### **Chapter 1**

"I heard they're bringing her in today," a familiar voice said from behind. I slowly looked up from the withered strand of hay I was repeatedly ripping in half, and turned to face a tall blond youth dressed in the uniform of the Iethanian royal army. His hair was rough and unkempt, his uniform weathered, his complexion tanned, and his eyes sharp and attentive. He was one of my few friends in Fortress - not just Fortress, in fact, but the all the inhabitants of Castlekeep. Since his arrival at Fortress five years ago for service assignment as part of training to become a knight, he had been friendly to me. That had come as a surprise, like any gesture of goodwill in my general direction. I was used to cool politeness, often sprinkled with a hint of distaste. Once I finished school and moved onto his neighboring bunk in the prison barracks, our friendship was a natural conclusion. It was a lopsided friendship, darkened by jealousy, but it was preferable to having no one.

"Hey, Curtis," I murmured. "I didn't see you there."

"Yeah. I just came back from making the rounds. Tibbot the madman was acting up again, yelling about how ghosts were coming in through the walls, trying to teach him necromancy. So he could raise them from the dead in exchange for his freedom."

"Nothing new there. Fat chance. They won't even let the most elite Scholars anywhere near that knowledge, if it even exists anymore." I returned my attention to the strand of hay. It smelled vaguely of horses. "You were saying something earlier?"

"I said they're bringing her in today. In a couple of hours, actually. She's going to be in cell 2B. That one's yours, right?"

I groaned at the thought of an additional charge. I was enjoying the lack of responsibilities recently, as two prisoners I was responsible for had been recently executed. It gave me ample time to look out the small windows in the prison hallways at the outside world, where soldiers trained, children played, and farmers walked past on their way to and from the market.

They belonged to the outside, a mystical and faraway land, a land where I had once inhabited in memories so distant and vague I sometimes wondered if they were lies. Any life I had led outside of Fortress was dead, buried, and forgotten. The cold stone walls of the prison enclosed the only home I knew.

Fortress's official name was Queen Ellyn's Reprisal Penitentiary. It was erected centuries ago on a rocky hill overlooking the city of Castlekeep, the capital of Lethania. The building was constructed from obsidian, five stories tall, with almost a dozen towers and spires decorating the slanted rooftop. It looked like a castle - an evil castle belonging to a vampire or warlock from childrens' bedtime stories, the ones that your parents would threaten you with if you didn't eat your vegetables, or so I heard from the few schoolmates who were willing to talk to me. The prison didn't have a name for the longest time - it was simply referred to as the royal prison or the Castlekeep prison, reserved for the most notorious and violent criminals of the country, and those who committed the ultimate crime, worse than murder - treason.

About a hundred years later, during the Black Magic War against Kothos, the bloodiest in the history of the two nations, the prison became crowded with war criminals. Kothos played dirty back then, everyone said. A Kothan assassin somehow managed to slip into the royal castle and murder King Arvis and Queen Ellyn's three children, Princess Anette, Princess Lizbeth, and Prince Percival, in their beds. Their attendants awoke from drug-induced sleep next morning to find their blankets spattered with blood.

No army could match the queen's wrath and sorrow. She was a revered magical prodigy far before marrying into royalty, and had continued to hone her craft even as she ruled alongside the king and bore his children. The history books say she walked to the shores of Magi Lake, on the border between Lethania and Kothos, clutching her magical dagger. She stabbed herself right through the heart, and her body fell into the lake, coloring it red with blood. Three thousand Kothan soldiers in a nearby camp perished in a mysterious fire that night. It spread and spread, and water seemed to only fuel it. The few survivors swore they heard the sobs of a woman among the crackling of the flames. The tragedy fueled the kingdom's thirst for blood and justice, and provided enough momentum to end the war mere months later.

Many years later, when the country cared about the names of buildings again, the royal court officially named the prison Queen Ellyn's Reprisal Penitentiary, and hired a stonemason to carve the words above the large double front doors. The name, poetic as it was, was quite a mouthful, so people replaced it a wide variety of alternatives, the most popular of which was "the Fortress". Some time and confusion later, the nickname was amended to "Reprisal Fortress", to differentiate the prison from actual military strongholds. However, for most prison workers, the prison was the only Fortress they knew of or cared about. For me, it was my only home.

Sergeant Greyfury, the prison warden, told me I was taken in at the age of 5. My parents had done something awful, he had said, when I woke up and asked where my parents were, and why I was in a strange room. They had been selling secrets to Kothos for almost a year, so the king had to lock them up to stop them from doing it, he'd told me. They had committed the ultimate betrayal. I was not allowed to see them, now, or ever, but I was assured they were safe, a fact that I had no means of verifying.

Fearing my knowledge or involvement in my parents' treacherous acts, the king ordered I be kept under a watchful eye. I was raised in Fortress, forbidden to leave its grounds, under the care of Faeyth Riverheart, a castle maidservant who volunteered for the job after her husband perished in the war and she lost her pregnancy from grief. I was treated about as well as I could hope to; I was under the care of a nurturing adult, my material needs were met and I received an education. Sergeant had me attend the school built next to the orphanage at the bottom of the hill, the Keep Garden School for Orphans. This was the only time I was allowed outside the boundaries of the prison. Faeyth escorted me to and from school every day, down the eroded path in the morning, up the same hill in the afternoon. The silver lining was I didn't have to walk. Instead, I was locked in a carriage, pulled by Faeyth's chestnut mare, Nelly, to prevent any attempts at escaping to freedom. At school, teachers scolded me whenever I talked to the other children too much; not that many of them ever did. I had a target permanently glued my back, labeled "TRAITOR".

As soon as I was old enough, I was put to work at the prison, helping to clean rooms and serve food. After I finished school, I was made a prison guard, serving the king to redeem myself for the crimes of my parents, for an indefinite amount of time. Sergeant promised me that I'd eventually earn my freedom. Year passed, monotonous and lonely, and I heard nothing of an end. Some days, I wasn't sure if I still had hope. Yet, every single day I watched the people in the city below, living their lives. I wondered where they were from, what they were thinking about, worrying about. I sometimes made up backstories for people I saw regularly. At times, it gave me a twinge of sadness to realize they would never know or appreciate their roles in my life.

Curtis was giving me a quizzical look. "Why the long face? You complain so much about being bored, I thought you'd appreciate breaking up the monotony a little."

"What do you mean, breaking up the monotony? It's just another addition to the daily routine. The same thing I've been doing for the past three years. Prisoners come and go. Nothing changes."

"Tristan, are you crazy? All the other guards would give an arm and a leg to be in charge of such a high profile prisoner."

"High profile? Wait - who are you talking about?" The strand of hay dropped to the floor, swaying gently as it fell to land on the ground between us. I reached into my cloth shoulder bag, rifling for the weekly bulletin, which I took as I reported in every Monday, but rarely read.

"Tris, you idiot, have you been living under a rock? You're probably the only one in the entire royal prison who hasn't heard of her, Tibbot included."

"Oh, spare me all that. Are you going to tell me who she is or what?"

"Her name is Kenzie Stormseeker. She's a spy from Kothos, is what they're saying. They caught her trying to get into the back archives of the grand royal library, you know, where all the top secret books are kept."

"Wait, did you say Stormseeker?" The Stormseekers were a famous noble family, made up of politicians, scholars, mages, and wealthy landowners. They were known to be loyal subjects to the king, and used their money and influence to support the Kothan war efforts, in turn gaining more money and influence. Therefore, they were our enemies in every way.

"Yep. She's their youngest daughter."

"Interesting." He had my full attention now. "I never got the impression that they weren't the type to be out on the front lines? That's generally delegated to people with significantly less wealth, if the things I've heard about them are to be believed."

I paused. "Of course, I may very well be wrong. It's not like I get out much."

"No, no, you're absolutely correct. I got the impression from the grapevine that she's a bit...wayward."

"Well, that's all well and good. Any idea what's gonna happen to her?"

Curtis shrugged nonchalantly. "We'll find out, yeah? You know how the king feels about spies and double agents, but at the same time, no one ever really wants to execute a pretty girl, him included. Her trial's not for awhile anyway. Think his highness has other things on his mind."

I heard a band of farmers on the eastern side of the nation were trying to start some sort of uprising. The reason for such had not reached the prison grapevine, although I guessed that they, like many of the citizens of Iethania, were tired of the long, endless war. King Sanson was known to prioritize harmony within his nation above all, even if said harmony sometimes involved quashing dissenting opinions.

"Figures. So she'll be here awhile, then."

Curtis nodded. "Should be enough to keep you busy, I'm hoping. You've been whining so much lately, it reminds me of Rana."

I narrowed my eyes at him, nettled at the comparison to his spoiled younger sister. "It's not my fault I can't leave the prison grounds."

"Soon, Tris, soon. Dealing with the Stormseeker girl might just be enough for his highness to think you've proved your loyalty."

"Maybe," I said, unconvinced. "I gotta go, Curt. Faeyth is expecting me to come help peel potatoes for dinner."

I walked past my friend toward the musty staircase at the end of the hallway. Four floors below us in the kitchen, Faeyth and the cook, Marian, were undoubtedly tutting about what was taking me so long.

"4 PM, Tris," Curtis called from behind. "I'll see you on the second floor at 4 PM to welcome our VIP guest."

There was no need to make such a fuss, I thought. I would be her guard, I was required to be present to welcome her to her new home.

At 3:30 PM, I wriggled out of my kitchen obligations and made my way to cell 2B. I opened the cell with the master key, a large, leaden weight chained to my belt not unlike the heavy steel balls chained to the feet of our most flighty prisoners. It was as neat and clean as when the last occupant vacated the space - I had long forgotten what fate he met. Who, after all, would have any means or reason to disturb its peace? A thick layer of dust had settled on every exposed surface. I cleaned what I was able, changed the pillow and sheets on the bed, then rinsed and filled the small water pitcher. I usually wouldn't go to such ends, but I also rarely had a female prisoner, especially one so young. It felt strange, to be doing something with the well-being of another human being in mind, let alone a prisoner. With the cell cleaned up, I propped the door open and stood outside, leaning against the cold metal bars.

At that exact same moment, I heard Curtis's footsteps coming up the stairs. He stood across from me, in front of a rusty sign reading "Cell 2F", and said aloud what I just realized.

"There are no other prisoners in this wing, are there?"

"Seems like it. Makes sense, given she's so 'high-profile', as you put it."

"Well, now we wait." Curtis's blue eyes stared into space, right through me. I wondered briefly what he was thinking, before turning my attention to the double doors at the end of the hallway.

An eternity later, we finally heard footsteps and the clang of metal against metal. I drew in a sharp breath.

She was about as tall, perhaps slightly taller than me. Her long curly brown hair was tied into a limp ponytail, and she was dressed in a plain white shirt and white pants, the standard attire for female prisoners. Her clothes were baggy, but I could tell she was athletic and slender. Her eyes were downcast, staring at her handcuffed wrists, but her head was held high, not in defiance, but seemingly more to protect what little dignity she had left. I noticed red marks where the metal dug into her skin. She was flanked by two uniformed officers, each with a hand tightly grasping her arm. I recognized them as senior prison guards Sir Steelcreek and Sir Flamebend. They nodded at Curtis briefly, but addressed me.

"Redthorn."

"Yes, sir." I saluted.

"This is prisoner 0727, Kenzie Stormseeker, of Kothos nationality. As you have certainly heard, she has been assigned to cell 2B, which falls under your responsibility," said Sir Flamebend, with a trace of something I could not quite grasp. Distaste? Confusion? Anger?

"Yes, sir," I said.

They marched Kenzie into the cell. Sir Steelcreek picked up the chain attached to the heavy steel ball in the corner of the room, and Sir Flamebend attached it to her leg, locking the cuff.

This was odd to me. The ball and chain was a punishment - and fiurther preventative measure - for misbehavior. I opened my mouth, and then closed it again at the consideration that she had likely already misbehaved.

Their prisoner now helpless to escape, the guards unlocked her handcuffs and hung them on his belt. The guards swiftly exited the cell.

"Lock the cell, Redthorn," Sir Steelcreek said shortly.

I did so.

"Let us know at the first sign of trouble."

"Yes, sirs!" And they were gone.

Suddenly unsure what to do, I looked at Curtis. He shrugged at me.

"See you at dinner, Tris," he said as he made for the staircase.

As his footsteps faded away, I was finally alone with my charge.

##

### **Chapter 2**

**She seemed to be checking out the features of the cell, not that there were many. Depressing gray walls. The simple cot. White pillow, white sheets, white blanket. A table and chair. A hole in the corner, for relieving oneself.**

Her expression was unreadable, but the sides of her eyes seemed to wrinkle in distress. What was she expecting, a quaint inn room?

Suddenly, she turned to face me, as if she just realized I was still there. I met her eyes, and tilted my head slightly as if to say "what".

"What am I supposed...to *do*?" she asked. Her voice was hoarse, but still strong, and almost musical, in a way. Or perhaps, I just hadn't heard any female voices that didn't belong to Faeyth, Marian, or one of the other servant girls since I finished school.

"What do you mean?" I asked dryly. "If you didn't want to get thrown into the Iethanian royal prison, don't commit crimes against Iethania."

My sarcasm went unnoticed. She had bigger concerns.

"No, that's not what I meant," she said impatiently. "There's nothing in this room. There's a desk and chair, but no books or paper or...anything! What am I going to do all day?"

I was taken aback, but regained my composure in a few beats. "Please, Miss Stormseeker. War criminals generally forfeit the right to suitable entertainment when they allow themselves to be captured by the enemy nation. You're not a noble here in Iethania."

Her dark eyes flared with a fire I had never seen from any prisoner. "Don't patronize me, jailer guy. I thought such a great nation would treat its prisoners at least as well as Kothos."

"I, uh...Don't call me jailer guy!" I snapped, without thinking. "I have a name. Tristan Redthorn." I didn't know why I said that. Most prisoners called me "hey you" or "you fuck".

"Redthorn...that's the family that betrayed your king years ago. I thought they were all rotting away in this same prison."

My face grew red. "What's it to you?"

"Absolutely nothing. Hey traitor, let's make a deal, alright? You call me Kenzie, and I'll call you Tristan."

"Miss Stormseeker, you are not in a position to bargain anything."

"Okay, traitor spawn."

I didn't want to deal with this. Her first name was shorter anyway.

"Fine, Kenzie."

"So I can't even have like, a set of quill and ink or anything?"

"I wouldn't count on it," I said. "Gods' sake, if you're really that bored - "

"Can you at least ask?"

"Fine, fine." I turned and headed for the kitchen, eager to be out of her presence.

Curtis was in the kitchen when I arrived, sitting in a seat at the big wooden table where the prison workers ate their meals. He was busy shuffling pieces of paper, and scribbling away with a large quill. I knew he was writing up reports for Sergeant. He didn't look up as I walked in and sat across from him.

"What are you doing?" I asked, even though I knew.

"Writing my weekly reports for my charges. I need to see about getting Tibbot moved to a more private cell."

"You just don't want to be in charge of him anymore." The private, high-security cells were guarded by the most senior prison guards. No one else was allowed in, including myself and Curtis. My parents were there, or so they told me. I could only take their word for it.

"How'd you guess?"

I didn't answer.

Curtis finally looked up at me. "So how is she?" he asked.

"Not what I expected, although I suppose I had no idea what to expect." I paused, unsure how to describe the bizarre interaction I had just experienced. "She asked what she was supposed to do, as in, she said she'd get bored. She wanted a set of quill and ink."

"That's interesting."

It was. For most of the prisoners, entertainment was the least of their concerns. If I had to estimate, out of any ten criminals at Black Fortress, at least eight would eventually be re-trialed and executed, some publicly, some done so secretly that crazy rumors abound regarding their fate, ranging from magic experiment to human sacrifice. They were well aware of their likely fate, and after exhausting their energy shouting threats and swear words at the guards, most spent their time praying, cursing, or staring blankly at walls. Occasionally, one would ask me my opinion on what he was choosing for his last supper. I always recommended Faeyth's chicken pot pie.

"So are you going to ask if she can have it?" asked Curtis.

"I suppose I have nothing better to do," I said. "I'll ask when I turn in my weekly reports on Sunday."

I retrieved the report sheets, along with my quill, from my shoulder bag, and turned to the first page. It was a neat chart, with seven rows for seven days of the week, and columns for each of my prisoners. I eyed their names, even though I knew them by heart. Quintus Cliffbreeze, the royal treasurer who embezzled tens of thousands of emerald eyes from the crown's war funds. He was fortunate his highness had spared his family a fate similar to mine, given the sheer magnitude of his crimes. Reuben Tusksplitter, who made no attempt to resist arrest despite stabbing his wife and her lover to death with a magical fire arrow a careless soldier left behind after a training session out in the fields. I heard the smell of charred flesh lingered for days. Linton Cloudrose, caught smuggling forbidden magical artifacts, the exact nature of which I did not know, from Kothos to Iethania. Lastly, Deven Bearwalker, who bragged about bombing the royal castle after a few too many pints of ale. King Sanson took those kinds of threats seriously. He had been in the longest, which meant the royal court would review his punishment soon. From my years of experience, his cell would be empty in a few weeks.

There was still room for two more columns, two more charges and two more condemned souls. I dipped my quill in my ink pot and scratched a capital "K" in the fifth column.

"How do you spell her name again? K-E-N-Z-Y?"

"Z-I-E," sighed Curtis. "S-T-O-"

"Stop, stop. I'm not that stupid."

"Kenzie Stormseeker," I wrote. I stared at her name for a few beats, and decided it had far too many e's.

I moved my quill to the empty row that began with "THURSDAY" in large capital letters, checking off each item on the list for each prisoner. Fed and watered, check. In good health, check. Behaving? Made no attempts to escape? No rebellious acts against prison staff? No suicidal behaviors or intent? King Sanson had strong feelings about his prisoners dying in no other hands than his own, through the proxy of his practiced and professional executioners.

Check, check. I wasn't sure if it was a blessing or curse that my charges had been so quiet lately. It was Deven who usually caused trouble if any, in the form of profanity and rude hand gestures that had long since become boring. On one hand, I was glad I didn't get drawn into conversations with Tibbot about whether the spider on his wall was a Kothan spying device, like Curtis did whenever he let his guard down. On the other hand, sometimes I wished for even the slightest deviation in routine to differentiate one day and the previous one, and the one before that, and the one before that, and...

Leaving the "additional notes" spaces blank, because there were none, I got to Kenzie's column. I would check on her later, I decided, as I was making the rounds to distribute the prisoners' supper.

"Tristan, Curtis," called Faeyth from the kitchen. "Supper's ready."

I jumped up, my pot of ink wobbling dangerously. Curtis glared at me as he erased a jagged line my sudden movement had caused him to scribble across the long paragraph he was authoring regarding Tibbot's behavior. He set his quill down, and followed.

"Thanks, Faeyth," I said graciously. "I'm starving."

Faeyth was one of the other few sources of warmth in the cold darkness of the Fortress. I wouldn't say she was like a mother to me - we had both held each other at a proper, safe distance, where we were as close as a guardian and child could be without considering the other family, because that word carried too many risky connotations and dangerous emotions. Still, she had watched me grow up, helped me with homework, escorted me to and from school every day for years, and comforted me when the none of the other students wanted me in their group for the fifth day in a row. Our apartment on the highest floor of the Fortress, overlooking the lake behind the castle, was the closest to a home I had ever known. That apartment was empty now. After I finished school, I moved into the prison barracks, where most of the guards and staff without families chose to reside. Faeyth moved to the maidservants' quarters. It was an implicit understanding; that I was no longer a child and did not, nor should I, need her anymore. Our relationship had changed forever, as we both knew it inevitably would.

Still, she was a welcome friendly face in a sea of professional indifference, especially when she was carrying a laden bowl of pork roast. As I eagerly served myself, Faeyth addressed me.

"Tris, I heard you're in charge of our VIP guest. It's been the talk among all of us." Us, referring to the maidservants, of course.

"Sure am," I said. "It's going to be interesting. It's already interesting, in fact. I'm going to take everyone's dinner up after this. I'll see her again then."

"What is she like?" Faeyth inquired curiously.

"She's...eccentric. Not like any prisoner I've had before."

"That's unsurprising. We rarely get nobility in Fortress, do we? Especially not Kothan nobility."

I shook my head. "I haven't exactly been around many nobles, but I feel like she's eccentric even for a noble."

Faeyth left it at that, perhaps waiting until I had seen her again to extract more details. I was beginning to feel a little like a frontline courier, or an eyewitness to a horrific crime.

"This is really good, Faeyth." I gestured toward my generous helping of pork roast.

"Thanks kiddo, but it's Marian's recipe. I just suggested she add some thyme."

I called a word of thanks to Marian, who gave me an appreciative wave before returning to prepare the prisoners' significantly less impressive suppers.

Fifteen minutes later, I handed my empty plate to Faeyth and picked four tin meal boxes out of a large crate. A maidservant, Clarissa, usually boxed the prisoners' meals for their guards to pick up, but I figured I might as well get my work done early if I could, and get some extra rest. I was feeling unusually tired, and I had a hunch why.

"Is their dinner ready? I'm going to take it up to them now if it is."

"Just about finished," said Marian. "Just need to take the cornbread out of the oven and cut it up."

"Tris," said Faeyth. "You need five boxes now, kiddo."

"Oh."

I silently picked up another box from the crate, and stacked them on the counter next to Marian's cornbread.

Limp string beans, cornbread, a few slices of dry chicken meat, half an apple. Five servings of each in five separate boxes.

I dumped the boxes in a smaller crate and headed upstairs. I stopped by each of my cells, pushing the boxes onto a small shelf accessible through a locked window on the doors. As I expected, some of them were sleeping, others clearly awaiting my arrival with a lethargic anticipation. The thrice a day delivery of their meals was the most exciting event in prisoners were as predictable as winter snow.

Although the second floor was the lowest of the five, I stopped by Kenzie's cell last. The twilight had already shrouded the hallways in shadows, making her cell's lamp, the only source of light in the entire hall, ever more eerie. I had been working at the Fortress long enough that it took quite a lot to frighten me; I believed the horrors mankind is capable of inflicting upon another are more terrifying than any bump in the night, or source thereof. Yet, as I approached cell 2B, my heart seemed to beat faster than I was comfortable with.

Kenzie was sitting motionless on her bed, facing the left wall, her hair blocking her face.

"Kenzie," I said in a softer voice than I expected. "I brought your dinner."

##

### **Chapter 3**

**She turned at the sound of my voice, hair still blocking the right half of her face. She brushed it aside. Her eyes focused on my crate, which I put down, and subsequently retrieved her box. My eyes couldn't help but linger on her features. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks seemed to reflect the dim lamp light a little more than would be usual.**

Had she been crying?

I almost opened my mouth to ask, but closed it before I could insert my foot. I unlocked the window, and slid the box onto the shelf. This was all my duties obligated me to do, but I lingered, making no move to pick up my crate and return to the kitchen. I wasn't sure what I was waiting for - did I think she was going to refuse food? There was nothing I was permitted to do about that. Many prisoners did pull the whole hunger strike thing, especially the more headstrong ones - or the more spoiled ones, who were naturally used to meals of a significantly better quality and taste. These acts of silent (or in some cases, not so silent) protest had long become laughable to the prison staff. In all but one rather memorable case, survival instinct would kick in, and the prisoner would soon be eating their meals with equal parts defiance and resignation. The exception to that - I was still in school when it happened, and only heard the details from Curtis and Faeyth - simply made his inevitable death slower and more painful than it needed to be.

Kenzie seemed to be frozen in place, her eyes vaguely gazing toward my direction, distant and unfocused.

"Your dinner is on the shelf on the door," I offered helpfully.

Her whole body let out a shudder, and she seemed to brace herself for a few seconds before standing up and walking to the door. She retrieved the box, removed the lid, put it beside her on the bed, and stared at its contents, her expression unreadable.

A twinge of annoyance tugged at me. "I'm sorry if it's not what you're used to," I said sarcastically. "This isn't your mansion in Kothos, if you haven't noticed by now." She could still be there, I thought to myself. It was her own choices that landed her in Cell 2B of Queen Ellyn's Reprisal Penitentiary.

She drew in a sharp breath. For a moment, I thought she might start crying.

"Shut up," she said. Her voice was more high-pitched than it was earlier. "You win, okay? You guys win. You got me." Her words echoed with hurt pride.

"That we did." My words lingered between us. They should have tasted sweet, but didn't. An eternity passed.

She finally moved to replace the meal box's cover, and placed the box on her desk. She proceeded to sit back down, her hair once again covering her face, and her expression.

"It's in your best interest to eat," I said, my voice more gentle. I was mildly regretting my snide words earlier; it was one thing if she was combative like many other prisoners, but I seemed to only be kicking her while she was down.

The fact that I was feeling even the tiniest drop of sympathy for a prisoner gave me pause, and a wave of disorientation washed over me. I quickly reassured myself that I had not had a female prisoner in living memory, especially one so young, so it was natural to feel different toward her. I swallowed. Remember your loyalties, I reminded myself. She's not your friend. She's the enemy. A bad person. She deserves to be here, unlike you. You still have a name to clear. To prove that you're not like your parents.

"I'm not hungry," she said. "I'll eat later."

"Okay," I said evenly. "I'll be back to pick up the box and silverware in the morning." I paused, then made to walk away, but stopped mid-step. "I see the warden on Sunday. I'll ask him about the quill and ink you wanted then."

She let out another shuddering breath. "Tha- Will he say yes?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I shrugged. "We usually don't do favors for our prisoners, but...you are a little bit of a VIP among the staff." I grimaced at the words.

"Don't let that give you any ideas. That's not a good thing. If the warden grants your request, it's probably because he appreciates you making his job a lot less boring for a little bit."

I heard her make a stifled cry of anguish, and whipped around before I could stop myself, but her face was still hidden.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," she said. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"That's what I've been saying about my life for years," I said bitterly. "And I'm still stuck here, dealing with human garbage all day every day. And unlike you, it wasn't even my fault that I'm in this mess."

I strode to the stairwell without looking back and slammed the door behind me.

That night, I dreamed of outside again. I could never decide if I wanted to have these dreams; they haunted me, wrapping around my body like tendrils and lingering long after I awoke and began my daily responsibilities. Yet, for a few fleeting moments, they allowed me to experience an alternate reality, a window of the life I could have had if my parents were peaceful, law-abiding citizens. I clung to these moments against my will and better judgment, craving the poisonous nectar of fantasy. More than once, I'd wake up with tears on my face, and impatiently wipe them away only to have more defiantly replace them.

These dreams would often have recurring motifs, like separate episodes of a play, written by different playwrights, but reusing the setting and, occasionally, characters. I would dream of myself chatting with the innkeeper and waitresses at the Castlekeep tavern, buying vegetables from the farmers' stalls at the market on Saturdays, sitting in the city square, by the fountain, just watching all the different people go by with a significantly better view than Fortress's narrow windows. I'd be a blacksmith one night, a horse trainer another, a minstrel the third. I'd have friends and neighbors and sometimes enemies, and meet new faces every week. Then, in the middle of a joke by Anna, my favorite barmaid, or a reprimand by the weapons shopkeeper for lingering too long, I'd wake up in my hard bunk, under my plain white covers, listening to Curtis shuffling around in his bed. That was usually when the tears would come.

This night, I dreamed I was at the public library, sitting at a table, a book open in front of me. I was taking notes on a piece of parchment with the quill Faeyth gave me as a present on my first day of school. She had trimmed the feathers to make it easier to write with, and painted them by hand, in the pattern of a rainbow.

*Loyalty, conviction,, determination*, I wrote. *Doing the right thing, not giving in to temptation or threats*. *Example of when Leofric demonstrated loyalty:...*

*My nineteen year old self was somehow doing my year four literature homework. I was taking notes on the story of Leofric Bronzeblood, a fictional Iethanian soldier in the factual Great River War against the now-conquered nation of Estium, which became the Riverwest District of Iethania. Due to his consistent poor performance as a soldier, Leofric was traded against his will to the Estian army in exchange for the release of two Iethanian generals. The Estians wasted no time in attempting to use this supposed betrayal to turn him against his country. He was offered money, women, land, freedom, in exchange for his knowledge and loyalty, but remained faithful to Iethania. The book detailed his elaborate plan of escape, and ultimate heroic return to his country.*

It had always given me mixed feelings.

I flipped the pages in search for the scene where Leofric slapped an Estian soldier for criticizing the Iethanian royal family. In the background, students and scholars rustled pages, scratched notes, and muttered words inaudible to me. Suddenly, a shadow fell over me, and I tensed.

The source of the shadow was a cloaked, hooded figure, about my height. The figure's face was hidden in darkness, but a few brown curls peeked out from under the hood. When the figure spoke, her voice was raspy and unnatural.

"Lies...useless...freedom...think...Tristan..."

She dragged out my name in an ominous hiss, and a suffocating sense of foreboding washed over me. I felt, in that moment, that my entire world, the few things I loved, the meager hopes I had for my future, could disappear in the wave of a mage's hand.

Then, before I had time to let out another breath, the figure was gone, and light shone on my book and parchment once more. People around me continued their scholarly business, with no indication they had noticed this frightening event.

As I surveyed my surroundings. my heart pounding in my chest, the figure's voice echoed softly, distorted, as if it was transmitting through a wall of water.

"Choose..."

Trying to convince myself that I was hallucinating from exhaustion, I attempted to press my quill to parchment again. However, my fingers would not obey commands, and after scrawling a series of uncontrolled messy lines, I looked up in defeat. My eyes landed on my book, but it was now written in a language I did not recognize. The words twisted and mutated before my eyes, making me dizzy...then tired...then...

I woke up, safe in my bunk in the barracks. It was still dark outside, and the sounds of rain and thunder indicated a storm had blown in during the night. My fellow guards were snoring and turning around in their sleep, their dreams wholly undisturbed by creepy cloaked figures.

I breathed heavily. I was safe. As much as I felt trapped in Fortress, I knew its security was top-notch, and no shadowy figures would be creeping on me in my sleep anytime soon. Going back to sleep was out of the question, so I carefully opened my dresser and slipped into my uniform.

"Mmm...Elise?" mumbled Curtis. The corners of my lips twitched. Even in my fog of anxiety and tension, I made a note to tease him about it in the morning.

On second thought, it was already morning. I gently picked up the small wooden hourglass on my bedside table, careful not to disturb the flow of sand. It was impossible to see in the darkness, but the sand was a bright shade of orange.

Orange, for the sun, said Eva, the girl with black pigtails and round cheeks in my fifth year class at Garden. She had taken me aside after school was over and pushed a small box into my hands. A small but elegantly carved hourglass was inside. Intricate patterns were carved into the wood pillars, but one of them was missing a small chunk, as if a rogue chisel had taken a bite there.

Her parents made hourglasses for a living, she told me. They were going to throw away this defect, but she stole it from the pile of garbage.

She blushed at her own words, and quickly amended that the hourglass was not at all garbage. I didn't care though. It had been years since I had gotten a present. It was fine except for the disfigured pillar, she said. The enchantments are intact. I thought you should have it.

This model is named Sun Blessing, she said. I thought you might need some... Her words trailed off, and she murmured that she felt bad for me.

I stared at the device as emotions gathered in my head like sand, trapped at the hourglass's constricted neck, pushing against each other, screaming to get out.

"Thorncreek!"

I almost dropped the box. Instructor Greenpeak was looking in my direction with a look of equal parts anger and dismay.

"What are you two doing? What's in that box? Hand it over!"

She marched to me, and I robotically handed her the box.

"Miss, it's just an hourglass," said Eva, anguished. "It's for Tristan."

"We'll see about that," she snapped.

She inspected every inch of the hourglass for fifteen minutes. What was she looking for? Secret messages? Enchantments? My heart sank in my chest.

Finally, she seemed satisfied, and put the box down on a nearby desk.

"Fine," she said shortly. "I've still got my eye on you, Thorncreek. Don't try anything funny."

Like I had a sense of humor, I thought bitterly. I picked up the box and left the classroom. Faeyth was waiting for me in the hall, humming to herself.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A girl in class gave me an hourglass," I said.

"Oh." A long pause. "They let you have it?"

"Yeah."

She grasped my hand, even though we both knew I wasn't going anywhere, and we walked to the carriage in silence.

I squinted to read the marks on the glass. It was 3:30 AM. Breakfast was in three hours.

I'd at least be first in line, I thought, as I pushed the door open and stepped into the musty hallway.

Even though the prison was always well lit, no one could deny it was more unsettling in the deepest hours of the night. Candles and magical lamps cast their quiet, yellow light on every corner of the building in a futile attempt to imitate the bright rays of the sun. Every movement, every noise was amplified by ghostly shadows and echoes. If an inmate was acting out, well, that simply made everything worse. I solemnly prayed I'd leave Fortress before my experience made me eligible to work the night watch.

The hallway was guarded by a night watchman at each end, by the stairwell, preventing unauthorized individuals from entering the staff living quarters. Their figures were shrouded half in murky lamplight and half in darkness, but I could easily recognize them by their height and posture.

I turned toward my left and wandered aimlessly down the hall. The guard whipped around at the sound of my footsteps, instantly tense and alert. His entire body was now illuminated, revealing his mature features and dark blue uniform, specially tailored to enable night watch guards to hide in the cover of shadows. He grasped a spear in his right hand, which was instinctively pointed in my direction.

"It's okay," I said hurriedly. "It's just me, Tristan."

Sir Roland Mistpeak retracted the spear, but did not relax his posture. He looked at me like I was walking away from a crime scene spattered with blood.

"Redthorn, what in the name of his majesty the king are you doing?" he asked stiffly.

"I apologize, Sir Mistpeak," I said. "I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep."

"So you decided to go for a little midnight stroll huh?" he demanded. "Where were you going to go, upstairs?"

Thrown off by his harshness, I replied, "Not really, sir. I just wanted to stretch my legs a little. Why? Am I not allowed upstairs at night anymore?" I added, before I could stop myself.

He bristled at this question. "You're allowed only because Sergeant hasn't forbidden it yet."

I stared.

"Listen, Redthorn," he said, lowering his voice for the benefit of no one. "We have never understood why Sergeant treats you the way he does, but assigning the Stormseeker girl to you makes me think he should have retired years ago."

"What - " I closed my mouth as quickly as it opened.

"Nothing can cleanse the traitor blood out of a person," he hissed. "You should have been locked up with your parents instead of granted fourteen years of free room and board." Which I would trade in a heartbeat for my freedom.

This was a sentiment I was not unfamiliar with. I clenched my fists, my nails digging into the palms of my hand. The red marks would linger for hours.

"I don't care," he said. "You're Kothan scum - traitor scum. You're no better than the people who killed the same queen this prison was named after. I don't trust you with that girl."

My throat burned. I imagined wrenching his spear out of his hands and impaling him, or myself, or both.

When would it ever be enough? Fourteen years of my life I had already paid to repent for a crime I did not commit. Sir Mistpeak could go home in the morning to his wife and daughter. He could stroll around the markets and town square as he pleased without having his loyalty questioned by everyone who laid eyes on him. He knew nothing - they all knew nothing - my life was a joke to them, a performance - something they could point and laugh at, but would never have to experience.

"I'm not a traitor," I said. "I'm not. And never will be. I'd die for King Sanson." The words echoed feebly in the empty hallway. I didn't stick around to see his reaction.

Back in my dormitory room, I laid back down on my bed, fully clothed, to wait for daylight. Outside, rain pounded relentlessly on the room's only window, like an inmate pounding on the bars of his cell.

##

### Chapter 4

I was indeed the first in line for breakfast the next morning.

"You're up early, Tris," said Faeyth cheerfully. She turned to me, and her eyes grew wide. "You look like you haven't slept all night."

Did I really look that bad? "It's fine," I said. "The thunder woke me up. Please don't worry."

I took my egg sandwich and walked away from her.

I waited for Curtis as I ate, but when he showed up fifteen minutes later, he only nodded in my direction before turning to talk to his fellow squire, Garin. He had mentioned the next round of examinations was fast approaching, I recalled. He was a sizable part of my world, but I was only a corner of his. Somehow, I had never fully gotten used to this simple fact. I chose to put it out of my mind for now.

Once again, I visited Kenzie's cell only after I delivered breakfast to my four other charges. I felt my heart beat faster as I walked down the hall to her cell. Was I nervous? Afraid?

Stop it, Tristan, I snapped impatiently at my own mind. She's just another prisoner, another person guilty of a terrible crime against Lethalia. Another person who squandered the freedom I craved so desperately.

"Breakfast," I called, as I unlocked the window. Kenzie was still sitting on her bed, facing the wall. I wondered if she had slept, or even moved an inch from that spot since I brought her dinner.

Remembering the night before, I eyed her desk. Her meal was barely touched, as if she'd made a few half-hearted attempts to consume it before giving up. Anger rose up in my throat. She was as spoiled as I expected her to be.

"Your dinner's gone bad by now," I said shortly. "Hand me the box - er, put it on the shelf, and I'll take it."

Slowly, she rose and replaced the box's cover, then walked to the door and traded it for her breakfast. As she approached the door, I became more and more aware of her breathing and body heat. My heart skipped a beat, but in seconds, she had returned to her original position on her bed.

"You better get used to prison food," I snapped, feeling the weight of the box as I tossed it into my crate. "I'm no fortune teller, but I can guess you're going to be here awhile."

"That makes two of us." Her words caught me by surprise.

I looked at her face. Black lines encircled her eyes, and she looked pale and tired, but she was no longer crying, and her words were calm and steady.

"I - " I drew in a sharp breath.

"Am I wrong?" she asked, emboldened.

"No," I said finally. "The difference is, you're behind bars, and I'm not. When you leave this place, you will be heading to the gallows, while I will be heading to a peaceful life as a civilian."

Kenzie laughed humorlessly. "You're an idiot if you believe that, Tristan. Plain and simple."

"I'm not an idiot," I said testily. "Everyone in Castlekeep knows you're going to be executed, ever since the news of your capture came out. What, are you planning on pulling a fast one? I'll have to report that to the warden, you know."

"I wouldn't tell you if I were," she said coolly. A short pause later, "I consider myself pretty smart, but I can't understand you."

She gazed into my eyes. "I pity you, Tristan Redthorn," she said slowly.

"Pity?" My jaw nearly dropped and blood pounded in my head. It was one thing if Curtis, one of the senior guards, or heck, even Nelly was saying that to me, if horses could talk. But a prisoner, someone on the wrong side, the business side of the iron bars, someone facing an almost certain execution - what - how -

My face twisted into a snarl. "You, pity me? You'd trade places with me in an instant if given the chance. Better ask your dark magic researchers back home to start working on a new hex."

Kenzie clenched her teeth. "I'm sure they would, if your army hadn't burnt down half their facilities and killed hundreds. It doesn't matter though, because I don't want to." She emphasized the last four words with vitriol.

"You don't want to live?" I asked derisively. "I suppose I wouldn't either, if I were you."

I shot her a look of utter contempt.

"You had a life most people can only dream of, and you threw it away because you wanted to be a little hero. And look where you are now. The laughingstock of Lethania. The shame of Kothos. Your failure, your stupid choices, on blast for everyone to see. Be as cocky to me as you want. It won't change a thing."

I felt the air around us freeze, and my head spun for a split second with the weight of what I had said.  
 Kenzie leaped off the bed, all her lethargy gone. She lunged at me with the ferocity of a wave in a stormy ocean, but like the wave hitting the concrete walls of our seaside citadel, she was swiftly rebuked by the cold steel bars of her cell. Unable to stop her momentum, she crashed into the bars, smacking her forehead in several places. I saw red marks materialize at the points of impact.  
 She grasped the bars and shook them with an unadulterated rage that would put Tibbot to shame. My training kicked in, and my right hand reached for the tranquilizer spray.  
 "Miss Stormseeker! Control yourself, or I will need to subdue you by force and report you to the warden. This is your only warning."  
 "You...are...evil..." she hissed, her voice pulsing with emotion. "Provoke me like this so you can report me to your puppetmaster and have me thrown into the torture chambers? Or do you just want my death expedited?"  
 "I want neither of those things," I replied, my voice also shaking a little. "I want the kind of life you squandered. You would never understand."  
To my astonishment, she seemed to relax slightly and lowered her gaze to look at the ground. Tears were once again clinging to her eyelashes, threatening to make their escape.  
 "I apologize," I said stiffly, as my caustic words burned in my chest. "I am your jailer, not your adjucator."  
 "You would never understand," she repeated. She let out another harsh laugh. "Pot, kettle much? Tell me, can your tiny sheep brain even try to comprehend the possibility that I had very good reasons for what I did? That the reality of luxury and freedom might be different from the fantasy you've built in your simple mind? That to me, there are more important things in the world?"  
 "What -"  
 "Yo, Redthorn!"  
 Another squire, Otto Iceforest, was calling to me from the other end of the hallway.  
 "What's taking so long? Faeyth is asking for you. She says she needs extra help chopping tomatoes or something. And she probably wants those boxes back."  
 "Coming," I said, groaning inwardly. Boredom was often preferable to kitchen duty, with the suffocating steam and constant banging of pots and pans. Not that I was often asked - was one of the kitchen girls sick again?  
 I felt Kenzie's eyes on my back as I joined Otto and headed down the stairs. As we descended, he turned to me.  
 "Redthorn, you look shaken up. Something happen?" I listened for concern in his voice, but it was not strongly present.  
 I shrugged.  
 "Is the Stormseeker girl giving you trouble?" he asked, his eyes wide.  
 "Sorta," I said in a voice that dissuaded further questioning.  
 "You know you should tell Greyfury if some thing's bad, right?"  
 "Of course I do. She's just upset that prison food isn't fit for nobility, that's all."  
 Otto chuckled dryly and made no further comment.  
 "Found your boy, Faeyth," said Otto nonchalantly, as we entered the kitchen. I grit my teeth at being called boy. He was younger than Curtis.  
 "Hey, kiddo," said Faeyth. She was transferring plump, red tomatoes from a sack on the floor to a crate on the countertop, next to a massive knife and equally massive cutting board.  
 "Bess, take those boxes from Tristan," she called, before turning to me. She waited until the girl was out of earshot before asking, "So how is she?"  
Chop. "She's...she's..." The recent heated interaction we had shared was still fresh in my mind.  
 "She's unlike any prisoner I've ever had in all my time here," I finished. Chop.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Faeyth. "Is she rude? Hostile? Acting strange? Kiddo, you know you need to tell Greyfury if something's wrong." She looked intently into my face. Steam rose from the pot of water boiling on the stove behind her.

Annoyance rose up my back like a shooting pain. I wasn't entirely sure why.

"Of course I know I need to tell him if she's acting up," I snapped. "I've been doing this for years. I don't need you to tell me. It's nothing like that anyway."

I expected Faeyth to be angry; it had been years since I'd spoken to her like that. But she wasn't. Instead, her brow furrowed with concern and she placed a hand on my shoulder. I flinched, but she didn't retract it.

<Tristan snaps at Faeyth>

<Tristan gets called to meeting>

<everyone is tense>

<Sgt. comes in and gives speech about threat>

<Tristan panics, asks Sgt. what he should do>

<is told to learn to defend himself, grabs a bunch of books>

<returns to kitchen, sees they're magic books, comes back to exchange but isn't allowed>

<begins to study magic>

"Tristan," said Faeyth, jerking me out of my reverie with a squeeze of my shoulder. "You can eat later if you like, but your charges are expecting their food on time."

She was carrying five boxes in her arms, which she placed in front of me.