. But I didn't think it would come in the form of a fever."

"You aren't going to die," Kael said. "I've seen dozens of soldiers pull through worse."

Jehn's mouth slid up in a rueful half-smile tinged with agony. "I'm not a soldier. I've never had the physical constitution strong enough. Not even as a child. You've always been the stronger one." His breath hitched as he moved his bandaged hand, and he groaned.

"You should have let me lose the finger, Jehn," Kael said softly.

"I am a fool," Jehn agreed. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "A prince's life is worth more than a finger. It's worth more than a mere man's. My life doesn't belong to me. A whole nation is at war to put me on the throne, men and women dying in battle and secret missions, and yet I risk it all." He opened his eyes and looked at Kael. "A fool," he repeated. "But I'm not

sorry, friend. I owe you a debt that I can never hope to repay. It only grows greater.”

Kael said nothing. He gripped Jehn’s good hand as if he could force strength and life into his friend that way.

After a while, Jehn’s breathing slowed, and his fingers went slack. His chest rose and fell with more even breaths as he slept, and behind his eyelids, his eyes tracked back and forth furiously in dreams. Once, he cried out sharply, and his wounded arm twitched as if he were dreaming of losing the finger. He opened his eyes, but he didn’t see Kael leaning over him as he panted and thrashed in agony.

Kael did not sleep. He kept a vigil beside his prince—no, his friend—all night, except to rise and beat his chains against the bars twice more to call for water and food. Rats came from the darkness, dozens of them, squeaking and rustling in the night, running over Kael’s feet and nipping at Jehn’s motionless body. Kael drove them away again and again.

In the darkness near dawn, the door scraped open, and a dark figure approached the cell. The clatter of a dish hitting the stones rang out, followed by a thump of heavy wood.

A gruff voice bellowed, “Now shut up.”

Kael felt his way to the gate and found a bucket of water and a plate of stewed meat and thick, crusty bread. He brought it back to the prince.

“Jehn,” he said, tapping the prince’s shoulder.

Jehn opened his eyes long enough for Kael to drizzle water into his mouth, but then the prince fell unconscious once again.

When the bucket was empty, Kael used it to chase away the rats.

Light began to glow at the holes in the ceiling. Kael ate and drank some, saving the rest for Jehn when he woke. Across the dungeon, Remi slept.

When the sun had almost risen, the door to the dungeon scraped open with an ominous screech, and three pirate men strode into the dim corridor between the cells. They passed Jehn and Kael and continued to Remi, who they woke by kicking the bars. They seized him by both arms and dragged him out, ignoring his frightened questions.

“You,” Kael called, rising. “We need more food.”

The men ignored him. They wrestled Remi into the corridor.

Kael grabbed the bucket and smashed it against the bars, throwing all his rage and horror and sadness into the action. He slammed it over and over

until the wooden slats splintered and the metal that bound them together began to bow and warp.

The pirates stopped only to laugh at him. The pieces of the bucket flew across the floor to their feet, and they kicked them away so Kael couldn't reach the shards.

When they'd gone, Kael returned to where he kept vigil by his injured prince, his mind stuck between two things.

Escape.

And her.

Always her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BRIAND WOKE AND lay quietly in the darkness while the others slept, she and Cait and Crispin curled on Rags's bed like kittens in a nest of blankets, shoulder to shoulder. The orphan children were still asleep in their corner, except for one or two who whispered quietly in the dark.

She thought of Kael. She'd been through a great deal in the last day, and she felt she owed herself that luxury. She allowed herself to imagine—just for a moment—a scene in which he appeared, exhausted and dust-stained from riding across the kingdom, to confess his error in leaving and describe in great detail his sorrow for hurting her. She pulled a knife on him in this imaginary scene, of course, and threw it at his head. Thinking of it gave her tremendous satisfaction. He didn't say anything as the blade sank into the door behind him, narrowly missing his ear. He didn't even flinch. He strode across the room, swept her into his arms, and kissed her.

Imagining that gave her tremendous satisfaction too.

When Briand locked her daydreams into the back of her mind where they belonged and rose from the bed, Nath did too, carefully placing Pip, who'd slept curled next to him on the floor, so as not to wake the child. Moving quietly, they sat at the table and tasted Rags's ale while they talked in whispers.

"Crispin still seems weak," Briand said.

"The lad isn't as soft as he seems," Nath said.

"We'll have to find another large city nearby," Briand continued. "Do you think he will be able to endure another long ride?"

"You mean to leave?" Nath said, surprised.

Briand blinked at him. "Why, yes. You think I would stay?"

Nath glanced around them at the thick stone walls. "If we want to hide from Seekers, this seems a good place to do so."

"You truly believe I could pretend to be a thief-queen while we lie low?"

"I've watched you rescue your friends countless times from danger. I've watched you win Dubbok games against a myriad of opponents. I've watched you call dragons from the depths and defeat Seekers and even learn to read," Nath said. "I think you can do anything you set your mind to."

~

Valora sat in her usual place in the council room, only half listening to the bickering of the nobles as they debated the merits of allying with the island nation of Couret. The prince and Kael had been gone for three days now. They would be approaching Nyr by now, she supposed. In her mind's eye, she imagined it: the approach of their ships toward the Nyrian shores, the dark green mountains of Nyr rising above the lush, cool terrain of the lower country, mists swathing the capital and harbor and reaching out to envelop the ships. She imagined Kael, standing at the ship's bow, his dark hair blowing in the wind and his dark eyes missing nothing, revealing nothing. A dart of frustration tagged at her. He was to be her husband, but she could not read him. Although they shared many similar passions, although they respected each other, he eluded the grasp of her understanding. He was like cold water in her hand, slipping through her fingers no matter how hard she tried to hold on.

Across the table from her, her future brother-in-law smirked at her as if he read her thoughts. Valora flicked her gaze away from Jacob Halescorn's eyes, who were distractingly like Kael's, and yet so different. If Kael was cold and deep water, Jacob was a maelstrom. Moody, flickering with darkness and light, seething. He never ceased to unsettle her. This brother, she understood, if only in a perverse way that rankled and troubled her. He had always raised her ire, disturbed her tranquility. And now, as always, he was laughing at her consternation.

With a surge of annoyance at both Jacob and her own distractible mind, Valora tried to return her attention to the discussion at hand. Several nobles had raised their voices at this point, and all were trying to shout over the other.

On the favorable side of things, Couret was well-positioned to provide resources and soldiers to the conflict in Kyreia, since the small kingdom lay off the western coast of the northern province. They were renowned for their highly skilled fighters, called shivets, who trained blindfolded and who were said to be able to kill a man in pitch dark. On the unfavorable side of things, Couret was small, and their fighting force was small, and they were demanding a large piece of land as payment. Land that belonged to Lord Nort.

“That land,” Lord Nort was arguing, “has been in my family for six generations!”

“It’s nearly all located in the Wild Lands,” Lady Alana shot back. “In which generation did any of your forefathers set a single foot on it?”

“That is beside the point,” Lord Nort sputtered.

“Then please, make your point,” Lord Danno murmured.

“The point is that this treaty would come at tremendous personal sacrifice to my family estate!” Lord Nort glared at them all as if they were trying to make him a penniless pauper. “How is the prince’s council prepared to reimburse us?”

Lord Halescorn stirred. He rarely said anything at these meetings, preferring to listen and make faces that could mean almost anything, and stirring the gossip at court into flurries of rumors about his allegiances and intentions. As one of the wealthiest lords in the Monarchist camp, and inarguably the most politically powerful, a mere lift of his finger gathered the attention of the rest of the room as effectively as Lord Nort’s shouting. “I believe,” he said, looking down his nose at Lord Nort, “there was talk of giving your family the stretch of land adjacent to the Jessu at the Tasna-Sythra line. Your family deals in logging, do they not?”

“They do,” Lord Nort said. “And there had been talk of expanding into the Wild Lands—”

“The land being offered has many rich forests,” Lord Halescorn continued.

“They are positioned close to the Jessu River, making the wood you’d gain from them easy to transport throughout Austrisia.”

“And who owns the land now?” Lord Nort snapped.

“Cahan,” Lord Halescorn said dryly.

“Then,” Lord Nort said angrily, “we are gambling half my family’s land on the victory of our armies over Cahan.”

Jacob laughed. “My good sir,” he said. “We’re gambling all of our *heads* on the victory of our armies against Cahan.”

Before Lord Nort could reply, a servant slipped into the room and stepped to Lord Halescorn’s side to whisper in his ear. The lord frowned, his eyebrows drawing together sharply as he listened.

“Lord Halescorn,” Lady Alana said with a sigh. “Could you grant us at least the illusion of consideration by not having your spies report to you openly in front of the rest of us?”

Lord Halescorn ignored her, still listening to the servant, whose whisper was like the scratch of a quill across parchment.

“What?” he said loudly enough to startle the whole room. “Are you sure?”  
The servant nodded.

“Lord Halescorn—” Lady Alana began again.

The door burst open, and a second servant ran into the room. In his hands, he clutched a wooden box.

Lord Halescorn looked at the box in shock.

“This just came via mechbird,” the servant cried, and dropped the box onto the table. “The prince has been captured!”

Jacob reached out to open the box, and one of the ladies screamed at what lay inside.

A bloodied, severed finger wearing the prince’s ring.

~

Valora paced the length of the corridor outside the council room, her chest tight and her breaths coming fast and frightened no matter what she thought in her attempts to calm herself.

Jehn and Kael—captured by pirates. A finger in a box. A demand for a sum none of them knew how they were going to obtain.

And she had not felt the danger. Not even a flicker.

She’d failed her prince. If she could have sensed it, perhaps—

“You’re upset.” Jacob was at her shoulder, a stormy presence.

“My prince’s finger is lying in a box inside the council room. Of course I’m upset,” she snapped without turning around.

“Yes, but it’s more than that,” he murmured. “You feel... guilty?”

“No, I don’t.” A pang of fear cut through the murmuring of voices in her head. How could he see her feelings so clearly? He didn’t know about her abilities, did he?

“You do,” he said. His voice was so soft, so dangerous. A shiver slid down her spine.

“Stop,” she whispered. “Please, stop. Stop trying to prod and poke at me. What do you want? Why are you tormenting me?”

He was so quiet that she thought perhaps he’d left, but then he said, “You think I am not loyal.”

“Why do you say that?” She was deflecting. She just wanted him to go away. No, she didn’t. Yes, she did.

“You say ‘my prince,’ not ‘our prince.’”

Jacob was silent a beat. “You bite your lip when you feel guilty.”

She made a sound in her throat. How did he know that? Was she so transparent? Did the whole court see through her?

“I’m sure he’s still alive,” Jacob said, and she knew he wasn’t talking about the prince.

Valora rallied, drawing her ragged emotions up with a deep breath. She was a noblewoman. She was strong. She told herself this as she said, “Yes, I’m sure he is. I’ve read about this pirate, this Longbeard. He wants a ransom, nothing more. He’d have no reason to kill Kael.”

“Yes,” Jacob agreed. “He will live, and you will be a Halescorn soon enough, never fear.”

What was that in his voice? Valora turned to pin him with a glare, but the expression on his face was one of naked pain. She was astonished into silence, and then she reached out a faltering hand of comfort.

“He is alive,” she said, firmer this time. As if she could convince the both of them by the iron in her voice. As if she could make it true by insisting it was so.

Jacob let her put the hand on his shoulder, and the muscles in his face eased when she touched him.

Valora withdrew her hand and returned to the council chamber.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WEASEL CAME TO give Briand a report of the information he'd gathered listening to the other thieves just as Lark was ushering the orphan children out for their breakfast.

"They aren't sure about you," he said, watching Nath out of the corner of his eye as he spoke. He stepped aside as the children passed him, and he seemed surprised at the mass exodus, but he didn't comment on it. "Some of 'em think you're some kind of witch for what you did to Rags. Some of 'em think you're just a girl." He paused. "Are you?"

"A girl?" Briand said with a thin smile.

"A witch."

"Something like that." She channeled her best impression of Kael when he'd been the steward of her uncle's estate. "Don't test me. You won't like what happens."

Weasel gulped. He accepted the coin she gave him in payment.

"Oh," Briand added as he turned to go. Thinking of Kael at her uncle's estate had given her a thought. "Is there a... a steward of some kind? A bookkeeper?"

Weasel nodded.

"Bring him here. I want to speak with him."

~

"Get up, louts!"

The pirates' cheerful, cruelly delighted shout reverberated through the dungeon, rousing Kael from the doze he'd fallen into. He lifted his head as a long-haired man with a webbing of scars across his cheeks and a sunburned nose stopped in front of the cell door and unlocked it. The man had meaty hands with blunt fingers.

Jehn didn't stir from where he lay on the straw, wasted and sick.

"What's happening?" Kael asked quietly. He half-rose into a crouch but didn't move from Jehn's side.

"Longbeard has summoned you," the pirate answered in the kind of tone of a man who doesn't care about the suffering of others—nay, the kind of man who takes a perverse pleasure in it, but only in passing. He wrenched the

cell door open with a squeal of rusted hinges and stepped inside. He stank of ale and grease, and food stains adorned the front of his shirt.

Jehn's forehead wrinkled faintly. He didn't even open his eyes, but his breathing changed, and Kael knew the prince was awake but conserving his strength.

Kael stood in one graceful movement, his chains clinking. He held the pirate's gaze. "He's sick. He shouldn't be moved."

"I do what Longbeard says," the pirate answered with a shrug. He reached down to hoist up Jehn by one arm.

Kael grabbed his wrist and pulled him upright again.

The pirate snarled and shoved an elbow in his face. "Get off me!"

Kael dodged the blow and slammed the man against the bars, his chained hands around the pirate's throat. "He's sick," he repeated, his voice a dangerous whisper. He was tired of these fools. He was tired of being battered and mistreated. His prince was suffering, and he missed Briand with every breath that passed his lips, and the dungeon smelled like piss and vomit, and he was tired. Lords, he was tired. His patience was nearly depleted. "He shouldn't be moved."

The pirate stared back at him, eyes bugging as he gasped for breath. He grabbed at Kael's wrists as he kicked at the bars with one of his feet to make noise. The door to the dungeon flew open, and two more pirates rushed in. They ran into the cell. One grabbed the water bucket and struck Kael on the side of the head as the other grabbed his shoulders and yanked him back. Pain lanced his head, and Kael released the pirate, who swore and sank to the floor.

"Bring them both," he spat when he'd recovered his voice. "Drag them by their ankles if you have to."

They forced Kael from the cell and lifted Jehn, who drooped limply as a sack of straw.

Something was dripping on Kael's shoulder. He looked down as saw blood dripping onto his chest. The bucket to the head must have done it. His head throbbed, but he put the pain aside, forcing his attention to stay focused on where they were going. One of the pirates carried Jehn, whose head lolled to the side. They moved through the main hall, past the arena of sand with bloodstains on the trampled ground, and Kael averted his eyes. Several drunken pirates lay scattered about on the floor, passed out after a night of

revelry. One Kael recognized—Petunia. She opened her eyes long enough to see him as he passed her.

“You’re bleeding, handsome,” she said, and she shut her eyes again.

Longbeard sat waiting for them, sprawled in his chair, eating seeds out of half a pomegranate and spitting bits of it to a peacock by his feet. He looked them over—Kael, defiant in his bonds, Jehn as weak and pale as a corpse.

“I have news,” he said in his gravelly voice. “I’ve sent a mechbird to your court, O prince, demanding a sum of half a million dubois.”

Kael’s face didn’t change, but he braced himself as his gut twisted at the number. Half a million. An impossible amount. They’d already paid most of their funds to the queen of Nyr in exchange for an alliance. Jehn could not conjure up a scheme to find more in some other desolate cave for Kael to find, for Jehn was nearly dead, and Kael his fellow prisoner.

The pirate king studied Kael’s expression as if looking for clues of distress. “Is it too much? I think it a bargain.” He popped another pomegranate seed into his mouth and sucked loudly.

Kael and Jehn both looked at the seeds at his feet hungrily.

“I am eagerly awaiting their reply,” the pirate king said. “I hope for your sakes that they respond promptly to my demands. I won’t wait forever.”

“And what happens to us if the funds cannot be raised?” Kael asked tightly.

“You’ve asked for—”

“A king’s ransom?” The pirate king turned his gaze from the pomegranate to Kael. His mouth curled. “Then I find someone else interested in paying for the exiled prince of Austrisia. I’m sure I could find many qualified buyers for such a prize.” He chuckled. “But you?” His face hardened. “You, I kill, unless the Seekers want you.”

Kael didn’t betray his thoughts with his expression. He kept every muscle in his jaw taut.

“They will send the money,” Jehn murmured. His voice was like a rasp of leather. His eyes opened a crack and then closed again.

“We need more food and bandages if you want him to survive,” Kael said evenly. “Think of all the money you’ll lose if he dies.”

Longbeard finished his pomegranate and flicked the last seed at the peacock. The bird rushed to peck it up as the pirate king stood from his chair and descended the steps until he was level with Kael. Kael dragged his gaze from the wasted pomegranate to the pirate’s eyes.

“You play a traitor,” Longbeard said softly, “but you are as loyal as a dog.”

Kael didn't move, didn't flinch as the pirate king paced around him. A shudder gripped him, but he held firm, his eyes focused on the window of yellow glass. Through it, he could see the lagoon, and the sea beyond. The pirate king drew close and breathed in Kael's ear. "I've known men like you. A man of dangerous, principled games, of dual identities, all in service to a cause greater than yourself. Men like you make good martyrs." His mouth pursed. "Don't get any such ideas here, Kael of Estria. Sit in your cell, tend to your prince. If you try to escape or do anything clever—if you so much as threaten my men again—I'll maim him."

"Like you've already maimed him?" Kael said, barely able to leash his sudden fury.

"He lost a finger, and it is the finger he needs least," the pirate king said.

"Next time, it could be an eye. Protect your prince."

Kael held the pirate king's gaze as the pirates dragged him and Jehn back to their cells.

~

Valora stood at the window while the rest of the council bickered behind her about how they would raise the sum demanded for the true prince's safe return. She felt Jacob watching her and resisted the urge to look back and catch him at it.

"If we sell enough land—" Lady Alana was saying.

"Yes, sell some land!" This was Lord Nort. He looked smug at the prospect of someone else's family interests being put on the chopping block of loyalty to the crown.

"If we start selling land, they'll know we need money," Lord Halescorn growled.

"We're at war. Of course we need money," said another lord.

"If we seem this desperate, they'll know we're weak. They'll attack—" Lord Markis began.

"So we disguise the sales. Sell small parcels of land under different names. We'll slip through the notice of Cahan's spies that way," Lord Beaua suggested.

"There isn't time for that." Valora turned from the window. "We have a few weeks at best, and the pirate king is demanding gold coin, not currency notes. We need to go to our allies."

The room was silent a beat. All the nobles stared at her.

“Our allies,” Jacob repeated, as if he were considering it.

“Tyyr, Nyr—”

Someone snorted at that. “Nyr couldn’t help us, not with this sum. I doubt the queen’s depleted coffers could spare such an amount even if Prince Jehn were the love of her life.”

“What about Tyyr?” Lord Halescorn mused.

“Do you think the Tyyrian ruler’s generosity would extend this far?” Lady Alana asked. “We have stretched our welcome here thin indeed, especially with the assassination attempt a few months ago in the arena. We have not been favored as much of late. Many of the Tyyrian people openly speak against us.”

“The monarch will do what is politically expedient,” Jacob murmured.

“And is that giving us the money to rescue Jehn?” Lady Verris asked.

No one seemed to have an answer for her.

“We’ll put together a delegation and make a formal plea for assistance,” Lady Alana concluded. “Lord Halescorn, will you be among the party? It is your son who is one of the prisoners...”

Across the room, Valora’s eyes met Jacob’s. He watched her as if he knew what she was thinking.

What she was planning.

“Lady Valora,” Lady Alana said. “You should also be among the party. Kael is your betrothed—”

“Please,” Valora said quickly. “I will be in my rooms, mourning and praying for my future husband’s and our prince’s safe return. Give my deepest apologies and regrets to the monarch.”

She had much to do.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

VALORA SPENT FOUR hours composing the message to the Nyrian queen. She wrote and rewrote the words, crossing out anything that seemed too weak, too pleading, too soft. She knew little about the Nyrian queen except what she'd gleaned from Jehn. She hoped it would be enough. She believed this would be their only hope.

Finally, Valora rewrote the perfected message on a clean sheet of paper and burned the other versions. She folded and sealed the letter, her hands shaking.

She was going behind the backs of the council. It was a bold move, one that would make her a target. She had the promise of the Halescorn name to protect her in the future, and she didn't think anyone would touch her now, even though she were only betrothed, but if Kael didn't make it... Well, she'd contemplate that later. Furthermore, she was negotiating with a sovereign on Jehn's behalf without his permission or knowledge. She could only hope that he would see the value in her actions, and not order her imprisoned for them.

Valora walked to the wall that overlooked the sea at dusk and released a mechbird for Nyr under cover of darkness so the guards and spies would not see. She watched as the flash of copper wings vanished into the night. As she slipped through the dark gardens, the air heavy with the scent of the sea and the grass soft beneath her feet, she felt utterly alone.

Then, a dark shape stepped out from behind a column into her path.

Jacob.

~

Kael knelt beside Jehn, wiping the prince's scorching forehead with a damp cloth. The pirates had brought them food again, at least, and another bucket of water.

Jehn continued to slip in and out of consciousness. His body burned with heat, and mumbled words and phrases tumbled from his lips as he arched and thrashed in pain. Behind his closed lids, his eyes darted back and forth frantically. Now, the prince wept and pleaded like a child, locked in some nightmare.

“Jehn,” Kael whispered, grabbing the prince by the shoulders and holding him tight. “I’m here.”

“Please,” Jehn sobbed. “Please don’t. Please don’t leave me alone in the dark. I cannot bear it.”

“You’re not alone,” Kael said. “It is daylight. I am with you, my friend.” Jehn turned his head restlessly from side to side. “So many rats,” he muttered. “They ate the fingers off a man yesterday when he fell asleep from exhaustion.”

Kael dropped his head to the prince’s chest. “You were dreaming.” But the rats had been creeping ever closer, bolder the sicker Jehn became. As if in anticipation of gnawing his corpse.

Jehn mumbled something Kael couldn’t understand.

“I’m here,” Kael repeated. “My friend, I am here.” His eyes throbbed with exhaustion, and his whole body ached with hunger and fatigue. He hadn’t slept except when he occasionally slipped into a doze sitting beside the prince, but he would not leave his vigil beside his friend. In this tiny, filthy world of their locked cell, he was no longer thinking of Austrisia and the war, of Monarchists and princes. He was thinking of his friend. He must keep his friend alive.

He must. He must.

When the rats came, Kael snarled at them like a dog. He grabbed the plate that had held their food and wielded it like a sword against the creatures. Jehn opened his eyes briefly, but he was not seeing what was before them. He whispered panicked words to himself about unseen horrors.

Kael drove the rats away and sank down beside Jehn again, panting with exhaustion. His body was weakening. He focused his mind on the plans he’d been building, plans for escape, but they slid away from him like cobwebs in a stiff wind.

He was beginning to lose hope.

~

Briand’s punishing schedule as of late caught up with her as she was speaking with the steward, who had given her a full report (by his word) of Rags’s holdings and the thief enclave’s resources. Briand estimated that the man, a bespectacled fellow named Quill who looked as though he was

Nath's long-lost brother, was telling her wrong by at least twenty percent with intentions to pocket the difference himself.

Her eyes grew heavy while he droned on about the various holdings Rags had squirreled away. She suspected Quill was making everything as boring as possible to confuse her.

Too many sleepless nights thinking of the one-whom-she-did-not-want-to-think-about had her utterly exhausted. She gestured for Quill to keep speaking as she stood and took a walk around the perimeter of the room to keep herself awake.

The movement didn't help.

She sat down in the chair, fighting to keep her lids up. She needed to look fearsome. Not narcoleptic.

"Can I see your notes on the previous years?" she asked.

Quill hesitated. "I'll have to fetch them—"

"Yes, do that," she said.

The moment he had gone, she laid her head on her arms and closed her eyes.

The dungeon walls were damp against her back, and she blinked at the bars. This again?

Auberon sat with his legs crossed, frowning at her. He was angry with her, she could tell, but he was also glad to see her. She watched the emotions war across his face before she stirred, alerting him to the fact that she was awake.

"Ah," he said smoothly, covering his naked emotions with a cool, detached expression. "Still alive, I see."

"No thanks to your fellow Seekers."

"You look as though you're no longer sleeping on the road," he observed.

"You look..." She looked at him and swallowed. He looked good. His hair was brushed, his skin oiled, his chest bare. He wore a silky black pair of trousers under his cloak, and nothing else. "You look like you're taking a nap in a brothel."

He smirked at her. She stared back. "Am I right?"

Auberon didn't respond. He folded his arms as if proving some kind of point.

Briand made a noise of irritation. Was he expecting some kind of reaction? Jealousy? Anger?

"I don't care what you do, Auberon."

His eyebrows twitched. “No?”

“No.”

She turned away so she didn’t have to look at him. She shut her eyes. This wasn’t worth the nap.

“I’m cursed,” she growled. “Cursed to keep encountering you when I should be resting.”

“I have information,” Auberon said, “that you might find interesting.”

“I find that highly unlikely,” Briand replied coldly.

“Oh, I think it very likely,” Auberon shot back. “It concerns your beloved prince and that despicable traitor.”

Briand stiffened. “What are you talking about?”

“A mechbird came to me days ago. It was from a pirate king called Longbeard. Claims he has the prince and the traitor as his prisoners.”

“What?” she barked.

“He wants to sell the prince to me. Said he captured them off the coast of Tyrr.”

Briand couldn’t breathe. Lies? Truth? “And what did you say in response?”

“Ah,” Auberon said. He was enjoying her interest, and he took his time in making his answer. “Well, it was quite a shock. A pirate offering me the fugitive prince. Should I go to Cahan with the information? Should I keep it to myself, see what I can sell it for? I have no love lost for either side of the war, you know—”

“Auberon!” Briand shouted. “What did you do?”

“Nothing yet,” he said.

Then, she forced herself awake, leaving him behind.

~

“Nath!” Briand cried as soon as she woke. “Has a mechbird come?”

“No,” he said, puzzled.

Briand didn’t wait. She strode into the hall. “A horse!” she said. “Someone get me a horse.”

Lark took her to the stables, and Briand picked the one that looked the swiftest. She rode into the city and sent a mechbird to Maera, hoping the woman could decipher her scribbled questions that she’d written in such haste. Her thoughts ran in a thousand directions, and after she’d sent the bird, Briand rode for the hills to clear her head and watch the sky.

Finally, she returned to the thieves' quarter. The mechbird came a few hours' later, when Quill had returned to give the rest of his report. Briand stepped away to read what Maera had sent. As she read the contents, Briand felt dizzy. She put out a hand to steady herself against the wall.

"What is it?" Nath demanded, seeing her reaction. She had not yet explained. She hadn't spoken to anyone, as Auberon could be lying... he could have been the victim of a scheme...

But no. It was true.

True and devastating.

Nath frowned at the message. "What did Maera say?"

Briand didn't ask how he knew it was from Maera, nor did she comment on his lack of surprise that they were corresponding. "It's bad news, Nath."

"Tell me." His face was white to the lips.

She tersely recounted the highlights in a voice low enough that only Nath could hear. Jehn and Kael were prisoners of a pirate king off the shores of the upper southern continent, in an unknown but suspected (by Maera) location, which she gave: the Agarra isles. A finger had arrived along with a ransom demand. A staggering amount, no less. Maera had a plan, but things were uncertain. The health of both Kael and the prince was not known.

Briand crushed the message into her fist as Nath swore under his breath again and again. She felt as if she were plummeting into a black pit.

A severed finger.

Kael captured.

He would give his life for the prince. She knew it without a doubt.

Had he given his finger? Was that the only thing they'd chopped off?

Was he dead?

The thought that he might not be alive in this world while she was filled her veins with broken glass. She wanted to double over in fear and agony, but somehow, she kept standing, kept breathing, kept speaking calmly. Her mouth was speaking words even while her mind was crawling into a crevice to hide from the horror of Kael's predicament.

Why had she not been informed immediately? Maera was planning something, she'd said. She'd need Briand's help.

They needed a dragonsayer.

"How far from here to the coast of Estria, if we take the river?" she asked Nath.

“Two days,” he said. “Then another day down to the islands Maera mentioned, if the wind is with us.”

She looked at him and saw the warring in his eyes. He was holding himself here even now. He wanted to be striding for the nearest ship at the docks to save Kael and the prince, caution and sense and everything else be damned. So did she.

“Quill,” she said loudly, turned back to the others. “How much ale and wine do we have in the previous thief-queen’s personal stores?”

“Ah...” Quill scratched his head thoughtfully. “A good bit, Guttersnipe.”

“Enough for the entire thief guild to eat and drink to their hearts’ content? Till they can barely move?”

“The entire guild?” He frowned. “Not quite enough for that.”

Briand held Nath’s gaze as she said to Quill, “I want you to take the portion of the queen’s assets that you’ve been hiding from me in order to profit off them yourself, and I want you to buy enough food and wine to feed the whole guild. We’re going to have a feast. A celebration of my ascension to the throne, and my pardoning of your attempted thievery.”

“For how long?” Quill stammered, his cheeks reddening at being caught. He looked as if he didn’t know which direction to run.

Nath put a hand on his sword. Quill swallowed hard.

Briand’s mouth tugged in a smile. “Six days should be long enough.”

While the thieves were carousing unaware, she was going to rescue the love of her life.

# **Part Three:**

# **Blood in the Water**

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

IT HAD BEEN two days, and still, Jehn's fever raged. What little food they were given, Kael gave to Jehn.  
He thought of Briand to keep himself sane.

~

Briand and Nath reached the coast, chartered a boat, and set out on the sea. The wind whipped Briand's hair into her eyes. She drew circles for the magic shivering in her bones. On the sea, she could feel the movement of tainted-blood creatures far below, drifting and somersaulting in the deep, dark places of the earth. The pain slithered through her head, and she clenched her fist around the Seeker knife and felt its buzz as it sent warmth through her arm as she reached down, down, down, casting her mind-net for the kind of monster that frightened other monsters.

Nath set sail for the south, and she stayed where she was, eyes closed, mentally searching.

They sailed for two days, a basket of food and water at their feet and the sun like a brand overhead. Nath slept sitting up. Briand lay with one cheek against the bottom of the boat, her mental net trailing through the water like snagged seaweed. She was exhausted. She'd found nothing in the great wide ocean.

What if they reached the islands, and she had nothing to fight with?

Far beneath their tiny boat, her mind hooked something.

Something ancient and cold.

The pain was exquisite. She bent over, gasping, and Nath dropped to her side.

“Dragonsayer!”

“I’m fine,” she gasped through gritted teeth as she held onto the thing far below. “I’ve found something.”

The something was intelligent enough to feel her intrusion. It rose rapidly, headed for sunlight. In the midst of that sunlight was a small, square shadow...

Her eyes widened.

“Hold on!” she shouted. “It’s surfacing!”

She wrenched the mind of the creature, turning it left. The beast fought her. A black fin the size of the boat broke the water, and Nath clutched his oar as if it could save him as the boat rocked and bobbed. The beast rushed beneath them, a hurtling black shadow, and then it dove again. Goose bumps rushed over Briand's skin as she rode into the deep and dark along with the beast in her mind, feeling the icy shock of the water as if she were swimming in it.

The beast made another circle, but she'd gotten a better grip on its mind. It made another shot toward the surface, still fighting.

This time, they saw a long, glossy back of wet, rubbery-looking skin along with the fin that was bigger than their boat. The spray of seawater drenched them both.

"Do you think it's going to sink us?" Nath shouted.

Briand shook her head.

"It's going to do exactly as I say."

And despite the headache clamping around her temples, she smiled.

~

The door to the dungeon boomed as it hit the wall. Three pirates strolled in, heading for their cell.

Kael's heart lifted briefly with hope. Had their ransom been paid?

No. No, it was too soon.

The pirates' faces held expressions of cruel anticipation.

It was not that, then.

They stopped before the cell and regarded weary, guarded Kael and delirious Jehn.

"Your prince," one said. "He looks ill."

The others snickered.

Kael didn't answer. He stayed in a crouch, watchful and wary.

One of the pirates unlocked the door and stepped inside. "Longbeard says you're too defiant," he said. "He sent us to fix that."

The pirate grabbed Kael by the shirt and hauled him up, and then he smashed his fist into Kael's face.

Kael's head snapped back, and then his training kicked in. He grabbed the man by the throat and slammed a knee into his groin. The pirate screamed.

The others rushed him, and Kael remembered what Longbeard had promised. If he fought back, would the pirate king take out Jehn's eye? He stopped fighting.

They threw him to the ground and drove their boots into his sides with kicks of rage. The one he'd kneed stumbled back to the door, bent over at the waist. When he lifted his head, the pirate's expression was pure rage. "Kill him."

One thought burned brightly as the sun in Kael's head.

Her.

He allowed himself a single moment of indulgence as he pictured her as she was the night they'd kissed in the garden in Tyyr, all warmth and fire and hungry desperation. He allowed himself to grieve, just a little. He allowed himself to think that this might be the moment that he died.

"Stop," a voice called across the dungeon.

The men's kicks paused. Kael lifted his head. Pain radiated from his ribs. Petunia stood in the doorway of the dungeon, outlined by the flickering light of the main hall braziers behind her.

"Stop, you stupid louts," she growled. "Longbeard has called for them."

Kael exhaled. He tasted blood on his tongue. He looked up at his attackers and smiled, slow and angry.

The pirates stepped back. One spat at Kael.

"Get them up," Petunia said as she strode toward the cell, eyes flashing like blades in the sun. When not drunk, she had a formidable presence. "Gently now. If you've killed either of them, you'll answer to Longbeard. If you've busted up the face of the pretty one, you'll answer to me."

Muttering but meek-faced, the pirates reached down and hoisted up Jehn and Kael.

Kael bit back a groan.

Jehn made no noise at all.

When they appeared before Longbeard, the pirate king stood with his hands clasped behind his back, facing his giant yellowed glass window. The peacocks pecked around his feet, and on the back of his chair perched a gray-furred creature with round, orange eyes and rings on its long, curling tail. It watched them as they stopped before the chair. Kael had one hand pressed to his injured side, and Jehn was carried between two of the pirates.

"Your ransom has come," the pirate king said, and paused. Delight flashed across his face, as if the next words he spoke gave him a fiendish pleasure.

“From a Nyrian ship.”

Jehn was still, no expression on his face at all as he absorbed the news, but Kael knew he was surprised.

“Surprised? I was, at first. Perhaps they think to buy you for themselves,” Longbeard said, turning around. He stepped to Jehn’s side and studied the prince’s face. “Or perhaps this is part of some complicated bid for an alliance. Or perhaps you’ve already got one with them. Ha. But I never had a head for politics when I was part of your Austrisian court, not like my father, poor man. It’s too much hot air, too much posturing and blabbing and speaking pleasantries while you sharpen the knife to plunge into your conversational partner’s back. I’ve always preferred the honesty of gold. It’s something you can—” He patted Jehn’s cheek. “—feel.”

Jehn moved only his eyes to look at the pirate king. His lips were pale.

“My,” the pirate king said. “You are as hot as a fire. You must be very ill.”

Still, Jehn said nothing.

“Prince Jehn,” the pirate king purred. “The true prince—isn’t that what your followers call you?”

Jehn opened his eyes enough to squint at the pirate king. “It’s what I am,” he said with raspy dignity.

The pirate king waved a hand. “I do not care either way. You princes come and go, and the loyalty of your nobility is just as fickle as the wind. Aren’t half of them with Cahan, their loyalty and support pledged to the man who forcibly seized the capital and had you imprisoned?”

Jehn didn’t answer.

Longbeard reached up to stroke his beard as if petting a cat. “That is why I like gold. It is real. It is powerful. Gold is what binds men to you, not loyalty.” His gaze fell on Kael. “For instance, I could buy your loyal dog here with the right price. Enough gold and every man will sell his mother into slavery. Especially an Austrisian noble.”

“You really believe that,” Jehn mused.

The pirate king smirked at him. “Oh come, don’t pretend. Every man has his price.” He looked at Kael. “What will it be? Ten thousand dubois?”

“You mock me with such an offer,” Kael said. He could still taste the blood on his tongue.

Longbeard sighed. “Shall we send the prince away? I wanted him to watch your betrayal.”

“My answer will stay the same,” Kael said.

“I had a dog once,” Longbeard said. He paced back to the window. “For the right scrap of meat, he let a mob of bullies beat me within an inch of my life. Every dog can be bought.” He looked back at Kael. “Twenty dubois.” “No,” Kael said.

Longbeard smiled. “Thirty thousand dubois.”

“The ransom came,” Kael said. “Let us go.”

A smile hovered at the pirate king’s lips. The kind of smile that promises something terrible. “Not so fast, Kael of Estria.” He returned to the yellow-paned window and clasped his hands behind his back once more.

“We’ve established that I love gold.”

He looked over his shoulder at them.

“Why accept one king’s ransom when you could have two?”

Kael and Jehn exchanged a glance.

“Look,” the pirate king said. “They’re almost here.”

Through the glass, Kael saw a line of dark shapes appear on the horizon.

Ships.

Austrisian ships, with Cahan’s flag fluttering at their masts.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

KAEL AND JEHN stood unmoving before the pirate king as Cahan's ships appeared in the distance behind him, visible through the window.

"Surprised?" Longbeard said. "I'm disappointed in you, Prince Jehn. You were always a clever one when I knew you. Surely, you saw this coming." Jehn studied him. He did not react to the ships. He did not say anything at all.

Longbeard's brows drew together in displeasure. "I see you are thinking. Searching to remember me. Does it bother you to be outsmarted? I'm sure it enrages you, though you pretend otherwise. You always hated to be wrong. You are trying to remember, aren't you? Ah, but you won't find my face in your memories, Jehn."

"Your beard is fake," Jehn said softly.

Longbeard laughed. His eyes widened, startled, but he covered it quickly.

"Not every man can grow a beard."

"Nor every woman," Jehn said.

When the pirate king spoke again, the voice coming from his mouth was different. Higher, more melodic. "Do you remember me now, Prince Jehn? What gave me away?"

"Well, I remembered the Tyrellese ambassador," Jehn said. "He had two daughters. No sons."

"No one remembers him," Longbeard snarled. "The man was practically invisible. Useless. Ignored by all. Those fat, lazy nobles mocked and abused him for his entire career, and they ostracized my sister and me. It has been my pleasure to take their fingers and their gold in memory of my father."

"Nia?" Jehn said. "The younger one. You were always angry."

"I had every reason to be," the pirate king snarled. She reached up and unhooked the fake beard, revealing a smooth chin and delicate mouth. Nia, one of the drunken women from the cell.

~

"Look," Nath said. "The islands." He pointed with his hand. "Maera and the others should be at the far end, the part that looks like a hook, according to her last mechbird. They'll meet us in the interior."

Briand didn't look. She lay in the bottom of the boat, concentrating too hard on dragging the sea beast beneath them to lift her head. It was fighting her hard. She groaned quietly and curled into a tighter ball.

"Dragonsayer," Nath said. He'd been saying that a lot. She wasn't sure if he was trying to admonish her to be careful or merely assure himself that she was not in the throes of death.

"Just hurry," she said in a quick whisper.

The sea creature thrashed beneath them.

She couldn't hold it much longer.

~

"Recognize me?" Nia-who-was-really-the-pirate-king asked with a playful arch of her brow. "It is useful sometimes to move among my men without their knowledge. I find out the most interesting things."

Jehn staggered where he stood. He was weak.

"He's sick," Kael said. "Please, let him lie down and rest."

"He can get on his knees if he's tired," Nia said. "He'll be on them soon enough when Cahan's men arrive to take him." Her lips parted in a fierce, angry smile. "These bluebloods," she said to no one in particular. "They would do anything for money. They had no loyalty. One of them murdered my father. He was merely an obstacle between them and a political deal."

She paused. He gaze flicked up and down over Kael. "I like you. Kael, was it? I've sold Jehn to the highest bidder, but there's no need for you to be given to Cahan. I could always say that I killed you. I've heard you're a good fighter, and you know much about the Seekers. That would be valuable to me. And you're handsome, as Petunia said. What could I offer you to entice you to leave your prince and change sides?"

"There is no such sum," Kael replied.

She smirked. "Not for ten thousand dubois?"

Kael smiled faintly. "No."

"Twenty?"

He was silent.

"Fifty thousand dubois. No. A hundred."

That was as much as Kael's father's personal fortune. His smile faltered at the thought of such a sum.

“Yes,” Longbeard—Nia—said. “One hundred thousand dubois. I could pay it with ease. I have more gold than you can fathom, either of you. I’m so wealthy I have castles all over the lower continent. I have an army of men. You think this dirty outpost is where I spend most of my time? No. This is for show. This is to frighten and torment the nobility I bring here. I have wealth beyond your wildest dreams.”

Still, Kael said nothing.

“Think of what you could do with that type of money,” Longbeard said. “Obviously, I’d give you sanctuary here. Whatever repercussions you might face for leaving your noble’s side would be dodged. With a fortune like that, you could buy a castle in Mammot or one of the lower warlords’ countries. There, you could be a prince. With that sum, you could build your own kingdom on your own island. You could go far, far away and start a new life. Perhaps find a lover and make her your island’s queen.” She winked at him. “No need to lick the boots of this prince. No need to be tortured to death in a cell for misguided loyalty’s sake. Your gamble isn’t going to pay off, Kael. You aren’t going to win this war. You and your prince are finished.”

For one brief second, Kael imagined it. If he sent for Briand, would she join him?

He knew that she would. This was not her war. She would not hesitate to leave it behind if she could bring the ones she loved with her.

He imagined her hand in his as they stood on the deck of a ship bound for somewhere else. Somewhere far away from Austrisia and the torments of war. He tasted the blood in his mouth and felt the pain in his ribs as he felt the imaginary sun on his face and surf spraying his skin.

Beside him, Jehn lifted an eyebrow with effort at Kael’s silence.

“No,” Kael said. The word fell from his lips and shattered the sudden quiet like a stone hitting glass.

“You refused fifty thousand?”

“I am not interested in betraying my prince.”

“No? When he was pretending to be you, he tried to betray you immediately. Told me to send a message via mechbird to a man you knew when you were serving the Seekers, a man by the name of Auberon. Said he’d pay handsomely for you, and we could split the money.”

“What?” Kael said quietly.

Longbeard rapped her knuckles against the yellow-paned window. “Indeed. He would have let you die for his own neck to be spared, although that’s what you are here for, isn’t it? That’s what we’re all here for. We’re here—body and soul—to serve them. That’s what they believe. Men and women only exist to build the road with their bodies for the princes and kings to walk upon. Your life, Kael of Estria, is nothing to your prince.”

Kael didn’t say anything to that.

The pirate king scowled, as if she’d thought she would have convinced him by now. Cahan’s men would be here soon.

“Sometimes a dog needs a stick instead of a scrap of meat.” Nia motioned to the pirates who had brought Kael and Jehn to him.

One of the men pushed Kael to his knees and held a knife to his throat.

“Fifty thousand, and your life,” Longbeard said. “As I said, I can always tell them you are dead.”

The blade bit into the skin of his neck. He felt the trickle of blood spill down his skin and seep into his collar.

On his knees, Kael looked through the yellowed glass of the window at the approaching ships. He saw the ships coming closer. They would be loaded with soldiers.

Nia smiled at Kael.

Jehn had remained silent.

“I could give you everything,” she said. “What do you choose, loyal dog? Death in service to the nobility? Or freedom?”

The knife dug deeper. Pain splintered down Kael’s neck and up into his jaw. The pirate holding the knife panted heavy in his ear, eager to spill his blood. Through the window, Kael saw a dark shadow moving through the water of the lagoon behind the ships. Jehn saw it too.

“I want to be free,” Kael panted through the pain of the knife.

Triumph bloomed across the pirate king’s face. She smiled wide and full as she held out a hand to stay the pirate’s actions.

“You see?” she said to Jehn. “Everyone can be bought.”

Jehn didn’t reply. He was breathing hard as if struggling to stay conscious. His eyes were focused on the ships.

The pirate holding Kael hauled him to his feet by one arm. Kael stood still as they unlocked his chains. He chafed his hands to get the blood flowing through them. He moved a little closer to the window, staring at the approaching ships. His heart beat fast. His pulse drummed. He turned his

head to look back at Jehn—just once—and the prince’s lips were pressed together as if it was taking all of his strength to stay standing.

“You’ve lost,” the pirate king crooned to Jehn. “Your most loyal dog has betrayed you just as you sought to betray him. Just as everyone in your court betrayed my father.”

“He was a good man, your father,” Jehn said suddenly.

Nia paused.

Jehn continued, “I remember him. He was kind, soft-spoken.”

“And he was murdered in the name of petty politics,” Nia hissed. “I will never stop enacting my revenge on the nobility of every country present at that court. Now, silence. Cahan’s soldiers are coming to take you away. Let me watch your fall; I want to savor it.”

“I’m sorry,” Jehn said.

“It’s too late to be sorry,” Nia growled.

“Not for your father’s death,” Jehn clarified. “I am sorry about that, although it had nothing to do with me. I was a boy. But I am sorry to ruin your enjoyment of my downfall.”

Nia turned to look at him, and he smiled. She whirled to the window.

That was when the water around the ships exploded.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BRIAND LET THE sea creature go as soon as she saw the ships. The beast saw the shadows and headed toward them like an arrow shot from a bow. She felt its rage and its joy. It wanted to break things. It wanted to stretch its jaws and lash its tail and cause mayhem and destruction.

It burst from the water and slammed into the belly of the nearest ship with a thunderous crack as Briand clutched the side of the boat, one hand pressed to her head, and Nath rowed frantically for a strip of tree-covered shoreline.

~

Kael leaped to Jehn's side, drawing the makeshift knife he'd made from the shards of broken slats in the water bucket he'd shattered earlier in a fit of pretend rage. He stabbed the pirate holding Jehn, and the man dropped to the floor with a cry of shock and pain. Kael yanked the man's sword from his belt and lunged to block the swing of another of the pirates as Nia screamed in rage.

"Kill him!" she bellowed.

Somewhere, a ship's bell clanged, the sound echoing through the halls of the building.

"What have you done?" the pirate king snarled to Jehn.

Kael cut left and right, parrying attacks. Jehn dropped to his knees without anyone to hold him up. His face was the color of ash.

Through the window, the water frothed and churned like a pot boiling over a fire. Tentacles snaked from the sea, wrapping around one of the ships.

A flood of hope sang through Kael's veins. Despite his wounds, his strikes were strong and sure.

She was here.

He knew it.

Whatever was in the sea had to have been called by her.

"Jehn!" Kael shouted, kicking the weapon of one of the fallen pirates toward his prince. Jehn grabbed the sword and crawled painfully toward the door. He reached the wall and sagged against it, his chest rising and falling. Sweat drenched his hair.

"I might faint," he told Kael.

“Stay awake!” Kael shouted back. His blade tangled with another pirate’s, and he brought his elbow up to smash it in the man’s eyes. “I’d rather not carry you out of here!”

“I apologize,” Jehn murmured, and then his eyes rolled back in his head. “Jehn!” Kael yelled.

He fought his way to Jehn and hoisted the unconscious prince up with one arm while he fended a pirate off with the other. Jehn sagged against him. Kael dragged his friend from the room, down the steps, still fighting the pirate attacking him. From somewhere below, he heard the sound of swords clanging. Another bell rang out, the clanging echoing in the great hall, and more shouts and the sound of running filled the air.

Kael’s sword pierced the pirate’s shoulder. He sagged back against the wall. Kael pulled Jehn through a doorway and slammed it shut. He locked the door and then looked around—they were in a vast storage room. Barrels and crates were stacked to the top of the cavernous ceiling on one side of the room, and a single, barred window looked over a forest of lush green on the other. The floor of stone was cracked, and gravel crunched under his feet. Three ruined cannons sat against one wall, rusted and broken.

“A powder room,” Jehn said faintly. “It’s perfect.”

“Maybe, if all goes according to plan,” Kael said. “I caught a glimpse of it the day they brought us here.” He craned his neck to look up at the cracked ceiling, stained with black powder and brown from water leakage.

The door shuddered as the man he’d wounded beat on the other side. A muffled voice shouted something that might have been a promise to dismember them.

Kael crossed to the window and tugged at the bars. They were solid and unyielding. Outside the window, the lagoon seethed and swirled as it swallowed the sinking ships. Pirates swarmed the docks, armed with swords and pistols. In the distance, a great gray beast lashed its tail at one of the ships. The deck cracked in two. The beast roared, and the sound was like the bellow of a giant’s trumpet. It echoed across the water.

She was here somewhere.

She’d come for them.

Briand had come.

Kael wanted to weep.

The powder room jutted out over part of the beach and the lagoon beyond. Kael could hear the sucking slap of waves at the pilings beneath the room

they stood in. He looked around, his mind ticking through scenarios. He returned to the prince's side and knelt.

"Jehn," he said, reaching down to slap the prince on the cheeks. "Jehn, open your eyes. I need you conscious."

Jehn's eyelids fluttered. His mouth curled in a ghost of a smile. "You were... very convincing," he murmured. "When you betrayed me. I almost believed you myself."

Kael lifted the prince into a sitting position. He grunted as pain flared along his broken ribs. "I would never betray you, sir. I would run myself through with a sword first. But I needed her to take the chains off my hands, and when I heard her say that you'd sent a message to Auberon, I knew you had set a plan in motion. I took a gamble."

"It was a good one," Jehn said over the thudding sounds on the door. It sounded as if the pirate was using more than his fists now.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Kael asked. He felt deeply tired. He'd been kept in the dark far too many times. He would never betray Jehn, never, but that offer from the pirate king had been too tempting for his comfort.

"I've been... sick," Jehn said slowly. He was starting to fatigue again, slipping into unconsciousness once more, each word wrung from him as if his tongue were made of stone. "I am sorry. The plan... was sloppy. I wasn't sure it would... succeed... It was developed on the fly."

"You sent word to her," Kael said. "The dragonsayer."

"That... was the plan, yes."

The door continued to shudder behind them. The wood began to splinter as the tip of a cutlass pierced through one of the boards.

Jehn was unconscious again.

Kael put both hands on Jehn's shoulders and shook him. "Jehn!"

The prince's eyes fluttered open. He pushed himself into a sitting position. Kael offered him a hand up, and together, they stood.

"And now," the prince panted, "what is your plan?"

Kael grinned at him in response. He returned to the other side of the room and searched the other barrels. More gunpowder.

Lots of it.

He removed the lid from one of the barrels of gunpowder and raised the barrel to his shoulder with a grunt. He poured a line of the gray powder all the way to the window. Then, he dumped the rest in a pile and stacked more of the powder kegs around it. His ribs ached as he lifted the heavy barrels.

The door shuddered and shook. The pirates were making progress.

"Kael," Jehn said urgently. He drew the weapon Kael had given him earlier.

"Find something to hide behind," Kael ordered. He wiped sweat from his forehead and crouched beside the end of the line of gunpowder.

He drew his sword and grabbed a piece of rock from the ground. He struck the rock against the blade of the sword, trying to make a spark.

Jehn limped to the farthest corner of the room and pressed himself behind a pile of crates after peeking inside to make sure they were not filled with more gunpowder.

The door cracked.

"I don't think I can promise you one hundred thousand dubois," Jehn called across the room.

"I've never been in this war for the money, sir," Kael said. He struck sparks from his blade. He held his breath and tried again, forcing himself to be calm, to strike sure and true.

Another strike. Stone kissed metal. Sparks sprayed, but did not catch.

The gunpowder lay on the ground, inert as sand.

Kael hissed a curse under his breath. He raised the stone to his lips, kissed it for luck, and whispered her name. May she bring him the fire he needed.

The door broke in half, the pieces clattering to the ground. Kael struck the stone against the sword.

More sparks flew from the rock against the sword and landed on gunpowder.

This time, they ignited it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BRIAND AND NATH reached the shallows of the island shore. Nath leaped from the boat and turned to help Briand onto the sand. She was half in the sea creature's mind, half in her own body. She stumbled and almost fell as the beast slammed its body into another ship. A cannon fired. The beast roared, the sound echoing through the air like thunder.

~

A hissing sound filled the air. Kael leaped to his feet, sword in hand, whirling to meet the first pirate that reached him.

Behind him, the flames raced along the trail of gunpowder toward the window.

“Take cover!” Kael shouted to Jehn, who sat white-faced and hunched against the wall with his weapon clutched in one hand and his wounded hand tucked under his other arm.

Jehn lifted his sword in response.

Kael fought his way back toward the door, driving back anyone who tried to stop the gunpowder. The nerves along his skin were screaming for him to run, run, RUN! before the blast.

He reached Jehn and threw himself against the wall over the prince, shielding Jehn with his body. His sword clattered to the ground.

The hissing sizzle of the gunpowder was as loud as a shout to his straining ears. More pirates streamed toward them, faces contorted in yells of rage, weapons raised.

Then

The gunpowder  
Exploded.

~

Two of the ships were sinking fast. Men were in the water, some swimming, some clinging to wreckage like ants. Briand saw the flutter of a silver cloak on the bow of the third ship.

Rage flared in her afresh. They'd come thinking they could collect Jehn and Kael as easily as plucking coins from a corpse.

They were dead wrong.

The sea beast whirled toward it and opened a mouth lined with rows and rows of teeth. The bow of the ship folded in half as the creature rammed it, mouth closing over the rail. It dove into the water, dragging the ship downward with a groan of straining wood and a crack like bones snapping.

The dragonsayer was angry.

She'd been angry for a long time.

~

Kael's ears were ringing. His back was blistered, and his hair smelled scorched. He grabbed his sword, hauled Jehn up, and turned toward the window.

The window was gone.

A ragged hole gaped in the side of the wall where the window and the gunpowder pile had been. Unconscious pirates lay scattered around the room wherever they'd been thrown by the blast. Debris burned in pieces around them, and black smoke hung in the air.

Kael and Jehn limped to the edge of the hole. Kael looked down at the water. He sheathed his sword and filled his lungs with a deep breath. Wind caught his face and whipped his hair into his eyes. He squinted against the sun, scanning the scene for her.

He would always look for her.

Always.

An explosion came from the ships out in the lagoon.

They were firing their cannons at the beast. The monster roared back, the sound making the walls around them quiver.

"Hang on," Kael said to Jehn.

And, still holding the prince, he jumped.

~

Briand stumbled over a root as she made her way back to the edge of the water. Twisted trees stood all around her, draped in vines, but she barely

saw them. She was in the mind of the beast as it decimated the ships in the harbor.

Nath hovered at her side, preventing her from plunging into the water in her inattentive state. She was only dimly aware of him.

The pain in her head was a roar. Blood dripped from her nose.

They would not take Kael.

She would not let them.

~

Kael hit the water and sank in a swarm of bubbles before he closed both arms around Jehn and kicked his way to the surface. The true prince gasped a breath as their heads broke to the surface. Kael spotted a shallow grove of mango trees and swam toward them, pulling Jehn after him like a sack of rocks. Jehn paddled weakly, but his eyes were beginning to close again. He was losing strength fast.

“Stay with me,” Kael called, and got a mouthful of salty water. “Don’t die on me now, Jehn.”

He reached the protruding roots of the trees and grabbed one. He was treading water and weakening quickly.

His foot found a ledge of stone underwater, and he dragged himself up onto the edge of the shore, still holding on to Jehn’s collar.

A hand clapped on Kael’s shoulder.

He drew his knife. The sword was too difficult to reach. He summoned enough strength to whirl with his dagger raised—

And found himself face-to-face with Nath.

“Kael,” his old friend crowed in delight. “I should’ve known that blast was your handiwork!”

Kael hauled himself out of the water with one arm and then turned back for the prince. Jehn coughed and sputtered as a wave splashed him in the face. He clung to Kael’s arm. Once on the ground, he lay breathing heavily.

“Your Grace,” Nath said, lowering his head in a short bow to Jehn.

“Where is she?” Kael gasped. There was no time for talk.

Nath pointed toward the edge of the mango tree island where the trees’ roots formed a knot above the sea water.

There, Briand stood with her eyes closed, both hands clenched into fists, hair streaming in the wind.

Something in Kael's chest caught and held tight even as the rest of the world continued to spin. He wanted to gasp. She was so beautiful, so powerful, standing there facing the ocean and the fight taking place over the water. The wind tugged at her scarlet cloak and her long red tunic and leggings. Even her boots were dyed a dark, bloody crimson. She was a fearsome, dazzling sight.

He was like a brand lit on fire.

Kael opened his mouth to call her name.

Before he had time to get out a single word, she turned.

~

Briand felt his presence behind her. Something inside her went still and calm as if all the loose and broken pieces that had been jangling around in her shattered soul had suddenly sucked together again. She turned and saw him standing there, battered and bruised, bleeding from cuts on his face, neck, and hands, his shirt stained with blotches of red and the wet fabric plastered to his muscled chest. He was looking at her the way a starving man looks at a feast. His gaze grabbed hers like a drowning man grabs an offered hand.

Kael.

The look in his eyes twisted her stomach in a knot.

She wanted to run to him. To twist her fingers in his hair. To cling to him to convince herself he was real and solid, not a dream. To never, ever let go. But she had unfinished work in the lagoon.

The wind whipped her hair and clothes and stung her eyes as she tightened her fists until they blanched white. The sea beast smashed the last remnants of the last ship, and she felt the sting of the collision across her chest and stomach as if she'd been slapped as it sank beneath the water. Her mind was half dark with underwater, half light with above as she wrenched her mind free from the beast's.

The sea creature let out a bone-shaking roar and plunged into the water, diving deep as it headed for open sea in a streak of rippling black shadow. Fins split the water like black knives, and then it was gone.

Kael and Jehn were safe from Cahan's clutches now, although they weren't the only enemies.

Her mind was her own again, although the feel of the sea on her skin lingered in the crevices of her thoughts, making them slick and swirling like battered seaweed in stormy waters as she took a step toward Kael.

His mouth formed a word.

“Take cover,” Nath shouted, diving to the ground as whizzes split the air with soft hisses of sound.

Arrows.

Briand stepped to the right, narrowly missing an arrow to the abdomen. Kael stood across from her, impervious to the pain raining around them. They were two hearts in the midst of a storm, but the ground beneath them was like the eye of the hurricane, cushioned from the maelstrom outside. She took a step. She stretched out her arm. Parted her lips to say his name. Something struck her hard in the ribs, and she stumbled and slipped on the wet roots, and then she fell backward into the water.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KAEL SCREAMED BRIAND'S name as she fell into the water with an arrow in her side. He lunged toward the water, but other hands grabbed him, pulling him back. A bearded man he didn't know struggled to restrain him. Kael threw the man off with an elbow to the face and ran to the edge of the water. Where was she?

He didn't see her.  
She couldn't swim.  
“Briand!”

The water was muddied and dark from the sea monster's churning. He couldn't see any sign of her.

Kael wrenched off his boots and dove in.

~

Briand sank like a stone, eyes open, the water far above her head like a strange, rippling ceiling. Sound came from above, muted and distorted. She saw the dark, twisted shape of the tree roots reaching down like tentacles into the mud. She saw darting shadows that must be fish fleeing from her slow-motion plummet. The water was deep here.

Pain radiated from her ribs. The arrow. She reached down to feel for it, every movement she made agonizingly slow, as if time were stretching and thinning like pulled taffy.

It must have only grazed her armored bodice. She didn't see blood in the water.

But it didn't matter right now.  
Not if she was going to drown.

Her lungs burned. She cast her powers out like a net, reaching for the mind of the sea creature to call him to catch her, but he had already surged into the open seas again. She could not get a grasp on his mind, and he shook her efforts off with ease. She reached farther, seeking something else, some fish or sea mammal that she could wrest into submission and come to scoop her from the depths.

There was nothing.

All the creatures had been driven away by the noise and fright of the battle above.

The pain in her lungs was suffocating. Urgency built through her veins. How long had it been? How long since the water had closed over her head? It felt like an eternity. Her body screamed silently with the need for air. Her blood begged her. Her vision darkened.

The water above her exploded with bubbles.

Someone had jumped in after her.

But the world was going dark.

~

Kael kicked for the surface, carrying Briand in his arms. He burst from the water, and hands grabbed them both and hauled them onto the land. He dropped to the sandy ground and laid her unconscious body down, bending over her. He cupped her face in his hands.

She didn't move. She didn't open her eyes.

He leaned down and pressed his mouth to hers, breathing air into her lungs. Desperation filled him. He couldn't speak. He worked over her, silent and focused.

He could not lose her.

Not now.

~

Auberon opened his eyes to the dungeon cell. Bars, straw, dank and stinking stones. His personal hell. He slept these odd hours to avoid the dragonsayer, for lords' sake—what else did he have to do to stay sane—?

The dungeon was silent.

He stilled. She was not sitting in her usual place against the wall.

Was she not here?

He rose, irritation and confusion mixing within him, seasoned with a pinch of panic.

Why was he here, if she was not?

He spotted her, lying on the stones beside the metal bars of the cell.

"Dragon girl!" he said, alarmed.

She didn't stir. She didn't move at all. Was she sleeping? Shouldn't she be with him in the dream?

He crossed to the bars in three strides. "Dragon girl!"

She was soaking. Her hair was plastered to her neck and face, dark and tangled. Water streamed from her dark red clothing.

Auberon fell on his knees beside her. "Briand," he gasped, her name burning like a confession on his tongue.

Her eyes were closed, her mouth a blue color.

He held his hand to her mouth, then his ear to her chest.

She wasn't breathing.

She.

Wasn't.

Breathing.

What happened? Where was she? How had this happened?

"Briand," he cried, reaching through the bars and shaking her shoulder.

"Briand!"

The dragonsayer did not respond.

Auberon hissed a curse. He grabbed the bars and shook them, shouting in rage. He needed to help her. He needed these cursed things gone.

Suddenly, they turned to mist in his hands.

Auberon didn't stop to wonder at it. He bent over her and pressed his mouth to hers. Her lips were clammy as he exhaled into her, begging her silently not to die as he gave her air to breathe.

If she were underwater somewhere, he would be her lungs.

~

The whole company stood frozen as Kael dropped to his knees with Briand's lifeless body in his arms. Nath ran forward, stopping just short of Kael as the man set her in the sand and worked to revive her. Maera approached, but she hung back. They all did. Silent, locked in collective terror even as the world fell apart around them. The explosion had caused a fire, and it was roaring across the rooftops of the pirate fortress and catching among the trees. Bells called an alarm, and armed men pounded down the beach in search of them.

But in the shade of the mango trees, no one spoke.

The dragonsayer wasn't moving.

“Kael,” Maera said finally. “We have to get moving.”

Kael did not look up. He did not answer her.

“Kael,” Maera said again.

Kael continued to work, his expression focused, his every movement precise. It was as if he did not hear her.

A buzzing filled Nath’s ears, muffling the bells ringing at the pirate fortress calling their enemies to arms, muffling the shouts of the others. Everything was silent but the slugging of his pulse in his throat and ears and the ringing of terror in his head.

~

Auberon drew back. He choked back a panicked cry at how pale and still she was. “Come on, dragon girl,” he ground out. “I know you have more fight in you than this. This won’t be the way you die. It won’t! Breathe!” He bent over her again and exhaled into her mouth.

And then, the dragonsayer was gone.

Auberon stayed still, kneeling, staring at the place where her body had been only moments before.

Had she revived?

Or had she died?

He stuffed a fist in his mouth to muffle the sound of his frustrated cry.

He wouldn’t know if she was dead or alive until he saw her again in dreams.

~

Maera’s expression was pain and regret. She turned to the others, all standing and watching helplessly.

“Load up the boat,” she said.

Nath heard her dimly through the buzzing in his ears.

“Please,” he heard Kael groan as he turned Briand’s face in his hands, then pressed his mouth to hers and breathed into her mouth again. Whether Kael spoke to Maera or Briand, he didn’t know.

“Come back to me, Catfoot,” Kael whispered. “Please, my love.”

The dragonsayer’s eyes fluttered.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

NATH GASPED IN relief as the dragonsayer coughed, turned her head, and vomited water. Kael's eyes slid closed for a second, and he murmured something under his breath as he helped the dragonsayer into a kneeling position, supporting her as she emptied her stomach onto the sand.

Nath sagged against of the mango trees. He was shaking all over. He wanted to vomit too.

Maera touched his arm. She had pulled the black cloth around her throat up over her nose and mouth, hiding her features. She pointed; the boat.

"Time to make our escape," she said. "Unless you would rather take on the entire pirate fortress."

Nath grinned at her. "As much as I'd like to give them a drubbing, I think we should take your way on this one." He crossed to where Kael and the dragonsayer were still huddled on the sand, both of them soaking and shivering. Kael had a hand on the dragonsayer's back, and she had her fingers curled around his wrist, as if they were both assuring themselves that the other were real, and not about to vanish like a ghost.

They rose at Nath's approach. Kael took one of Briand's arms and Nath the other, and together they helped her to the boat, where Prince Jehn had already been tucked into the bottom and wrapped in a blanket. Nath stripped off his shirt and draped it over the dragonsayer's shivering shoulders, and Kael nodded his thanks to Nath. Kael would have done so already, Nath saw, if his clothing was not as soaked as hers.

"Shove off," Maera said quietly, and the men with the oars pushed away from the bank and slipped down a side channel, away from the flames and the sinking ships and the shouts of furious, thwarted pirates.

~

They traveled through the channels that connected the maze of islands quickly and furtively, everyone in the boat silent as they listened for sounds of discovery or pursuit. Maera had covered the boat in foliage, and they crouched beneath the palm fronds and branches woven with vines, breathing in the sharp scent of sap and frond fibers and hearing the suck of the sea against the underside of the boat.

Briand sat in the bottom of the boat, beside the near-unconscious Jehn, with Nath's shirt around her shoulders and Kael's presence enveloping her even though he had returned to his reserved state as soon as they reached the boat. She could feel his attention on her like sunlight, like the heat of a fire. Every time his eyes fell upon her, a warmth unspooled within her. His glances were soft and deliberate as secret kisses. They burned her with exquisite fire.

This channel clearly was not often used by the pirates. Vines hung across the way, and several times, Maera had to take a large knife to them for the boat to pass. Twice, they had to get out of the boat and drag it across a spit of sand that made the channel untraversable. Kael carried Briand in his arms, and Nath and another man supported the prince, who made no noise at all except once when they jostled him on accident getting him back into the boat, and his injured hand hit the side. Jehn cried out, the sound like a wounded fox, and everyone paled. One of the men put a hand to his eyes as if he might be sick. Everyone was stricken to see their prince in such a state. But then Jehn opened his eyes a crack, summoned a smile, and ground his teeth together so hard that his jaw flexed visibly. Maera stepped to his side. "My prince," she began. "We can stop and let you rest if you need. There is a doctor on the ship. He's brought herbs and medicines. Something for the pain—"

"Then," Jehn said with a pained quirk of his eyebrows, "let us get there quickly. I shall survive in the meantime. Treat me as any other soldier." Maera's mouth curled in a smile in return. "Your Grace," she said, which was clearly a polite no to treating him like any other soldier.

Briand curled into Kael, clinging to his shirt, eyes closed as she inhaled the scent of him and felt the thud of his heart against her ear. She wouldn't think about the future, not yet. She would stay here as long as possible, soaking in this place of safety.

When they were back in the boat, Kael carefully set her down, asked her if she were all right, and then, at her nod, stepped back and resumed his distance. But he was always attending to her, and she never felt alone. The boat felt immaterial, the others merely shadows. It was just Kael and her, the distance between them like fire instead of air, their glances like kisses, their wordless silence a whole conversation. She only looked at him twice, but she felt even that was giving away too much of her feelings. Every exhale from his mouth sent a ripple across her skin.

She had never felt so alive.

Her throat and lungs ached from her near-drowning, and her stomach felt uneasy and tender. A vague memory, like a dream, hung at the back of her mind—Auberon, bending over her and screaming her name, Auberon breathing air into her mouth, Auberon frantic and pleading.

She blinked, a line forming between her brows. When she tried to remember more, the memory came apart in her mind like mist.

“Not much farther,” Maera said, slicing another vine that stretched across their path. Her voice was muffled from the cloth she still wore across her nose and mouth. It was dark now, the channel coated in shadows, but they lit no lantern. Maera guided them on instinct and memory alone.

Moths and mosquitos buzzed around them in the muggy air. Nath swatted and cursed. Kael sat silent, occasionally catching an offending insect in his fist before tossing it into the water. Jehn, eyes closed, breathed shallowly at his place in the bottom of the boat. He kept his injured hand, wrapped in blood-soaked cloth, tucked protectively against his chest. He muttered something once, barely above a whisper, and Kael moved to put his ear to the prince’s lips.

Briand looked away. She drew a breath into her burning throat and released it. She had once come to see Jehn as a friend, and then she hated him for what he’d done to her and Kael. Seeing him like this filled her with conflict. Almost sorrow.

Almost.

Finally, mercifully, the channel opened up onto a tiny lagoon. The sound of waves crashing in the distance met their straining ears, and there, moored at the edge of the island, a ship.

~

Once on board, Briand was taken to a cabin, given clean and dry clothing, and wrapped tightly in thick blankets and put in a bunk.

“Victims of drowning,” said the physician who attended to her care, “must stay warm. It revives the blood and gets the humors flowing again.” He produced a pipe and tobacco. “If you were still unconscious,” he said, “we would administer this via enema. It’s how they treat drowning victims in Mammot, you know. Very effective.”

Briand drew the covers tighter around her legs. “I am quite revived,” she said.

The physician left her with instructions to rest and eat. When he’d gone, Nath came in to see her. He sat on the edge of the bunk, and for a moment, Briand thought she saw a shimmer of a tear in his eyes.

Then, he opened his mouth.

“That was the most infuriating thing I’ve ever seen,” he snarled, jabbing a finger at her face. “You could have died, dragonsayer, and for what? For the want of swimming instruction!”

Briand sat still and held her face in neutral. She wanted to smile, but she didn’t. She let him rage; he clearly needed to air a few of his emotions.

“As soon as we return to Gillspin,” Nath declared, “you are learning to swim! The moment we reach the city. No thief-queen duties first. No greeting those blasted dracules. Nothing. Immediate lessons.”

Briand found it harder and harder not to smile. She frowned instead.

Nath saw her expression and doubled down. “I know you are frightened of water, dragonsayer, but I absolutely will allow no argument on the subject. It will be your next step in your education. I’m sure everyone else will agree with me. There is not a single justification for your continuing in ignorance on such an important—”

“All right,” Briand said.

Nath paused. “Yes?”

“Yes. You are right. I need to learn.” She took a breath and let it out. “So you are returning with me?”

He stared at her a moment. “My place is at your side, dragonsayer. We have not yet established you as a legend across the upper half of Austrisia.

Besides, your Tyrian is still atrocious, and you need to learn to speak and read Nyrese. You need a tutor for this instruction, and I’ll accept absolutely no argument to the contrary.”

“I will give you none,” Briand said gravely, still fighting her smile. She was deeply relieved that Nath was not going to part ways with her here. “You’re right. My Tyrian is atrocious, and I don’t know a word of Nyrese.”

“Are you mocking me?” Nath demanded.

“Old friend,” Briand said, still fighting that smile. “I promise I am not.”

He drew back, his expression suspicious. “And you will learn to swim?”

“I will,” she promised. “Even if I half drown in the process.”

They paused a moment, studying each other.

“And your dancing skills—” Nath began.

“No.”

Nath jabbed another finger at her. “You move like an elephant. Dancing will improve fighting, not to mention it is an excellent way to converse with men in your inevitable intrigues you’re going to encounter as a queen of thieves. They are all connected.”

“I’m not a noblewoman to mince and preen at court and please all the powdered gentlemen. I’m a blasted thief-queen! I sit on a throne of barrels; I have a court of rags! I will let my knife do my conversing. Thieves do not have balls and parties, Nath. It’s Gillspin, not Tasglorn. Half the city has lice and chlamydia.”

“It shall be a court of silk when I’m through with it,” Nath snapped. “There shall be balls. And blasted dinners with fine plates and candelabras.”

“I’d like to see you try!”

They both paused, panting, and then Nath seized her hand.

“Dragonsayer,” he said fervently. “I am very glad you did not drown today.” She squeezed his fingers. “I am too.”

Nath dropped her hand, resuming his scowl. “Now, about this court of rags business...”

~

Kael stood at Jehn’s bedside in the captain’s cabin while the physicians Maera had brought—the Austrisian court physician as well as one from Nyr—hovered over him, administering herbal mixtures, tinctures, and medicines. Jehn lay unmoving on the bed, his lips and cheeks colorless, his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. He had been given opium for the pain, and now he lingered in a near-sleep. His eyes, when he opened them, were dark and unfocused.

The physicians unwrapped the bloodied bandages, then cleaned and examined Jehn’s wound, muttering to each other as they parsed the torn and bloodied flesh and the nub of finger left behind. The Nyrian physician spoke to himself in Nyrese as he pressed on the wrist and moved the other fingers. Jehn made a soft noise of pain, and the doctor paused.

“Is this his dominant hand?” the Nyrian physician asked Kael in perfect Austrisian. He had no trace of an accent.

Kael stirred. “It is not. He uses the other for writing.”

“It’s good it is his index finger that was lost, then,” the Nyrian said. “Losing the littler ones would make it impossible for him to do many tasks. Finger amputation is quite common in the outer islands of Nyr, and I have made a study of its effects. This is why the queen sent me.” He turned the hand over, studying the injury from another angle.

“What will be the effects of the amputation?” Kael asked quietly, cutting his gaze to Jehn’s face. The prince had closed his eyes and appeared to be sleeping, but of course, with Jehn, appearances were usually deceiving. “His outcome is promising if he overcomes his infection,” the physician said. “Though he will always have pain in this hand, I fear.”

Kael looked down at the pale face of his prince. His chest swelled with emotion—gratitude, regret, anger, sorrow.

Jehn had taken this injury for him.

Even if he had not been loyal before, his heart would be sealed to the prince’s service now.

The physicians resumed their work, and Kael left the room, searching for the other person who occupied his thoughts this night.

Briand.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BRIAND DOZED IN her bed, wrapped tightly in the warm blankets the physician had prescribed. Nath left her alone after another long lecture about the benefits of refinement and good manners (a lecture she ignored), and now her mind raced over her memories of the day and over what the future held.

Someone brought food, and she ate, washing the taste of the sea from her mouth with fruit, bread, and fragrant tea.

Then, she pushed back the blankets, pulled on the cloak that someone had brought when they'd taken her clothes to be dried—Briand was wearing some of Maera's clothes, she supposed, the cut of the bodice was rather low—and then she went out into the warm wind of the deck.

Stars glittered above her. The sky above the sea was a deep purple-blue, shimmering above the water like a curtain dusted with diamonds. Briand inhaled the warm, salt-scented wind and closed her eyes, letting herself relax to the sound of waves hitting the hull as she stood at the rail.

She felt his presence before he spoke. She didn't open her eyes, not yet. A shiver of anticipation ran down her spine, accompanied by a shiver of fear. She wasn't sure what he was going to say. She wanted one more moment of uncertainty in which it was what she wanted to hear.

"Catfoot," he said.

She turned toward him like she was a compass and he north. When she opened her eyes, he was studying her with such naked longing that she lost her breath.

"Kael," she said, and then he crossed the space between them and swept her into his arms. She pressed her face to his neck, and he buried his in her hair. She could feel the drumming of his heart against hers. Two hearts, beating against each other wildly. His fingers were like fire against her back, her neck. She brushed hers across his shoulders, feeling him tense and relax in turn at her touch. She drew back a little to see his face again, and he was breathing hard, his gaze fixed on her with perfect attention.

"You came for us," he said.

"Of course." It had never even been a question. Not once. She moved her hands to cup the sides of his face, and he sighed.

"You saved me," she said.

“Of course,” he whispered, touching his forehead to hers. She closed the space between them with a kiss. She was dizzy, falling into fire, breathing him in desperately. His hands knotted in her hair, and he pushed her against the rail and kissed her back, and then—

Then, he wrenched himself away.

“Forgive me,” he said, his voice thick with pain. “I cannot. I cannot—” She let go of him and stepped back, breathing hard, her pulse racing and her thoughts wheeling.

“You are still going to marry Lady Valora?”

Kael turned to face her. His eyes glittered with agony. “I will obey the orders of my prince.”

She reached out and touched his face again, just once. Then, she turned and went to find Nath without another word.

“Briand,” Kael said, the word a low utterance of agony.

“Don’t,” she said, and left him behind in the darkness.

She headed toward her cabin, almost running into the figure sitting on a barrel in the dark. Starlight illuminated a straight nose, long forehead, and a chin covered in several weeks’ worth of unprincely stubble.

“Hello, Briand,” Jahn said quietly.

She halted. She touched the knife at her belt out of habit. Anger burned in her blood. A thousand words filled her mouth, but she held them back as a player would. She ought to be calm, deliberate. That is what a queen would do, she thought. And she was a queen now.

A queen of thieves and guttersnipes, vagabonds and beggars.

Perhaps a thief-queen would not be quite so calm.

“What are you doing out here? You should be in bed, recovering. You’re half dead, and a lot of people have just risked their lives to make sure you kept yours, myself included.”

“Thank you,” he said, turning his head to look at her. “For your role in my rescue. It will not be forgotten.”

He spoke as if he were trying to conserve his energy. The bandage on his left hand was a point of uncomfortable white in the darkness, and she kept looking at it and then away.

“I don’t want your gratitude,” she snarled. The memory of Kael’s kiss was still on her lips, and the memory of his torment was still fresh in her mind. She wanted to throw her knife and see it quivering an inch from his face.

She wanted to see his eyes widen, his thoughts turn as he realized she could kill him now, and then she wanted to see him be afraid.

"I've missed our conversations over Dubbok," Jehn said into the silence.

"You snake," Briand hissed back. "Every word you speak is a lie. You haven't missed me. You've missed the loss of your pet dragonsayer."

She saw him wince even in the darkness. "I did say I enjoyed your frankness, didn't I?"

Wrath built in Briand, bottling in her throat. Again she saw Kael in her mind's eye, standing at the rail, filled with pain and yet held firm by his unshakeable loyalty. She moved a step closer. "Then let me be frank. I'm glad it was your hand and not Kael's. I'm surprised you didn't tell the pirates he was the prince, so you could let them take his finger instead. You've taken everything else from him."

Jehn didn't say anything.

"In one of our conversations that you claim to miss so much, you said you don't seek to cost your friends their lives if you can help it. Don't you see? You're killing him. Not physically, maybe, but you've stripped him of everything. You treat him like a dog, and he will let you carve the heart straight from his body before he disobeys you."

"Briand—" Jehn began.

"Do not call me by my name," she snarled. "You may address me as dragonsayer, or queen."

One of his eyebrows lifted.

"Didn't you know yet? I've gained a ragged throne."

With that, she left him and stalked into the darkness to find Nath.

They left the ship in the middle of the night, setting out in their smaller boat, heading for the Estrian coast. Briand, wearing her own still-damp clothing once more, wrapped in a cloak to stay warm against a wind that had suddenly turned chilly.

Nath did not say anything. He saw the pain in her silence and respected it. They caught an easterly wind and made quick progress toward the coast.

~

Kael stood at the bow of the ship, watching Briand and Nath slip away. He bowed his head against the pain that filled him as he watched her leave. His

hands curled into fists as dawn broke across the horizon, staining the water with gold, filling the frigid air with threads of brilliance.

He stayed that way until she and Nath had vanished, and the sea was empty before him once more, and then he turned with purpose.

He had words to speak to Jehn. Words he could no longer keep silent.

But before he reached the prince's cabin, a shout rang out. Kael stopped, his hand on the door.

It was just a whale surfacing in the distance.

Kael went inside and found the prince sitting up in his bed, the covers swirled around him like frozen waves. Jehn looked small and fragile there. His bandaged hand lay on the bed, and Kael looked at it. His heart felt heavy as a stone.

"What is it?" the prince asked in the dazed voice of one just roused from sleep. His eyes were still glazed with the misery of fever; his hair was damp with sweat. "Is it pirates?"

Kael was not entirely sure if Jehn were even awake.

"It was only a whale, Your Grace," he reported.

The ship creaked as it pitched and rolled over the uneven sea. Jehn remained upright, his uninjured hand knotted in the covers. He was breathing fast, and when Kael stepped to his side, the prince recoiled as if fearful for his life.

Kael stilled, his hand outstretched. Jehn focused on it, his breathing labored, his eyes flicking back and forth from Kael's hand to the door as if expecting someone to come barging through with a sword.

"Please don't," he hissed. "Don't cut it off. Please."

"My prince—" Kael said softly. He'd seen this before, in soldiers who came back from battle. Battle sickness, some called it. Like quicksand, the memories trapped men and women and overwhelmed them in terror. Nath had it from his time as a slave to the Seekers.

Something in the shadows of the room tipped over as the ship slid down a wave, and Jehn jerked in fear.

"Please," Jehn begged. Tears filled his eyes. "I am so full of nightmares, and they are clawing to get out."

Kael found the vial of opiates that the physician had given Jehn for the pain. He gave the prince a sip, and Jehn allowed Kael to ease him back on the pillows and pull the covers back over him. His breathing slowed, and Kael left the prince to sleep, his words yet unspoken.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

KAEL STOOD RIGIDLY at the rail of the ship as they grew close to the coast of Nyr, staring at the lush green coast and the towering, pillar-like mountains swathed in clouds, his jaw tight with emotions held tightly in check. Waterfalls poured from one of the rock faces like salt from between a man's cupped hands, the mist enveloping the ship and spraying across the deck, and the sight of it brought back memories of the last time Kael had visited the country, on a mission for Jehn to secure an alliance with the queen. He'd promised her a staggering sum in exchange for her aid, and that sum had been obtained with the dragonsayer's help as they stole jewels from the dragon-guarded caverns in Sythra.

Thinking of the dragonsayer brought pain. He pulled his mind back to the present, though the taste of dust and fire remained at the edges of his consciousness, along with the memories of the darkness of those cavernous tunnels.

Jehn, well enough to emerge from his cabin but still wasted and weak, stood beside Kael on unsteady legs as the ship approached the island. Kael was watchful of the prince's strength, but he granted Jehn the dignity of at least the illusion that he was well enough not to be hovered over. Two servants lingered in the background, ready to rush forward at the slightest sway on Jehn's part, and Kael checked them with a sharp glance. They remained at a distance like anxious parents watching a child toddle for the first time.

Jehn noticed them, surely, because he noticed everything. But he didn't say anything. The illusion was for the others on the ship, perhaps, but Kael maintained it all the same.

Together, Kael and the prince watched Nyr grow closer and closer. The sharp, pointed rooftops of the capital city became visible, their rust-colored shingles glowing bronze in the sunlight. In the distance above them, the palace stood, a maze of walls and terraces that mimicked the paddies that farmers used to grow crops in the southern parts of the island. Silk banners fluttered in the wind. The palace rooftops rose to points, like spearheads. The visual effect was stunning—and ominous.

A knot formed in Kael's chest.

"Lovely, deadly Nyr," Jehn said with a soft sigh. "I used to dream of it as a child over and over. I was certain I would be happier here than in stifling

Tasna.”

“I don’t remember you mentioning that,” Kael said.

Jehn shook his head. “I do not dwell on impossibilities. There was no sense in wishing I’d been born a different prince.”

Kael studied the approaching coast. “You could have married into the Nyrian monarchy if you chose to.”

Jehn turned to look at him, an eyebrow lifted as if Kael had suggested he marry a dolphin from the sea below their feet. “Nyr is not powerful or strategic enough to justify such an alliance. Had Cahan not stolen the throne and butchered his way through the nobility of Tasglorn before my coronation, perhaps I might have considered such an indulgence. But no.” Kael remained silent.

Jehn leaned on the rail. Spray from the sea misted his face and made his forehead shine. “You think me cold.”

“Sir,” Kael said carefully.

Jehn made a noise in the back of his throat. “Forgive me,” he said. “We have already traveled this conversational route too many times, and it has never been fruitful even when we were both well-rested and in the best of health. I don’t know why I returned to it—like a dog to a buried bone.” His mouth turned up at one corner in a rueful, self-loathing smile. “The court has already arrived, I am told.”

“Yes,” Kael said, thinking of those who waited for him here, and those who did not. He’d spoken privately with Maera earlier, who had told him that the rest of the court had reached the Nyrian shores around the same time that she’d rescued them from the pirate king. His father, his brother... Valora. He pressed his lips together in a firm line. He had laid awake late into the night these last three days of the journey, thinking. Planning. Arguing with himself.

He was exhausted.

He looked at Jehn, who disguised a wince as he lifted his bandaged hand to the rail. “How is your pain, sir?”

“Manageable, with opium,” Jehn said, moving his bandaged hand a little as he spoke. “But I need my head clear for this.”

“Your Grace—” Kael began.

Jehn flinched at the title. He made a swift motion with his hand. “Please. Kael. Please.” His voice was weary.

Kael ground his teeth together. He looked back at Nyr.

“Jehn,” he said. “You lost your finger for me.”

“Yes,” Jehn said. “You have given many things for my sake. It was my supreme pleasure to do the same for you, and it always will be. I shall never regret it. And I don’t want to speak of it again.”

“Sir,” Kael said in acknowledgment of the order.

Jehn’s face softened as he gazed at Nyr. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Beautiful and deadly. Like their famous carrau snake for which the queen’s dynasty is named. The serpent queen, they call her.”

He seemed melancholy today, Kael thought.

The ship reached the harbor and docked. Maera joined them on the deck. She was dressed like a lady now, in a gown of crushed blue velvet and a hat with a silk net that shaded her eyes. She laid her gloved hands on the rail.

“Do the Nyrians welcome us, Your Grace?” she asked. “Or just their queen?”

“Not everything she does is popular,” Jehn said. “At least, not yet.”

Kael and Maera both looked at him, but Jehn did not elaborate.

One of his plans?

Kael did not ask.

A small crowd of Austrisians and a few Nyrian dignitaries awaited them at the dock. Maera and Kael went first, with Jehn following behind, walking slowly with his wounded hand clutched to his chest.

At the bottom of the ramp waited Lady Valora. She stood with her back straight and her chin up, as if ready for battle. As if bracing herself. Beside her stood his brother, Jacob, and Kael did not miss the possessive way Jacob seemed to occupy the space beside Valora. As if he felt some unconscious need to defend her.

They had done something.

The money from Nyr?

Kael understood in a flash that whatever they had negotiated, it must have been costly. He knew Jehn must too.

Valora’s gaze, steady and intense, pierced Kael as he grew close. She exhaled as if she had been waiting to see him in person to believe he was truly not dead. Something else lingered in her eyes, an uncertainty that Kael couldn’t decipher, and every inch of her seemed to strain, as if she was holding a hurricane inside her skin.

She reached out a hand to him, and he bent to kiss it. His lips brushed the skin on the back of her hand, smooth and smelling of scented oil, and Kael

saw a lifetime unfold before him, days and years unspooling in a thousand tiny flashes in his mind's eye. A question was asked with the gesture. He felt her hand tremble in his. He answered her with his kiss.

When he raised his head again to look at her, she nodded to him, and he relaxed slightly, enough to ease the tension in his shoulders.

Beside her, Jacob stood as if he half wanted to clasp hands with Kael too, but could not bring himself to breach the distance between them to do so. The familiar chasm between them was an ache this time.

Kael turned to help Jehn off the gangplank when the prince reached the end. The prince was breathing hard from the short walk, but he stood tall as if he was not in pain.

Valora took in the sight of Jehn with a quick rise and fall of her chest, a thinning of her lips, as if she were gathering strength, as if the sight of the true prince in such a state was almost too much for her to bear.

"Lady Valora," Jehn said gravely. "Jacob Halescorn."

They bowed in response. Valora, Kael noticed, was biting the corner of her lip. Jacob's jaw flexed as he glanced at the prince and then at Kael.

Jehn's eyes narrowed slightly. "Shall we speak in private? I have the feeling you have something you want to tell me."

"Yes," Valora said. "That would be a good idea, I think."

Then the Nyrians swept to his side and bowed deeply, cutting off any further conversation between them. The Nyrians wore silk robes draped cunningly around their bodies and held in place with jeweled brooches and pins. Both the men and women were painted with eye kohl and lip tints. Gold seemed to be the favored color, although some of the dignitaries had lips of dark purple or even black.

"Welcome, Esteemed Excellency," the dignitary who appeared to be in charge of the receiving party said to Jehn. He spoke in smoothed, honeyed tones in Nyrese. A slender, dark-eyed girl in pale pink robes of silk translated his words into Austrisian. "I am Noor Sannu, and I will oversee your welcome to our fair land and introduce you to where you and your court will be staying. Our sun and moon, the queen, sends her greetings to you. She is meeting with members of the northern island territories on the far side of the island, but she looks forward to sharing sya with you when she returns."

Kael knew enough about Nyr to understand that sharing sya was an intimate tradition. One performed between family members.

Jehn frowned thoughtfully at the mention of sya.

The dignitary spoke again, looking to one of the other dignitaries as he did. The man flashed his teeth in a polite smile.

The translator bowed again. Her cheeks flushed faintly. "We have the queen's personal physician standing by to treat you," she translated. "If you will please come with us, we will show you to your apartments."

"Thank you," Jehn responded somberly. He looked at Kael, who raised an eyebrow but otherwise gave no indication of what he was thinking.

The Nyrian dignitaries paused to allow Jehn to walk first beside Noor Sannu. The head dignitary walked slowly to accommodate Jehn's fragility, and the man had no expression on his face to betray his emotions, whether they were impatience or not.

At the end of the dock, a wooden box mounted on poles waited for him, with shirtless, strong men standing by to carry it.

"Please," the translator translated for Noor Sannu, indicating that Jehn climb inside.

"What is this?" Jehn said to Noor.

Kael knew that Jehn knew exactly what it was. He was painting a perception with this dignitary.

"A royal method of conveyance, for your honor, Esteemed Excellency," Noor said after the girl translated the question.

Again, the girl turned a little pink as she translated back.

"Ah. Thank you," Jehn said, and climbed inside.

~

At the palace, the Nyrian welcoming party ushered Jehn and the others to the guest chambers that had been reserved for the prince amid an entire wing of the palace that, the translator informed them, was given over to the Austrisian court. "Unlike your stay in Tyyr," the translator explained, "here you will live among the Nyrian nobility."

The whole procession moved slowly, though Jehn made no indication of pain, and one who did not know him might think he was merely the type to stroll leisurely. Noor Sannu kept up a stream of comments that the translator rushed to interpret for Jehn, her voice soft as she reported idle pleasantries and inquiries about the trip, as if Jehn and Kael had just returned from a leisurely pleasure cruise. Jehn smiled wanly and answered in bland but

polite responses. Once or twice, Noor Sannu smirked when he thought no one was watching. They were joined at the door by Lord Halescorn and Lady Alana—the lord pressed his lips together as if furious about something, the latter turned white at the sight of Jehn’s gaunt face and bandaged hand. But they both only greeted the prince in front of the Nyrians as if seeing him after a long and uneventful journey. Kael and his father exchanged words as if they were virtual strangers. As if Lord Halescorn’s son had not been imprisoned and under threat of death only days earlier. And nearly anyone might have missed the way Lord Halescorn trembled as he bowed to his son as if suppressing some deep and unexpressed emotion, or the way that Kael masked a look of naked vulnerability when he faced his father.

The chambers were luxurious, with golden columns, patterned carpets that muffled the footsteps of the party, and draperies of scratchy, stiff silk that hung down from the ceiling and provided partitions for the various parts of the room. Round, overstuffed pillows were piled about the room, and a large bed lay on a low marble frame against one wall with screens framing it and a wall of splashing water that streamed behind the bed, making a soothing, constant murmur of sound. A fountain splashed in the center of the apartments, and fish swam a slow circle around it, their undulating bodies striped white and gold, mouths puckered.

“We will take our leave of you now,” the translator said for Noor Sannu. “Our illustrious queen’s personal physician will attend you shortly. If you have any needs at all, pull the red cord there—” She gestured at a silk rope hanging beside the bed. “And a servant will appear and grant whatever you desire.”

Bowing, the Nyrians departed.

As soon as they were alone, Jehn sank onto the nearest cushion. His features tightened with undisguised pain. Kael strode to the red cord.

“I will call the physician—”

“Wait,” Jehn said, lifting his good hand. He looked at Jacob and Valora, who stood anxiously beside the fountain, then at Lady Alanna and Lord Halescorn waiting behind them. “Would someone like to tell me,” Jehn said tightly, “why the Nyrian dignitary has been referring to me for the last five minutes as a *kanoosa*? ”

“The word means,” Kael explained for those present who did not know Nyrese, “roughly translated, ‘concubine-bitch.’ ”

Lady Alana scowled at this, and Lord Halescorn looked thunderous.

“His disrespect will not be tolerated—”

“Yes, yes,” Jehn said dismissively. “We are all incensed and shall see him flogged. But later. Now...” He leveled his gaze at Valora. “Talk.”

“Well,” Valora began. She knit her hands together nervously. “We did not have the funds to secure your ransom—not in time. We appealed to the Tyrian ruler, and we were denied. They did not want to pay such a vast sum. There was no advantage in it to them, and our goodwill there has been strained anyway since the assassination attempts threatened their ruler. The council was in turmoil over what to do, and we were running out of time. So, Jacob and I sent word to the queen of Nyr and... brokered an arrangement in exchange for her paying your ransom.”

“An arrangement,” Jehn repeated.

Valora paled. “My prince—”

“It was the only way to save you, Your Highness,” Jacob interrupted. “And I know you’ve already put all the pieces together in your head—”

“Let us bring everyone in the room into the know, shall we?” Jehn said coolly.

Jacob swallowed.

Kael was not used to his braggadocios brother looking so small, so cowed. But Jehn was glowering like a god of justice at the moment, despite his fragile health.

Valora’s eyes slid closed as she spoke. “A... a marriage. A marriage between you and the queen of Nyr.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

LADY ALANA AND Lord Halescorn audibly gasped at Valora's words. Kael cut a glance at Jehn, whose face was impassive. The prince had known, somehow. No doubt he'd guessed it from the Nyrians' careless, rather revealing comments.

Valora and Jacob stood unmoving, as if they expected to be executed for their actions. Valora was pale but resolute, and Jacob's hands opened and closed at his sides. His left eye twitched, and his mouth couldn't decide if it wanted to grimace or nervously smirk.

Jehn looked down at his bandaged hand, thinking.

"And I assume the Nyrian queen agreed to consequences if this agreement was not honored?"

Jacob spoke. "She keeps all of the 'inducement to join forces with you,' as she put it, and she removes herself as your ally."

Jehn shut his eyes. A line formed between his eyebrows. A muscle in his cheek tightened.

"And," Valora finished, "she gives her alliance to Bestane and Cahan instead."

Jehn nodded. His eyes opened again and fixed on Lord Halescorn and Lady Alana. "Let us not have a word of this reaching the rest of the court yet," he said. "I will announce the decision soon, until then, it is as if you know nothing."

They both nodded and bowed.

"Thank you both," Jehn said.

A dismissal.

After the lord and lady left, Jehn did not speak for a moment. He tipped his head back and gazed at the ceiling, which was painted in swirling blues and golds to look like the sky. Winged men and women with fanged teeth swooped across the clouded painting, carrying lightning bolts. Valora and Jacob remained, standing uncomfortably beside the splashing fountain.

Kael pulled the red cord, and a servant slipped into the room and bowed.

"The queen's physician," Kael said crisply. "Find him. The prince is in great pain."

The servant vanished as silently as he'd come.

Jehn pulled a vial from his tunic and held it aloft. "I am not entirely unarmed," he said, a smile touching his lips as he uncorked the small bottle. He took a large swallow of the contents and tipped his head back again. "Your Highness—" Valora began.

Jehn didn't take his eyes from the ceiling. "No," he said drowsily. "Let me think first before you begin your apologies."

Valora's lips thinned.

Jehn muttered to himself quietly. His eyes moved back and forth as if he could track secrets in the painting on the ceiling, and then he shut them, but movements still twitched beneath his eyelids.

"I'm not," Valora said suddenly.

Jehn opened his eyes again. "What?"

"I'm not going to apologize," the lady said. She took a few steps toward him. "You are my prince, yes, but I—we—saved your life and my betrothed's life. We took action and did what needed to be done. I'm not sorry, though the cost is high."

"High indeed," Jehn said. "Your little stunt may have cost us the war."

"If you had died," Valora persisted, "what then? There'd be no clever machinations to save us, no matter what. We are not Monarchists without a monarch. Without you, there is no one to put on the Austrisian throne. Without you, we are finished."

Jehn stared at her, but his gaze grew remote. As if he had stopped seeing her. As if he were thinking of something new, something that held his full attention in its grasp. "Yes," he said absently. "Yes, it's true."

Valora, Jacob, and Kael exchanged confused looks.

"I thought you might be angry with me after that speech," Valora said.

"No," Jehn said. He took another swig from the vial. "You were well-chosen to be part of my inner circle, Valora, and you did what I groomed you to do. You acted intelligently, independent of the yodeling crowd of noble-bred fools they call my council, and with initiative."

"I did not act alone," she said quietly.

Jacob shifted in his place beside the fountain.

"Yes, the lesser son of Halescorn," Jehn said. His tone took on a slightly scathing quality. If Jacob had expected praise as well, none appeared to be coming. "I see you have traded your bullying in for second-rate political scheming."

"We saved your life!" Jacob snapped.

“There were half a dozen other alternatives,” Jehn snarled back. He had never liked Jacob, and he unleashed all of his irritation on him now. “You have sunk my plans, for all your well-meaning. I was two years in to arranging a marriage between one of the warlord’s daughters and myself, and though not a royal alliance per se, this particular woman was the heiress to a collection of mines that would have funded our entire army until the end of the war—” He made a sound in the back of his throat and fell silent. “I had it completely planned out. It would have worked. I saw how it would go down, how we would win. And now...” He sighed and leaned back again. “Now, I do not know.”

“But we can still win, Your Grace,” Valora said fervently.

“Perhaps,” Jehn murmured thoughtfully. He traced a finger around the edge of his vial of medicine. His eyes were beginning to glow with a glazed quality. “Perhaps yet. But I must think.”

The room was quiet for a length of time, with Valora and Jacob not daring to move, and then Jehn stirred again. He turned to Kael, who had stayed silent and thoughtful and almost forgotten in the corner.

“My friend,” Jehn said. “Did you say you called for the physician? I am seeing live dragons on the ceiling of this room. Perhaps he ought to do something about that.”

Valora looked alarmed. “What is he taking?”

“Opiates,” Kael said. He took the vial and smelled it. “Not opiates.”

“Nectar of the gods,” Jehn said fervently.

“Sounds like aliope,” Jacob murmured. “If he got it from the Nyrian and he’s seeing things.”

Aliope. Kael frowned. He’d heard of the drug, a highly addictive and often hallucinogenic substance from the tip of the southern continent.

“Was it from our court physician, or the Nyrian doctor who accompanied the ship?” Valora asked.

Everyone looked at Jehn, who blinked at them.

“I think you’ve taken too much for your pain, sir,” Kael said. He took the vial from Jehn’s hand and tucked it into his own pocket.

“The dragons are going to eat the fish in the fountain,” Jehn said softly.

“She won’t like that. She’ll try to stop them. And I will have to stop her. We need the dragons.”

“Let’s get you in bed, Highness,” Kael said quietly. Valora helped him put the drugged prince to bed in beneath an ornate silken coverlet. Her hands

brushed against his as they covered their sovereign; she bit her lip and looked away.

Jehn smiled up at them with half of his mouth. It was an unguarded smile, a strange expression on his thin face, never seen by most. He gestured at the red cord. "The Nyrians said this red rope would grant whatever I desire." He tipped his head at Kael. "Will it bring me a new finger, you think?" Valora winced.

"You ought to find her and give her a bouquet," Jehn mumbled to Valora.

"Purple, never yellow. You've shown yourself a true ally."

Valora shot Kael a puzzled look.

"I think," Kael said, "the prince is suggesting you ingratiate yourself with the queen of Nyr. Seeing how you and Jacob have secured her the greatest political move she could have hoped ever to make in her lifetime, if we should win this war and take control of Austrisia once more."

Jehn began to breathe deep and slow. He was asleep. Valora and Kael rose like exhausted parents, both moving carefully so as not to wake him.

"That *if* is highly important," Jacob said from across the room. "Our victory is hardly assured, and her court won't see it as a boon for them. They'll be as angry as our nobles, only for different reasons. If we fail, then their queen has thrown away her opportunity for a penniless fugitive and invited invasion of her country."

"Agreed," Kael said, crossing the room in search of food and drink. He found a pot of steaming liquid and a collection of gold cups waiting in the antechamber. He studied the pot.

"Are you trying to determine if its poison?" Jacob asked with a smirk.

"Yes," Kael said honestly.

Jacob appeared startled by this admission. He hesitated.

"Was it... was it very bad?" he asked in a low voice, too low for Valora to hear. Kael knew his brother meant the captivity.

"I did not think we would survive," Kael answered.

Valora joined them. "Why did he suggest a bouquet? Or is that on par with dragons on the ceiling?"

"Bouquets are sent as gifts in Nyr. They carry great meaning," Kael said.

"Purple means a mutual advantage. Yellow suggests cleverness. Nyrians do not want clever allies. Just steady ones that they can manipulate and predict. Don't make yourself a puzzle for the queen to solve, he is saying."

“Ah,” Valora said. She pressed a hand to her forehead. “I am tired. I will see the both of you tomorrow.”

She departed with a last look, leaving the brothers alone.

“Such an intricate meaning behind such a string of nonsense,” Jacob muttered. “Perhaps you’re only trying to make the prince look better in his drugged stupor.”

Kael and his brother locked eyes, and Kael saw a glimmer of the old animosity they had always shared.

“You and Valora seem close,” Kael observed quietly.

“Jealous? Of me and your betrothed, whom you can’t seem to stay in the same room with for five minutes?” Jacob said. “Or are you afraid I’ll try to steal her lands and fortune from you the way I stole your place from the kingsguardmen when we were boys?”

Kael turned away wearily. Jacob, with a muttered exclamation, grabbed his brother’s shoulder as if he meant to yank him around for a punch to the face.

The next thing Jacob knew, he was pinned against the wall by Kael’s wrist against his throat and a knife pressed to his cheek.

“I am tired, brother,” Kael said in his ear. “I would rather not do this now.” Jacob gasped at the pressure on his neck, shaking but still defiant as he forced the words out. “When you were kidnapped, part of me hoped you would die. But then I thought it would be a hero’s death, and you would be forever a martyr, beloved by all. So, I’m glad you’re here. This way, I don’t have to watch our father suffer and pine for a son he never wanted anyway, loaded with guilt over his inability to accept you even now.”

Kael pressed his wrist harder into Jacob’s throat.

Jacob gagged and continued, “He still isn’t sure if he’s your father.”

Kael’s mouth turned in a quick, exhausted smile. “Lords, I wish he wasn’t.” Jacob blinked twice. Kael drew back, and his brother slid to the ground and sat gazing up at him with venom in his eyes, his fancy robes crumpled in a pool of silk around him on the ground.

“Get out,” Kael said. “I’m sure our father is waiting for your full report. Mustn’t keep him waiting, brother.”

Jacob picked himself up quickly and straightened his robes with a jerk. He left without another word.

Kael looked back at the prince, lying asleep on the bed.

He ached to be astride a horse with a wild, starry sky above him, his company around him, and the dragonsayer beside him.

Instead, he was in this perfumed deathtrap of politics and assassins. A servant stepped into the room and bowed. “Sir,” the servant said in perfect Austrish. “Our sun and moon, the queen, has returned.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

BRIAND AND NATH reached Gillspin, both of them disguised with cloaks that hid their faces. They met Lark at the prearranged location at the docks and followed her into the grate that led to a secret entrance to the thieves' quarter.

Briand went straight to the arched chamber filled with tables laden with food. She was still filled with pain from leaving Kael, but she put it aside. She had much to do here.

She was going to use this situation to her advantage. She needed to find the guardians.

Who better to find them than a bunch of thieves?

The thieves and beggars were feasting, many of them draped over chairs in a stupor, others laughing and singing.

They had not appeared to have noticed her absence.

But the children Lark cared for spotted her, and they began to whisper among themselves.

Briand saw Crispin at one of the tables, looking improved. He saw her and called out, "Long live the thief-queen!"

She jumped onto one of the tables and drew a knife, posing so to make Nath roll his eyes. A few of the thieves raised their cups to her with a shout of "thief-queen!"

Her feasting edict seemed to have earned her a better reputation, anyway. The children crept forward, staring at her as if she were a legend that had appeared before their eyes. Except for Pip, who sidled up to Nath and stood beside him without a word.

"Tomorrow," she announced, "the feast ends, and we return to work. But," and here, Briand's eyes fell on the children gathered around the table she stood on, "there will be a few changes."

Across the room, she met Nath's eyes and smiled.

~

Jehn sat on a low couch across from the queen of Nyr as birds screamed and called loudly in the early morning air. The windows of the queen's breakfast chamber were open, and the room overlooked the expansive gardens below,

where sculpted trees and shrubs cut to look like serpents and cranes fluttered in the breeze blowing from the sea. Servants moved around the prince and queen like gusts of wind, brisk and silent, serving tea and bowls of stewed fruit poured over sweet noodles. The queen's face was unpainted, her hair hanging black and straight down her back, wearing a silk dressing gown instead of a formal robe.

It was all informal. Intimate.

A demonstration of the queen's position of power.

She had no need to impress him, to put on her robes of state and gold eye paints and make flowery, flattering speeches.

She was going to marry him.

Jehn leaned on the palm of his good hand, his bandaged hand lying in his lap. The queen's eyes kept straying to it. She hid her emotions with near perfection, but if Jehn had to guess, he'd say she was fascinated rather than repulsed by the idea of the injury.

But she held herself in check.

The servants served the sya, a traditional Nyrian tea typically shared between family, drank from the same two-handled cup. It sat on the low table between them, and Jehn settled his gaze for a moment on the cup. The queen stared baldly at him. She had a direct and unnerving stare, one that reminded him faintly of Lord Halescorn with its arrogance, but hers had more vulnerability. It was like a child's stare. Unashamed to look at things others might politely turn away from, like his bandaged hand and the missing finger it hid.

But Jehn was not fooled. This woman was no child, and her mind was far from childlike, no matter what her political enemies might whisper to the gossips. He rather suspected that she might have spread such rumors herself. Getting one's enemies to underestimate you was a trick he enjoyed employing too.

"I trust your nobility have informed you of our arrangement?" the Nyrian queen said finally, her eyebrows hitching with a hint of humor.

She was enjoying this.

"Yes," Jehn said blandly. If the queen was all bold stares and unadorned brashness, he was demureness personified. He had always been charming and disarming to people below his station, but to those who wielded great power, he tended to become diffident. A holdover from his experiences with his father, he had often thought. The dynamic would serve to stroke the

queen's ego here. She would think herself to have the complete upper hand with him.

He lifted his eyes from the cup.

He caught her, not quite smiling—all of her features were stern, composed—but she radiated a fiendish sort of glee from the crinkle of her brow and the twitch of her lips. Just a blink of a lash and the glee was gone, smoothed away as easily as a manicured hand smooths a wrinkle from a robe.

She had intended him to catch her. She wanted him to know her triumph.

"Imagine my surprise," the queen said, "at the letter I received. The true prince of Austrisia, my new and untested ally, captured. A princely sum demanded in ransom. A desperate plea from two of his loyal subjects. Of course, it would be difficult for me to justify parting with so much money for any reason other than the noblest of reasons." Her face remained impassive, but he saw that twinkle in her eye again.

She was enjoying this far too much.

"I responded to your intrepid and beseeching nobles with the fairest arrangement I could imagine. For my sacrifice and risk, for my gesture of faith, one in kind from you. My council agreed, of course, that it was the best course of action for my coffers... and my heart. For I must be a woman in love, to pay such a sum for an impoverished prince without a throne."

She picked up one of the bowls of sweet noodles and a pair of golden eating sticks and took a bite.

Jehn tipped his head to the side as if thinking about what she'd said. She was toying with him, trying to see if he would crack at her mockery of the situation. "And speaking of your council... You've lost a significant amount of our original exchange of funds. Will that affect the goodwill they extend to my court during our stay here?"

She leaned back on the couch. "Oh, I should have it back soon. Perhaps by this evening. My secret forces are storming the pirate's fortress as we speak."

Jehn raised a brow. "Your Shadow Hands, as I hear they are called." He knew of her secret, elite band of loyal men and women only from the rumors of rumors. Calling out the name of them was a gamble.

The queen smiled without showing her teeth. Jehn had a feeling it was the smile she made when she was surprised—and displeased about it. She seemed like a woman who did not like to be surprised.

So, he was right. They did exist.

“Very good,” she said smoothly. “I shouldn’t be surprised, though, should I?”

“My spies are excellent,” Jehn said.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” she said. “Of course they are. They have to be.”

“A prince or two has survived worse on dumb luck,” Jehn said.

“Ah,” the queen replied, leaning forward. “But you do not believe in luck, do you, Prince Jehn?”

“I make my own luck,” Jehn said.

The queen ate some more sweet noodles and fruit.

They both looked at the sya cup.

“Let us put artifice aside for a moment,” Jehn said quietly.

The queen laid down her bowl as if she didn’t hear him. “Have you heard of Anu the Builder? He is renowned in my kingdom for his innovative designs and for the way he melds palaces and gardens as one. He has started a school for architects under my patronage. He designed these quarters—let me give you a tour.” She stood and walked deeper into the room without looking back.

Jehn rose and followed her into a larger chamber, with silken screens covering the walls and lanterns of silk hanging from ribbons from the ceiling. Her chamber ceiling was painted too—hers depicting a great battle between two ancient forces, the men and women clad in animal skins and wielding crude spears in their hands. Dragons flew above their heads. Jehn glanced with interest at the scene, but the queen did not pause. She strode past a vast bed covered in pillows, her dressing gown hissing as it dragged across the smooth stone floor. She stepped through a forest of columns that surrounded her bathing area and paused before an arched door before going inside.

Jehn followed her. The back of his neck prickled faintly, but he didn’t hesitate.

They were inside a room the size of a small bathing chamber, with walls of stone and a cage filled with glowing worms hanging from the top of the room. Water poured down the walls around them, a roaring, thunderous cascade that made Jehn feel as though he stood inside a waterfall. The sound drowned out everything else—voices within the chamber and without.

“This,” the queen of Nyr said with a smile that showed a hint of teeth, “is my thinking chamber. Anu built it at my request. We can speak freely here.

Other ears are always listening, but they cannot hear our voices above the sound of the water.”

“You do not trust your men? Your guards?” Jehn asked in surprise.

“Not yet,” she said. “My palace is riddled with spies. They peddle information to my ministers and my courtiers. And I let them. They do not know that I know. They think this a bathing room. And it is.” She reached out a hand and touched her fingertip to the falling water. “Whenever I bring a confidant here, they think I am merely meeting a lover.”

“I suppose rumor will say we got along quickly, then,” Jehn said.

The queen let her hand fall. “About that,” she said, turning her direct and forceful gaze upon him once more. “Do whatever you like. I do not expect fidelity from you. I know this is a political arrangement to my advantage. I know you are angry. I also know you have no choice. Such a marriage can hardly hope to engender goodwill. I expect no love from you, no progeny. I expect to have my own paramours and mistresses if I wish. You may do the same. I do not care.”

“I do not have any,” Jehn said. He met her gaze just as directly. He was not embarrassed. He felt calm here in this room of rushing water. He felt calm speaking so plainly with her, even calmer than when they had been playing games, although that had invigorated him in an odd and perplexing way rather than annoying or tiring him as he had expected.

“None?” the queen said. Her eyebrows quirked again. “Are you a celibate?”

“No,” Jehn said. “But I don’t have much interest, generally.”

“Hmm,” the queen mused. “I find I have the opposite problem.” She studied him. “Will there be an expectation of an heir from your kingdom?”

“No,” Jehn said. “Our rulers are selected from a pool of bloodlines. Kings do not pass the crown to their sons or daughters by birthright. And yours?”

“The Nyrians trace their bloodlines through their mothers, not their fathers,” she said. “I will need heirs, but it matters not to my people who my children’s father is, as long as I am their mother. I don’t even have to be married.” She waved a hand. “We can speak more of this later, if you wish.”

“I’m happy to lay it to rest now,” Jehn said. “No children.”

The queen of Nyr smiled. “Agreed.”

~

Kael waited in the prince’s chambers for Jehn to return from breakfast with

the queen, choosing to stand with his eyes fixed on the sea through the arching windows that faced the west. Somewhere out there, Briand had returned to her growing band of loyal people, Nath alongside her, a northern sky arching over her head and the beauty of the Wild Lands surrounding her.

He missed them so fiercely he could taste the wind in his teeth as though he rode beside them. His heart throbbed in his chest with longing. The memory of her body, limp and streaming water as he pulled her from the water, flashed into his head again, and he couldn't breathe. He'd faced torture, dragons, Seekers, and a thousand other dangers in his service to the true prince, but lords, he had never been so frightened as when he'd thought she had drowned. The moment she'd opened her eyes again, it was as if he'd risen from the dead.

Kael laid a hand against one of the columns in the room and lowered his head. He was trembling. The scene swept over him again, her cold body in his arms. No. No, she was alive. Alive and well. Furious at him, fighting for life and power, hot and raging as a wildfire. He drew strength from the mere thought of her out there. And she'd been strong—that beast she'd dredged from the deep was bigger than any he'd seen her command before. Her powers were growing. She would take care of herself; he was sure of it. She didn't need him.

But he wanted her. Lords, he wanted her. Watching her leave the ship while he stood behind had gutted him to his core. He'd rather crawl on his hands and knees through the maze of caves beneath Aron Kul's estate before see her leave him again.

Footsteps sounded at the door, and Kael straightened and braced himself to face his sovereign, but it was Valora instead. She paused at the sight of him, startled, and then curtsied without a word. Kael bowed to her.

"I've come to see the prince," Valora said. "Is he still with the queen?"

"He is," Kael said. "He—"

"Is here," the prince said behind them.

Valora and Kael turned together as Jehn walked into the room as if his limbs were made of glass and lowered himself onto the bed. He gave one small gasp of pain as he lay down, and then he carefully arranged his arms so that his injured hand was resting atop his chest.

"What did the queen say?" Kael asked.

Jehn reached into his pocket and frowned. He looked at Kael. “Did you take my vial?”

“Yes,” Kael said.

“Did the queen mention when she plans to announce the marriage?” Valora asked, grimacing at the word *marriage*.

“I want it back,” Jehn said to Kael. He sounded almost petulant.

“You were seeing dragons on the ceiling last night,” Kael said, crossing his arms.

“Excellent,” Jehn said. “Let’s see if I can see them again, shall we? Perhaps I’ll see a genie too.” He held out his good hand.

“Sir,” Kael said. “I have already disposed of the medicine.”

“How dare you! I gave up that finger for you,” Jehn snapped.

Valora’s eyebrows arched up in surprise at this revelation.

Kael’s eyes slid closed. He sighed.

“Jehn—”

“Stop treating me like a blasted addict and give me my medicine, Kael. I know you are lying.”

Kael produced the vial from his coat pocket as if he’d been expecting this. Jehn took it with a grunt of satisfaction and swallowed the entire thing with one gulp. Then, he held the vial to the light, squinting at it.

“What did you replace it with?” he asked when he’d finished.

“What our court physician recommended,” Kael said. “I visited him last night. He was very concerned about what you’d been taking without consulting him.”

Jehn muttered something under his breath about the mental faculties of the Austrisian physician. He set the vial on the table beside the bed and waved his good hand at them both. “Go ahead,” he said. “You’re both here to talk to me, so talk.”

“The queen—” Valora began again.

Jehn shook his head and made a sound of impatience. “I can barely think straight at the moment due to the pain radiating from my left hand. It feels as though I have a rock dragon latched onto the nub of my index finger, and he is trying to grind the rest of it to pulp between his jaws. I do not have the patience—” Jehn paused and took a deep, shuddering breath. “The patience,” he repeated, “to do this now. Kael, you are about to break your jaw, you’re holding it so tightly, and you are holding your hands down and open the way you do when you wish you were out training with a sword—

which is how you seem to feel whenever you have something to say to me that you think I will not like. Valora, when you're nervous about something personal and trying to hide it, your left eyelid has an involuntary flutter. You are not here to talk about the queen of Nyr—your nervous tick about court matters tends to make you purse your lips and wrinkle your brow. Neither of you is here to talk about Nyr. So please, for the love of all that is holy, skip to the actual point.”

They both stared at him.

“Kael first,” Jahn prompted.

Kael looked at Valora. “Sir,” he began again, hesitantly. “Perhaps privately

“It concerns her, does it not? Let’s do this now,” Jahn said. He flexed his injured hand experimentally and shuddered. He let his head fall back on the pillow and shut his eyes.

Kael inhaled. He did not look at Valora this time. “I have come to ask you to release me from my order to marry Lady Valora.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

KAEL WAITED FOR Jehn to speak. His heart beat fast, and he tapped one hand against his leg reflexively before he tightened the hand into a fist to still it. He didn't look at Valora. He hadn't intended to blurt it out in front of her. But what was done was done.

Jehn's eyebrows twitched, but he did not open his eyes. He reached for the vial of medicine and took another swallow, grimacing when he was done. "No," he said.

A roaring filled Kael's ears. "Your Highness," he said. "I beg you to reconsider."

Jehn worked himself into a sitting position. His face was white. He pressed his lips together—whether from pain or fury, Kael could not tell. "No," he said.

Kael dropped to his knees and struck his arm across his chest in salute. "I swore my life to you and your cause, Jehn. I have never wavered, and I will continue to give my life in service to you. But you must release me from this torment."

"I must?" Jehn's voice was angry now. "Who is the prince? Me or you? You insist upon reminding me of what I am always, calling me Your Highness and Your Grace no matter how much I hate it, and yet now, you want to change the rules and have me recant my orders, my decrees. Well? Am I the prince or not?"

Kael didn't flinch despite the prince's pain-fueled fury, which he suspected was largely for show. "Jehn—"

"Do you trust me or not?" Jehn roared.

"Lords," Valora burst out. "Let us put this to rest! Quit bickering—I refuse to marry him. There."

Kael turned to stare at her in shock. She folded her arms, sparking with resolute fury. Two spots of color appeared on her cheeks.

Jehn's eyebrows shot up, and his lips tugged in what might have been the barest of smiles before it vanished back into a scowl. Was he... *amused*?

Kael wanted, for just a moment, to strike his prince. He squashed the impulse and remained kneeling.

"He does not want to marry me," Valora continued. "He loves another."

"Ah," Jehn said. "Has he told you this?"

“No, but I am not an idiot,” she said. “I can tell a lovesick man when I see one. Anyway, I would rather not chain such a tormented and reluctant bridegroom to myself no matter the material benefit, thank you very much.” “I empathize with your desire not to marry someone against your will,” Jehn said dryly.

Valora flushed bright red at that jab. “Forgive me, sire, but I am not a prince. Wars and kingdoms do not hinge upon my marriage. If you are so set upon me marrying a Halescorn, I’ll- I’ll marry Jacob!”

Kael lifted his chin in mild surprise. Jehn did not look shocked, however. Her intent declared, Valora stood still, one hand pressed to her lips as if she were afraid of what else she might say if she gave herself the opportunity. Both Kael and Valora waited, neither of them moving, for Jehn to speak again.

The prince flexed his fingers again. The wrinkle between his brows smoothed; the pain medicine was taking effect. He appeared to be thinking carefully for a moment.

“Very well,” he said after another excruciating pause, throwing up his good hand. “Marry Jacob.”

Kael did not move, but a shiver ran through his whole body. He held himself in check, waiting for the rest of the prince’s words. Another marriage assignment? A blistering scolding?

But Jehn only fell back against the pillows. “That will be all, Lady Valora.” “Sir—” she began.

“That will be all! We’ll deal with the particulars when my head doesn’t feel like the entire Nyrian army is marching inside it.”

Valora curtsied and left.

Kael remained kneeling, his head ringing in shock. He had just been freed from the invisible chains holding him. He ought to be giddy with relief. And yet, something about the conversation stuck in his mind like a burr.

Jehn turned on his side, trying to get comfortable. “These Nyrian mattresses feel as though they’re stuffed with rocks,” he muttered, pressing on the bed with his good hand. “I had a devil of a time trying to get back to sleep last night after the medicine wore off.” He rolled onto his other side and looked at Kael, who remained on his knees.

“I am not about to lop off your head, Kael,” Jehn said finally. “Lords. You are looking at me as if I’ve just ordered a kitten’s execution.”

Kael rose. He walked to the window and gazed at the gardens below. Gardeners moved from shrub to shrub, trimming the fie-colored leaves into fantastic shapes. A cool morning wind blew, stirring Kael's hair. He was still thinking. Musing.

Jehn grumbled quietly in the background, but Kael could feel his attention. The prince knew Kael was thinking about something he'd done.

"When Lady Valora said she refused to marry me," Kael said slowly, "you appeared to be... amused."

He turned to glance at the prince.

"I was in a great deal of pain," Jehn said.

"You were amused," Kael said with certainty.

Jehn pressed his lips together and paused in his kneading of the mattress.

He looked interested in what Kael was about to say, as if he wasn't expecting Kael to get it right, whatever it was.

Kael rubbed his jaw with one hand. He could feel a headache growling at the base of his skull. "You were not expecting her to say it—neither was I—but you were *amused*. I know you well enough to know your faces—you wanted to laugh the way you do when you're right about something in a way that surprises even you. Something you've thought about a great deal."

"I think about everything a great deal," Jehn said.

"No, not like that. This was something you'd rehearsed mentally. This very conversation."

"Well?" Jehn said impatiently. He ground his fist into the mattress as if trying to pulverize it into the desired softness. "Tell me your conclusions."

"You never intended for Valora and I to marry, did you?" Kael said as the realization dawned.

Jehn gave up on the mattress and swung his legs over the side. He rose slowly, taking care with his bandaged hand. "In a word? No."

Blood roared in Kael's ears, but Jehn was still talking.

"But you are both taking action far ahead of what I'd planned," the prince said, oblivious to the thunderous look forming on Kael's face. "I did not anticipate being kidnapped by pirates, and that's caused a bit of a stir in my plans. Running into the dragonsayer stirred you up, and it seems Valora and Jacob's adventures in matchmaking princes and queens have given them a bit of an interest in each other, or at least a willingness to be in each other's company that was not there previously. There are just too many variables sometimes. Jacob seems to want whatever things you have—not surprising,

given the way he's always been wildly jealous of you—but I suppose I was a bit wrong about Valora—I thought she might be harder to turn against the idea—”

Kael could take it no longer.

“Jehn,” he said icily, doing his best to contain his mounting anger. “Do you mean to tell me that you have been manipulating us to some secret end you’d devised in your head? That this was all a charade?”

Jehn blinked at him. “The dragonsayer needed a goad to push her into full independence. She doubted herself. She needed some final, perfect inducement of rage to nudge her into position to flourish. And you. You needed to recognize the balance between duty and heart. Forcing you apart was the perfect way—”

Kael had never in his life wanted to strike anyone as badly as he wanted to strike the prince at that moment. He held himself in place by sheer willpower as he stared Jehn down.

“You have been playing with our lives as though we were pieces in a game,” he snarled.

“Well,” Jehn began, as if there were anything at all he could say in his defense. He considered it, seemed to decide there was not, looked a bit guilty, and settled for simply, “Yes.”

Kael turned and strode across the room to remove himself from temptation. He flexed his hand, wrestling the rage inside into submission.

“It worked,” Jehn said.

“Shut up,” Kael roared, and stalked toward the door. He needed to clear his head before he did something regrettable.

“Kael,” Jehn called after him.

Kael whipped around to face the prince.

“Your Highness,” he ground out, bowing low. His voice dripped with fury when he spoke, belying his posture of submission. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Jehn’s eyes glittered with what might have been a shred of regret amid whatever other complicated things he was thinking and feeling. “I may have overstepped. I-I’m only human, Kael,” he said quietly.

“Then stop trying to be a god,” Kael said.

With that, he wrenched open the door and left his prince sitting in the middle of the room alone.

Hours later, the courts convened in the queen's throne room, a resplendent hall with a towering dome of smooth marble that arched high overhead like a sky of stone, dripping with jeweled lanterns that glowed a rainbow of colors. An artificial river splashed and flowed around the perimeter of the throne room, filling the air with soothing sound.

The Nyrian queen sat atop her throne of green marble and gold, fans of silk spread out in layers behind her like the petals of a rose, dressed in overlapping folds of green silk that cinched at her waist in a jeweled belt. Her lips were painted a deep purple that was almost black, and her eyes were lined with a matching purplish paint that swooped almost to her hairline. A web of pearls covered her long black hair. She looked fierce, remote, and almost like a sculpture rather than a living, breathing woman. Kael stood at the back of the court, his back to the cool marble wall, arms folded as he watched the Nyrian and Austrisian courts mingle. The Nyrians smiled with cool detachment, their true expressions difficult to decipher behind their painted faces and jeweled fans. Both men and women wore ornate and beautiful robes, their hair intricately styled with coils and jewels. In contrast, the Austrisians seemed almost plain, although they wore their best clothing. They were like sparrows next to peacocks.

A gong sounded, announcing the entrance of Jehn and his retinue of guards. Some of the higher-ranking nobles accompanied him as he entered the throne room. Kael had declined to be a part of this procession so he could stand back and observe the reactions and mood of the Nyrian court from behind as they received news of their queen's marriage.

Jehn walked the length of the throne room with ease, his back straight and his injured hand tucked across his chest and into the elbow of his other arm. He wore a Nyrian robe of gold, and some attendant had brushed a few glimmers of gold paint across his eyelids and lips. He looked strange and beautiful and alien, not quite Austrisian, but not Nyrian either.

Jehn stopped before the Nyrian queen's throne. He did not bow, but stood straight before her. She gazed down at him, expressionless, her eyes dark and unfathomable.

The Nyrian and Austrisian nobles packing the throne room moved and whispered.

"Welcome, Prince Jehn," she said into the restless silence, speaking in the Austrisian language, stretching out one jewel-encrusted hand.

Jehn stepped forward and brushed it with his lips.

When he stepped back, the queen rose. She surveyed the court. Her face was like a statue's.

"Greetings to the Austrisian court in exile," she said in Nyrese. Her voice, husky and low, carried across the hall. A translator repeated her words in Austrish. "I am sure you are all relieved beyond words at the safe return of your prince, as am I. I was honored to have a hand in his rescue, and I am happy to announce that the pirate king who dared to strike a finger from your beloved prince's hand has paid for his mistake with his head."

She gestured to the side, and a servant stepped forward, bearing a bag seeping blood. Whispers and gasps rippled through the throne room.

Kael unfolded his arms and studied the bag as it was borne away.

The queen of Nyr continued, "Prince Jehn and I have corresponded for some time, and his capture was the final gem in the crown of my feelings, to borrow one of your Austrisian phrases. Our ardent love cannot be contained any longer. And thus, the Austrisian prince is henceforth to be known at court as prince-consort, Lord of the Mirror Isles, bearer of the golden scales. He is to be my husband. We will wed in one month, at the beginning of the rainy season. May peace last between our peoples for an eternity of ages."

Shocked murmurs rippled across the room. No one in either court had expected this.

The queen did not smile. She and Jehn did not look at each other.

Kael turned on his heel and left the hall for the gardens beyond.

# CHAPTER FORTY

BRIAND SAT ATOP the thief-queen's throne, gazing down at the winding line of thieves and beggars who'd come to give pay for her protection and patronage. She'd placed Quill beside the bucket where all cast their coins, so no one would be tempted to cheat her. As each person came forward, Briand asked what he or she did, how they earned their money, and Cait, who perched beside her on the barrels, made a note of it in a small notebook.

There were going to be changes. She had to get the lay of things first, however.

Nath stood in the doorway, observing and also making notes. Lark perched in a stone indentation on the wall, also observing so she could later report who seemed reluctant and who seemed enthusiastic to give monetary support to the new thief-queen, although she wrote nothing down in her provided book. Briand supposed the girl couldn't read.

They'd have to rectify that.

Among many other changes, all of her thieves were going to have lessons. She'd already decided. Nath needed something to do to keep him from going stir-crazy, and Crispin would probably make a suitable tutor as well, seeing how he was always trying to boast about how much he knew.

The next figure stepped before her. A figure in a dark cloak, face partially hidden.

"I ask a night's safe lodging," the figure said. "Rags and I had an agreement." He stretched out his hand to drop money into the bucket, and a lion tattoo peaked out from his sleeve.

Briand straightened, her skin prickling as dread sank into her gut like a knife.

The man with the tattoo. The one who'd played Monarchist and Seeker both.

The one who'd paid her to kill Kael.

What was he doing here?

"Yes," she said, her mind spinning with curiosity and alarm. "One night's lodging."

The man's pay was generous indeed. He did not count the coins as they fell.

Briand reached into her sleeve and closed her fingers over the knife there to reassure herself.

She was not helpless against Seekers. If he tried to lay a hand on her, she would blast him against the wall.

But hopefully, it wouldn't come to that first. She had questions for him.

~

Kael walked the gardens alone, familiarizing himself with the landscape—the shaded places where visibility was difficult, the pockets in between shrubs where an assassin might conceal themselves. The Nyrian gardens were riddles within riddles, designed to perplex and confuse. The perfect sort of place to be knifed to death.

He paused on a bridge over a tranquil lake. The water below was green with algae and dotted with lily pads. Fireflies danced in the gathering dusk, and lanterns had begun to glow at intervals along the path of moss. From this vantage point, he realized the lake was cleverly made to resemble a woman, with the willows at the far end forming her flowing hair, and the small island, her eye.

A wind blew, carrying with it the scent of flowers and incense. Music drifted on the breeze; the court was celebrating the announcement of the marriage, though Kael knew already that many were displeased with such a risky and unforeseen political match. Not everyone in Nyr would have the foresight to see how this move could benefit Nyr. And others who did have such foresight could see how the marriage might cripple the nation and bring Cahan's wrath upon them, should Jehn lose his war.

Unpopular, indeed. No wonder they'd used the excuse that they were in love.

He felt Jehn's presence before he saw him. Kael kept his eyes on the lake when he spoke. "You shouldn't move alone through these gardens, Your Grace. Where are your guards?"

"They don't even know I've gone," Jehn replied. "I told them I felt ill, and they escorted me back to my chambers. Then, I climbed out my window."

"I'll have the guards replaced immediately," Kael said. "And you should be moved to different chambers. If you can climb out your window with one injured hand, what could an assassin do?" Still, he didn't look at Jehn.

“The queen said she would have her personal guard see to my protection,” Jehn said quietly. “And perhaps you underestimate my climbing skills.”

“You will have your own guard, sir,” Kael said. “I’ll form it myself. A new, better guard.”

“I want you as captain,” Jehn said.

Kael looked at him. Jehn stood with his bandaged hand resting on the rail of the bridge, his good hand dangling, the fingers clenching and unclenching as if in pain.

“I will serve you however you see fit,” Kael responded.

When Jehn turned his face toward Kael, his eyes shimmered with a layer of tears. The prince didn’t try to hide them.

“I don’t deserve you,” he said softly. “You are more faithful to me than I could have ever imagined. I have failed you many times, Kael, and I know I will fail you again. This wretched war. My wretched mind. I am not... I am not...” He paused, fumbling for words. “I am not always like other people. I do not always feel things the same way. I can be cold. Unfeeling, even. I have wounded you deeply. I am sorry.”

Kael was at a loss for words. “Sir,” he managed finally, and stopped.

Jehn bowed his head. “You deserve everything, my friend. And I’m not confident I will be able to give it to you. Or Maera, or Valora, or Nath and Tibus and the rest of your faithful and loyal crew. Any of them.”

“I didn’t think you knew Nath and Tibus’s names,” Kael said. “Nath would be pleased to know it.”

“Don’t you see yet?” Jehn said darkly. “I know everything. I see the patterns, the predictions. My mind cannot stop seeing them. I used to drive my mother and nursemaids mad as a child. And it torments me, Kael. I am alone. I do not want this burden. I do not want to be the Austrisian prince anymore. I do not want to weave all these threads—these lives—together. But all our lives depend on me.”

“When it becomes too difficult for you to walk,” Kael said, “I will carry you. You are not alone. And you never will be—not as long as I am alive.”

Jehn reached out wordlessly and gripped his friend’s arm. For a moment, they were silent.

“Was that really the head of the pirate king in that sack?” Kael asked.

“Not a chance,” Jehn said with a laugh. “Just some poor pirate fished from the lagoon, no doubt. She did send her men to burn that wretched island palace, but I doubt our captor is dead. I very much doubt that indeed.”

The darkness encroached, wrapping them in solitude. The lanterns glowed, making splashes of color on the water.

“She isn’t gone for good,” Jehn said suddenly.

He didn’t say Briand’s name, but Kael knew who the prince meant.

“I know,” Kael said.

“I was thinking,” Jehn added. “As captain of the guard, you may need to gather some of our more loyal and seasoned troops to serve under you. Men and women scattered through Kyreia and the Wild Lands.” He paused. “I hear we have a new potential ally in the north. A thief-queen. Perhaps you ought to make a diplomatic visit and see if she can be persuaded to join our cause.”

The side of Kael’s mouth tugged in a brief half of a smile.

“As my prince commands,” he said.

~

The thieves dined in the great hall, and Briand stood in one of the doorways, watching, twisting one of her knives between her fingers. She felt the presence of someone behind her and knew who it must be. Something about that velvet silence, imbued with danger, made her skin prickle.

“You,” she said, turning her head. “Why are you here?”

“You didn’t do as I instructed you,” the man said instead of answering.

“Kael of Estria still lives.” He was not wearing gloves, she noted.

“Instructed?” Briand said lightly. “Is that what we’re calling threats of death these days?”

“I was never going to kill you, dragonsayer,” the man said.

Briand looked at him in shock.

“Yes,” he said. “I know what you are.”

She lifted the knife to make certain he could see it. “And do you know what I can do? I can have you incapacitated in a moment, and when you are, I will kill you.”

The Seeker (was that who he really was?) smiled briefly. He did not move his hands toward her. “I have not come to harm you. I came to see Rags. But I found that you killed her.”

“She was a Seeker too,” Briand said.

“Not quite,” he replied. “She did not pass her trials. But she had the powers. She slipped through the cracks and escaped. We became friends; she was useful in my travels. And she was always happy to pass along information in exchange for dubois.”

“Escaped?” Briand asked.

“Those who do not pass the trials after their education are not allowed to live,” the man said.

“Of course,” Briand said. “So, what now?” She spun the knife between her fingers. “Who exactly are you? Why did you want me to kill Kael? It seems rather odd—hiring a guttersnipe to kill a man when you don’t even know if she’ll see him again, a man who was already in the company of several Seekers. Surely it would have been easier for you to accomplish yourself, or by the hand of one of your own.”

She’d puzzled over the arrangement many times when lying away at night. She’d never been able to understand the reasoning.

The Seeker smiled faintly. “Ah. Yes. Perhaps. But I have no ill will toward Kael of Estria inherently. I am not, as you seem to think, loyal to the Seekers. I am a Monarchist. My loyalties are to the prince.”

“Did you think him a traitor?” she asked. “Why do you want him killed? Why ask me to do it?”

“Some Seekers,” the man said, “possess a rare gift. A gift so rare many do not even believe it exists. The ability to see glimpses of potential futures, malleable and unformed like wet clay, but visible.”

“And?”

“I saw the possible outcomes of the war. Much of it was uncertain,” the man said. “But one thing I saw clearly. If Jahn is to defeat Cahan and the Seekers and ascend the throne of Austrisia, Kael of Estria will die.”

Briand froze in place. Her pulse thudded in her neck, her wrists. Her chest felt full of stones. She was sinking.

The Seeker’s eyes glittered.

“And he will die by your hand.”

**Look for book #6 in the Kingmakers’ War, A Court of Rags, in Summer 2018!**

**A Note to My Lovely Readers:**

Thank you so much for joining me in the story of Briand, Kael, and the rest of their friends. I hope you enjoyed reading this story half as much as I enjoyed writing it. Scrappy, defiant Briand, enigmatic Kael, cranky Nath, and longsuffering Tibus (and all the others) hold a special place in my heart, even among all of my book characters. This was one of my earliest stories that I set out to write, way back when I was still a teenager. I love that it lives on the published page for people like you to discover and enjoy. If you loved this book and think other readers might enjoy it too, consider taking a moment and leaving a review on Amazon! I would deeply appreciate it. As a reader, reviews are the first thing I look at when deciding whether or not I'll like a new book, and the same is true for many others. Reviews help readers find books. Your words are especially powerful in reviews of later books in the series, since less people write reviews for those. So be a booksayer and write a review! Your words have more power than you know.

Sincerely,

Kate

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kate Avery Ellison lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband, two children, and two cats. She loves dark chocolate, fairy tale retellings, and love stories with witty banter and sizzling, unspoken feelings. When she isn't working on her next writing project, she can be found reading, watching one of her favorite TV shows, or lying on the couch in exhaustion due to her two rambunctious children under the age of three.

You can find more information about Kate Avery Ellison's books and other upcoming projects online at <http://thesouthernscrawl.blogspot.com/>.

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My readers, for their faithful support and infectious enthusiasm. It means so much to me that you all love these characters. I love you guys!

**Read the first chapter of *The Season of Lightning*, available now in paperback and ebook format!**

## ~ONE~

THE SOLDIERS HAD their guns pointed straight at me.

The sky was cloudless and blue as azure above us, the air dry and hot with late summer heat. I was bruised from falling off Gryphon, my horse, and my temper was as short as the hair of a newly articed servant.

I'd escaped from the house on horseback after another argument with the housekeeper about my inability to keep shoes on while walking the grounds. Riding Gryphon hard across the gold-brown flatlands outside the fields of the plantation made my head clear, so I'd given him slack in the reins, and that brat took the bit in his teeth and ran wild for the Jessu River, which cut like a jewel-green snake through the hills between our land and the port city at the edge of the sea. He'd been startled by a hawk in the foothills and thrown me, and then my companion, Trilly, had shown up with the air of a martyr and the scolding of a sergeant to usher me home on foot. We'd been arguing about the propriety of my actions when the soldiers appeared, guns slung across their arms, on patrol against smugglers that sometimes roamed the river at night. I'd known immediately by the expression that crossed the big one's face that we were in trouble.

Now, he was toying with us like a cat plays with an injured sparrow. They were young soldiers—new ones I'd never seen before—the buttons on the gold-embroidered uniforms still sparkled clean and bright in the sunlight, the fringe on their belt-ends still hung straight and soft and clean, unstained by the dust of the canyons that edged the river. Their faces were sunburned, their eyebrows drawn together like locked gates as they looked at me. One was tall, with bright blond hair that marked him as barbarian-blooded somewhere in his past. A foreigner. He jerked his chin at me.

“What’s your business on this road?”

He spoke with the lazy drawl of a man who knows he will be having some fun and who wants to take his time so he can savor it.

The second soldier, who was smaller, swarthier, and darker-haired, an Austrisian, looked away at the twisted trees lining the water of the Jessu instead of the boardwalk we stood on. One of his eyebrows lifted a little, as if he wanted to say something, but couldn’t find the courage to speak in front of the blond.

"I was riding my horse, and I fell off when a bird flew up from behind a rock and startled him. He reared, dumping me. We were walking home, where he has surely already gone." My words came out stiff and hoarse instead of cold and strong like I wanted.

The yellow-haired soldier frowned. "Let me see your papers."

This was, of course, an outrage. I wasn't carrying papers because I didn't have any, because I wasn't a bonded servant or a silvra freewoman, or a tyrra like these men assumed. My hair might be curly with a hint of red-brown and my skin milky with a touch of bronze in the summer like a tyrra, the river people who lived in our land as immigrants and strangers, but I was the daughter of a plantation owner, an Austrisian, and I had every right in the world to be walking on this road with my companion.

"Didn't you hear me? I want to see your papers."

"I don't have them, you idiot. I don't need them."

"Oh?" His mouth turned down, but his eyes sparkled. The malice in them made me furious instead of afraid.

"My name is Verity Ely—"

"Shut up. I only want to see the notification that you have the right to escort this *seevver* along this route. I don't want a sob story."

I quit feeling frightened when the word *seevver* left his lips like a breath of smoke.

"You pig," I snapped, drawing in a quick, sharp breath. "We don't need papers. Get your guns out of our faces before I have my father arrest you. I \_\_\_\_\_"

"I said *shut up!*!" He stepped forward fast, grabbing my shoulder hard. Trilly screamed, and the other soldier started to raise his gun at Trilly.

The soldier's hands dug into my arm. His eyes blazed as they stared into mine, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw his weapon in his hand, and the way his fingers tightened reflexively over the trigger. His breath was hot against my chin.

"I'll teach you to insult me, you little minx. Your father, you say? He's probably dead in a ditch somewhere, shot for insolence against a patrol. You need to be taught a lesson."

I heard the sharp rap of a horse's hooves on the boardwalk, and my mind screamed out for salvation from this new person, but the soldier ignored the sound of hoofbeats, drunk with his station and the power that came with his firearm. He knew as well as I that no farmer would mess with him, not with

a gun in his hand, not with the uniform he wore on his back, not with the fury written all over his face.

My heartbeat pulsed in my throat. My shoulder ached beneath his hands. I saw the way his jaw tightened as though he was holding his temper in check, but just barely.

“For the last time, girl,” he growled. “Your papers.”

The hoofbeats halted behind us, and a cool voice cut in. “I knew that the regiment had taken to importing barbarians to do its dirty work, but I was unaware that it had begun recruiting the brain-injured.”

I knew that voice. My heart sank.

The soldier swung around with a swagger of confidence, lifting his gun. As he caught a glimpse of the man who’d dared to interrupt his interrogation, his hand slipped on my arm, and I yanked away.

“Sir,” the soldier muttered, his tone grudgingly deferential.

The nobleman on the horse tapped one gloved hand against his thigh as his lips pursed in a scowl. He darted a look at me that embodied pure scorn before returning his attention to the two soldiers before him.

“I am of course assuming that you were unaware that you were accosting the beloved and only daughter of General Elysius?” Their faces turned ashen as they realized their horrible, horrible mistake, and I smiled tightly at the way they darted furtive glances at me, their mouths snapping open and then closed, as if they were holding in curses. The dark-haired one stepped away from Trilly hastily.

“Give me your regiment numbers,” the young nobleman snapped, looking disgusted at having to continue even conversing with them. “I’ll report you myself. If you are lucky, you’ll get by with only a caning instead of a full dismissal.”

He remained astride his horse and watched as they wrote down their regiment numbers and gave them to him. My eyes lingered on the pistol strapped to his leg, the fine lambskin boots that came almost to his knees, the crisp white gloves that covered his hands. Lords, I had such terrible luck. Of all the people to have rescued us, it had to be him.

After the soldiers scrambled away, not daring to look back, he turned to us, his mouth folding back into its characteristic smirk. “Ladies.”

I wiped the beads of sweat from my upper lip, avoiding his gaze. I was thankful, naturally. But...

Trilly, on the other hand, gasped out a sigh and snatched up the fallen bonnets and basket, trying without success to smooth out the wrinkles from the bonnets. “Lord Roth, I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t shown up.”

I swallowed the snarl that came to my lips, because, after all, he had just saved us. Gratefulness was in order.

His lordship dismounted smoothly, and his eyes found mine. There was a lazy sort of appraisal in them, as always, as though he’d measured my talents and faults and found me wanting in every way. I busied myself with brushing a bit of mud from the full bodice of my gown.

“Thank you,” Trilly said to Roth.

“Oh, it was nothing. I’m sure Verity would have been able to find something to say to keep that lackey at bay.” He folded his arms, as if waiting for my smart reply.

“That’s Miss Elysius,” I snapped, feeling stupid for being unable to think of anything wittier to say to him. “Anyway, we really must be going. We’ve lingered here long enough, and Mimi is probably frantic about us.

Goodbye.”

Roth *tsked* cheerfully under his breath. Now that the soldiers were gone and the danger was over, he was sarcasm as usual.

“Is that any way to thank me?”

I grabbed Trilly’s arm and pulled her down the pathway for my father’s plantation, my silk shoes barely whispering against the planks of the boardwalk that carried us safely over the waters of the Jessu.

“I could send a baou, so you wouldn’t have to dirty your shoes,” Roth suggested.

I knew he was upset with me for getting myself into trouble with the soldiers like an idiot, no doubt, and I knew he was probably also upset that I was being nasty to him about rescuing us.

Perhaps I should care, but it was Roth.

I left him standing beside his horse on the boardwalk without a reply, and his chuckle rang in my ears, infuriating me.