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# REIGN *of* MIST

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BOOK II: THE OREMERE CHRONICLES

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HELEN SCHEUERER

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Published by Talem Press, 2018

An imprint of Writer's Edit Press

[www.talempress.com](http://www.talempress.com)

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First printing, 2018

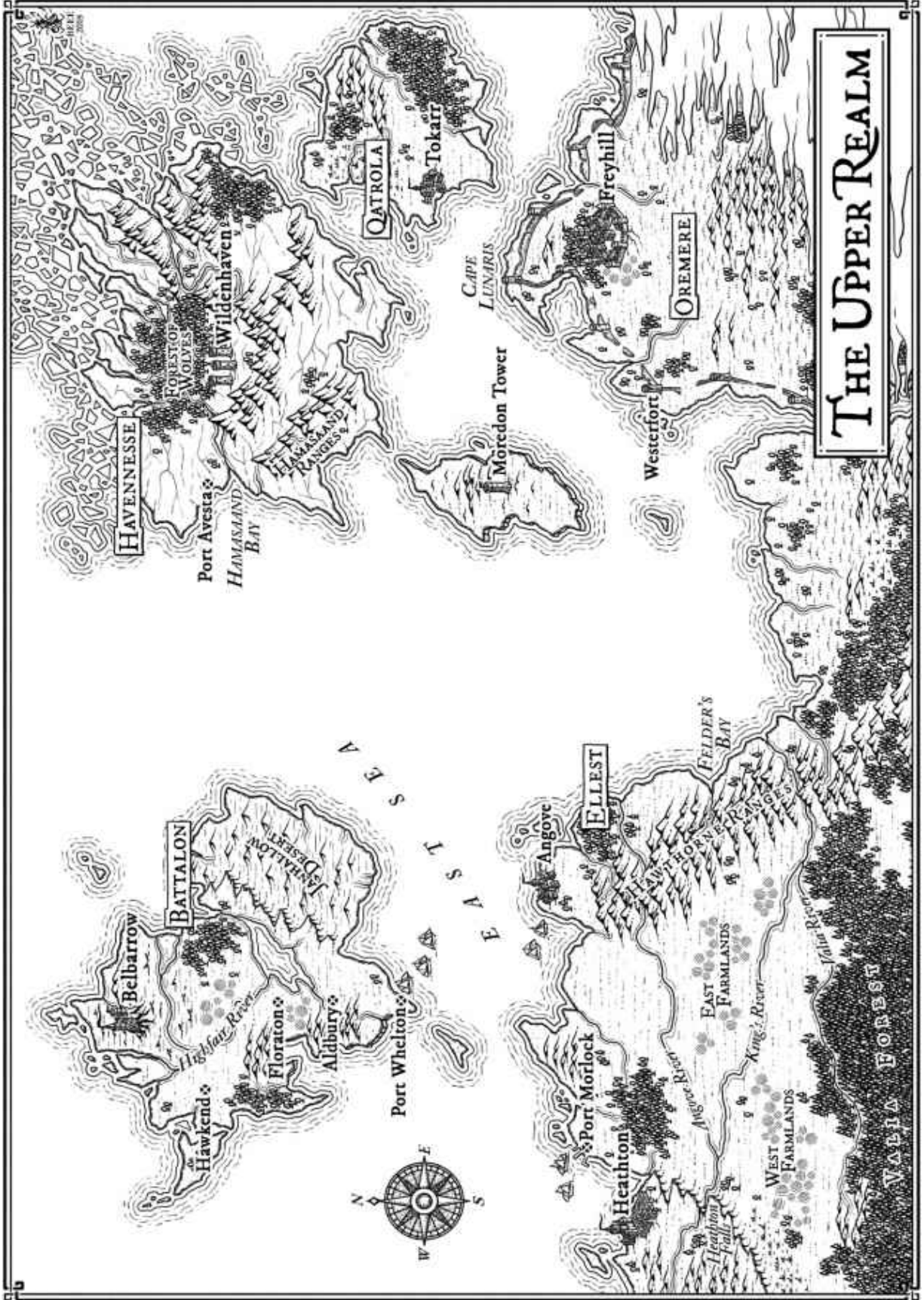
Print ISBN 978-0-9941655-7-2

Ebook ISBN 978-0-9941655-6-5

Cover design by Alissa Dinallo

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*This one's for sisters.  
Most of all, it's for Yasmin Scheuerer.*





## PROLOGUE

From a clifftop overlooking the roiling mist, a woman watched a ship smash upon jagged rocks. Squinting into the violent wind and rain, she saw it shatter into pieces, a single survivor – a girl – flung from the wreckage into the churning foam. The waves pummelled her, no doubt dragging her over unforgiving coral and filling her lungs with salt water. The girl washed up unconscious on the coarse, gravelly sand, the lapping waves breaking over her calves. All that remained of her ship were floating splinters of wood, and a single sail, filled with pockets of air, bubbling at the sea's surface.

The orange light of dawn was muted by the mist. The woman was already eating her cold breakfast when down below, the newcomer woke with a start, the tide creeping up her body. She was injured – that much was clear as she hauled herself through the wet grit of the shore.

From her hiding spot, the woman watched on, ever vigilant, following the girl's struggles over the uneven terrain. The girl didn't give up. She dragged herself across the dunes, heading inland, only pausing when she reached the crest of the shore. There, on unsteady feet, she stood, staring out onto the misty moors and the ruined remains of a great fortress in the near distance.

The woman pulled her cloak tight, bracing herself against the dying storm, and began the descent of the cliff face, a ghost in the shadows. She followed the girl, close enough to hear her laboured breathing and muttered curses. Close enough to see the foreign markings on her wrist.

The woman continued after her. She wanted to see what the newcomer made of Oremere.

## CHAPTER 1

The fortress was formidable. Its sheer vastness overwhelmed Bleak, even in its broken state. As far as she could see, there were old watchtowers, turrets, fallen slabs of stone wall, and a keep; in fragmented pieces, yet somehow still magnificent. A long time ago, it would have been an impenetrable stronghold, but now ...

The colours were different here, softer and sapped of their brightness, thanks to the lingering mist. As she staggered into the ruins, it swirled around her ankles and settled on her skin. Despite her weakened state, the soft thrum of her magic was ever-present, whispering back to it.

It was dusk when she reached the first crumbled watchtower. Half of the structure still stood, while the rest lay in a broken pile of rubble in its shadow. Bleak ran her fingers across its rough stones and felt the velvet petals of the little red flowers with black centres that grew in its fractures. But she didn't dare stop here; she wouldn't get up again.

Her journey from Heathton had lasted days, maybe a week or two. She didn't know. It all had blurred into a mess of blood, storms and mist. Now finally, she found shelter from the wind by a thick wall of stone, praying that it wouldn't come crashing down on her in her sleep. She didn't have the energy for more questions and investigation. She didn't have the energy to build a much-needed fire. She didn't have the energy to do anything, and so at last she allowed herself to shrug off her spare rope and pack. She rummaged for the water canteen and, finding it, put it to her cracked lips. Taking a measured sip, she savoured the cool moisture on her dry, fat tongue. It took all her willpower not to guzzle the whole canteen then and

there. She had to make her supplies last if she wanted any chance of finding answers in Oremere.

With her back pressed against the cold stone, and a frayed length of rope clutched in her hands, Bleak closed her eyes. At last, after the longest day of her life, she could sleep. She felt the exhaustion tugging at her consciousness, inviting her into a heavy, dreamless slumber. Relief washed over her. Escape was near. But just as she was about to drift over that edge, she heard something.

Her eyes flew open.

A deep, wheezing breath rattled from within the fortress. It set Bleak's teeth on edge. Stomach churning, she dropped her rope and got to her feet. Despite the pain, she crouched, dagger unsheathed at her side.

*Who's out there? Should I make myself known? Or will it only lead to further trouble? Surely I've had enough trouble for one lifetime?*

The wheezing breath rasped, in and out, in and out, and Bleak's heart hammered against her sternum. Behind her, some of the stone wall crumbled and fell noisily to the ground as she brushed against it. She cursed.

'Who's there?' she called out.

She only heard more ragged wheezing.

Whoever they were, was it possible that they were in a worse state than she? Wincing at the pain shooting through her ribs, Bleak stepped towards the noise, pulse racing.

She had no torch, and despite the moonlight, the ruins before her plunged into darkness.

Something *snarled*.

Gods, what was she getting herself into? She moved forward, inch by inch, straining to make out any distinctive shapes. And then, she fell over it. A huge, furry mass at her feet.

It roared in pain, and she scrambled back. It was clearly dangerous. *Incredibly* dangerous. But it didn't move. Bleak backed away from the growling thing, her own breathing hitching. She didn't know where its head was, and she wasn't going to risk reaching out blindly only to have her hand ripped off. Whatever it was, it hadn't killed her yet, which was a good sign. That was what she kept telling herself as she crept back to her own camp, groping her way through the archways and broken walls.

The cold stone grating against her spine made for a poor bed, and the nearby ragged gasps for breath continued well into the night and early hours of the morning. She kept her face turned towards the creature, not quite able to assure herself that it wouldn't slaughter her in her sleep. She dozed fitfully; every time she was on the verge of sleep, the wheezing jolted her awake, sounding closer than before.

SUNLIGHT HIT THE RUINS, and Bleak felt worse than she had the previous day. Her eyes were puffy and sore, and her body ... She pressed a tentative hand to her side and withdrew it almost instantly with a sharp intake of breath. She'd cracked multiple ribs. Every time she inhaled, jagged pain rippled through her. She could still hear the rasping breath from last night, though it was shallower this morning. She couldn't wait any longer, she *had* to know what was there. Supporting herself on yesterday's staff, she followed the sound to another ruined chamber and stopped short, clapping a hand over her mouth.

There, in the misty morning light, lay the mangled body of a teerah panther.

She stumbled back. These creatures were *legends*, myths used by parents to scare their children into decent bedtimes and eating their greens. *They didn't exist*. And yet, the creature locked eyes with her, his pointed teeth bared in a hair-raising snarl. But he didn't move.

Bleak looked over the beast. He was the size of a horse, though if the tales were true, they were rumoured to grow much larger. However, the creature before her now was broken. He had been in a fight, or *many* fights, by the looks of things. His short, silvery-black fur was matted with blood from open wounds. Some of the cuts were deep enough that Bleak could see white fleshy tissue beneath – or was it bone?

The teerah was so injured and malnourished that he could do no more than hiss at her presence, and follow her movements with suspicious eyes.

Bleak's stomach rumbled loudly, and she steadied herself against her staff, light-headed. When was the last time she'd eaten? She couldn't remember. She hobbled back to where she'd left her pack and stood at the entrance to the ruins, taking in the view before her. Misty moors stretched across the land. The desolate plains reached out to a hazy horizon, with no landmarks save for the one Bleak now stood upon.

*Oremere*. She'd made it. Against all odds, she was finally here, where the answers she needed lay somewhere deep in the mist.

She turned back to the fortress, spotting the same velvety-red blooms she'd seen at the watchtower ruins the day before. They grew sparingly in the cracks of the stone, creeping up the broken walls and across the rubble on the ground like ivy.

*Now what?* Bleak heaved her pack to the ruined chamber with the teerah panther. Despite her injuries and dwindling supplies, something drew her towards the beast. The big cat watched her, furious that he couldn't pounce upon her for the kill. His razor-sharp claws were out, but he didn't have the strength to swipe at her. When Bleak settled down opposite him, he closed his eyes.

Bleak raised her water canteen to her lips and nearly vomited. The tepid liquid sluiced into her empty belly, making her queasy. She raised one of the last few seed bars to her lips and tentatively nibbled at it. It was dry and tasteless, sticking to the roof of her mouth and soaking up any moisture the few sips of water had given her.

The teerah panther was watching her again.

She wondered how long he'd been lying there, suffering. With all the remaining energy she could muster, she shuffled closer to the animal, ignoring his snarls. He couldn't hurt her, that much was clear. Unsure of the feeling that had overcome her, Bleak lifted his head with both of her hands and rested it in her lap. He hissed and struggled weakly, but gave up soon after. Dismissing her earlier thoughts of rations, Bleak put the canteen to his mouth and tipped precious water in, some spilling out onto the stone beneath them. The teerah choked and spluttered. She waited and tried again. This time, he swallowed.

'May as well quench our thirsts together,' Bleak told him. 'Though, I can think of better things to drink.'

His big tongue licked at the spilt water on the stone.

'What happened to you, friend?' Bleak said, scanning over the horrific wounds littering the beast's once magnificent body. A low growl rumbled from the big cat, but he didn't move. Bleak rested her dirty, bloodied hand on his head, finding soft fur there.

If she hadn't been in so much pain, Bleak would have laughed. Here she was, in the supposed secret fifth continent of their realm, with a teerah

panther's head in her lap. The things she'd done, the things she'd been through to get here ... If it wasn't so tragic, it would have been funny.

After a time, she retrieved her pack once more and brought it closer to where she sat with the panther. She fed him some of her dried meat, piece by piece. He was probably used to huge hulking slabs of fresh game.

*Beggars can't be choosers*, Bleak mused.

Her own thirst and hunger had abated, which she knew was a dangerous sign. Her body was tiring. Finally, she slept.

SHE DREAMED of the weeks that had just passed. Of Henri, of Swinton, of Fiore and of Bren. Where were they all now? It felt like an age since they had crossed the rural counties of Ellest, tensions taut between them. Down in the cells of Heathton Castle's dungeon, Swinton had told her that Henri and Bren had returned to their homes, and Bleak had been relieved. Much better for her childhood friend, Bren, to be back with his brothers and by the sea, than amidst the corruption of the capital. Much better for Henri to be back with the kindred of Valia.

Images of the Hoddinott inn flashed in her mind. Silent screams for mercy. Eyes running with red. She had snapped; a hidden part of her ability had somehow been unlocked and unleashed on a dozen men. She remembered scrubbing the blood from her boots, and the smell of burning flesh as the fire they had lit had consumed the inn. Thank the gods Bren had returned to Angove. Thank the gods only three other people knew of what had happened there. She gnawed at the inside of her cheek as she slept, reliving the mess she'd created for herself.

Bleak opened her eyes to find it was night again. The head of the teerah panther was still in her lap, and for a moment, she thought he was dead. But she leaned in and heard his shallow, raspy breath, saw his torso move as he clung to life a little longer.

'I can't let you die nameless,' she whispered to him, her pity for the mauled animal twisting her insides. She stroked his matted fur, and he didn't even growl this time, so close was he to death. Perhaps he didn't want to die alone either.

'Rion,' she said. 'Rion, a strong name for the beast you once were.'

She poured some water into her palm and forced him to drink. She wet her own tongue, not even caring that the canteen was nearly empty. She

wondered if they would both die here. Together. Before she found any answers.

BLEAK DIDN'T DIE. Nor did Rion. She woke the next day with a raging hunger and a searing thirst, but stronger than the day before. She shared the last of her dried meat and water with Rion, and then took up her staff, leaving her pack by the big cat, and set off. She was determined to explore the ruins if she wasn't on death's doorstep. Who knew what she could uncover amidst the rubble.

Her ribs were agony, but she couldn't stay still any longer. The epic stone walls, archways and remaining spires looked out to the East Sea, and once again Bleak wondered what the fortress had guarded. Mist swirled across the tall grass beyond it, concealing anything that might be out there.

*Mist dweller.* Allehra's words hadn't ceased to haunt Bleak. And as the words churned in her mind, the mist seemed to come alive on her skin, beckoning the magic that pulsed beneath it. Gritting her teeth, Bleak pushed on through the ruins, looking for signs of other people, and more importantly, for water.

With the canteen under one arm, and the staff supporting her under the other, she continued on, marvelling at the red blooms that seemed to follow her. She moved her staff forward and knocked something on the ground, sending it clattering across the stones. Squinting, she found what it had been – a compass. With much effort, she bent down to retrieve it. The dull silver was warm, though the sun was barely hitting the fortress. Bleak turned it over in her free hand; it was unadorned but for a leather string, and seemed to be working. Shrugging, she tied it around her neck and continued through to the next chamber. As she ducked under yet another archway, goosebumps shot across her skin and instinct told her that she was not alone.

'Rion?' she called out, as though the panther would answer her. He'd just as likely eat her, had he the strength to move an inch.

She was sweating with the effort it took to manoeuvre herself around the broken stones and uneven ground. Mopping her brow with her sleeve, she felt the scab on her forehead come away, and fresh blood begin to trickle out of the old wound. Swearing under her breath, she hopped clumsily, trying to turn back the way she had come. She shouldn't have

walked so far, not when she was still so weak. And what if she got lost? It was possible – the fortress was huge.

She started to clamber back through the ruins, and was so busy berating herself that she almost missed the puddle of water at her feet. Knees cracking as she got down on all fours, she blanched at the sight of her own reflection. In all her life of bar fights, drinking and street living, she'd never looked this terrible. Her face was thin and gaunt, the skin around her eyes was black and bruised, and the cut on her forehead was a bloody mess. She tucked the loose flyaways of her matted hair behind her ears. Gods, if only Senior and Bren could see her now.

Stifling a moan of pain, she bent closer to the water and sniffed it cautiously. It didn't smell like anything, but she'd heard plenty of stories about people getting lost in the wilderness who died from drinking stagnant water. With a helpless shrug, she unscrewed the lid of her canteen and pushed it into the puddle, letting the water bubble in. She was damned if she did, damned if she didn't, she decided. She'd have to boil the water later. At least that way most of the toxins would be killed.

Red-faced and body drenched with sweat, Bleak eventually found her way back to Rion and the camp. He snarled in greeting, but Bleak was convinced that his heart wasn't really in it this time.

'A little gratitude wouldn't hurt,' she muttered to him as she struck a piece of flint and lit the tinder for the fire. While she stoked the flames, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

This time, she *knew* someone was watching her – she could feel it. Carefully, she propped herself up with her staff, and unsheathed her dagger.

'Show yourself,' she said, her voice sounding stronger than she felt. 'Who are you?'

Her words echoed amidst the ruins, and once again, she felt stupid. Perhaps she was becoming delirious. She's struck her head one too many times and eaten one too many seed bars. Perhaps Rion was a hallucination as well ...

Just as she was about to lower herself back down to the ground, rock crumbled nearby. Bleak gasped and backed up, knocking over her canteen.

A cloaked figure emerged from atop one of the walls. Laced black boots landed deftly as the stranger jumped down to where Bleak stood. Rion snarled in earnest this time, even getting up on his haunches to bare his teeth.



‘Easy there,’ said a familiar voice.

Thin, feminine hands lifted to pull down a crimson hood.

Bleak gaped. ‘You!’

The woman took a step forward. Bleak would know those graphite-grey eyes flecked with green anywhere.

‘Henri,’ Bleak breathed, staring at the reigning warrior Queen of Valia.

Henri’s long hair, usually pulled tightly into the traditional side braid of the kindred, now hung loose around her face, cropped just below her jaw.

‘Close,’ said the woman, ‘but not quite.’

## CHAPTER 2

Bleak stared open-mouthed at the woman before her. She was Henri's likeness in every respect, bar her short hair and lack of Valian leathers. Everything else was the same: the sharp features, the eyes, the build – they even moved like one another, with the same silent, predatory grace.

'What?' Bleak spluttered.

'My name is Sahara,' the stranger said, tucking that midnight-black hair behind her ear. She watched Bleak's eyes widen. 'Henri is my sister.'

*Sahara ...* The name sounded familiar to Bleak. A distant memory tugged at her.

*Sahara is dead*, Henri had yelled at Allehra after Bleak had trained with the Mother Matriarch. The raw emotion in those three words had stoked Bleak's curiosity, but she hadn't had the nerve to question the warrior. It had been only in the days leading up to her imprisonment that Henrietta of Valia had spoken of her twin disappearing into the mist.

*'I swear I felt the moment her heart stopped in there ...'*

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat. 'They ... They think you're dead,' she said. 'Is that what you wanted them to think?' Her voice quavered.

Sahara shook her head. 'That's what I wanted to be true. The mist ... It had been deadly for centuries. So when I walked in, it was to end my life.'

Bleak stared at the ground, shifting from foot to foot. Finally, she glanced up. 'You're truly Henri's sister?'

Sahara's eyebrows rose and she gestured to her face with a sardonic smile. 'Is this *really* not proof enough?'

She tried to focus on Sahara's thoughts, which clouded with emotion as her gaze swept over the markings on Bleak's wrist. There was no single truth to latch onto. 'You could be bewitching me somehow.'

'I could,' Sahara allowed. 'But I'm not.'

'How do I know for sure?'

Sahara pointed to the dark markings she'd been studying. 'My mother gave you that.'

Bleak said nothing. *Is this a trick?*

Sahara crouched down and rolled up the leg of her trousers. Wrapped around her ankle was a similar pattern of dark-blue swirls.

'She created this for me when I was nine,' Sahara explained. 'She was certain it would draw out some sort of hidden Ashai power. Alas, I remained a perfectly average Valian.'

'There's no such thing as an average Valian,' Bleak heard herself say.

'So you *have* spent some time in the forest, then. That's the sort of thing a Valian would say,' Sahara said, momentary fondness flickering across her face.

'Is that what it does?' Bleak asked, touching the marked skin on her wrist. 'Draws out power?'

'You tell me. I imagine you've had your own experiences with it?'

Death flashed before Bleak. Once leering faces, blood leaking from glassy eyes. Piercing screams she'd heard beneath the waves. She'd had her own experiences alright.

'We need to get out of the open,' Sahara said, no doubt noting Bleak's paling face. 'And just as well you didn't drink that,' she added, nodding to the spilt water. 'Tell me, what's your name?'

'Bleak.'

Sahara raised a brow. All at once, the Valian's thoughts came crashing into Bleak's mind: her observations, the gleaming surface-level memories of the past few days. An argument with a scruffy, bearded man. Scavenging for weapons amidst the ruins, and then – Sahara's first sighting of Bleak, washed up on the shore. The Valian had watched Bleak journey from the beach and find shelter in the rubble. At first, she hadn't known if she could trust the newcomer, until her eyes had fallen on the markings around Bleak's wrist – she'd recognised her mother's work.

Sahara made to start walking. Rion snarled, saliva foaming around his mouth.

‘Interesting choice,’ she said. ‘To water and feed the lethal beast.’

‘Did you do that to him?’ Bleak threw at her, gesturing towards the teerah’s wounds.

‘Gods, no,’ Sahara said. ‘I wouldn’t go near one of those things with a ten-foot stick.’

‘What happened to him, then?’

‘There’ll be time for that later. We need to move somewhere more secure. Ines has eyes everywhere.’

‘Ines?’

‘The bitch who calls herself Queen of Oremere. Queen of the Upper Realm. We’ll speak of it later,’ Sahara said, hoisting Bleak’s pack on her shoulders.

*Queen of Oremere.* The phrase snagged on something deep within Bleak’s memories. It didn’t sound right. But whatever memory had stirred settled back into the dust, lying dormant.

She pushed the uneasy feeling aside. ‘Where are we going?’

‘My camp.’

‘Your camp? Is it far?’ she asked, glancing at Rion.

Sahara shrugged. ‘Depends what you think far is.’

Frowning, Bleak approached Rion and crouched down beside him. He glared warily at the two women.

‘Rion,’ Bleak whispered. ‘You gotta get up.’

Sahara’s eyes bulged. ‘You can’t be serious?’

In that moment, Bleak knew she was Henri’s sister without a shadow of a doubt. Their tone of incredulity had the same inflections, the same matching facial expressions.

‘I don’t want to leave him here to starve.’

‘Then put him out of his misery. We can’t take him.’

‘I won’t leave him,’ said Bleak, plonking herself down next to the beast.

Sahara studied Bleak, eyebrows raised. And then did something that Henri never would have done. She threw her head back and laughed. It came from deep within her belly, and her eyes lit up with amusement. ‘Whatever did my sister do with you?’

‘Yelled at me, mostly.’

More laughter. ‘I can imagine. You’re clearly no Valian. And I don’t mean that as an insult.’

Bleak found herself grinning.

‘Well,’ said Sahara, ‘if you can get him to move, by all means bring him along. No doubt he’ll try to slaughter us in our sleep, but we’ll figure that out when it comes to it.’

Bleak nudged the teerah panther. ‘Rion,’ she coaxed. ‘Get up, come on ...’

He growled.

Bleak shoved him a little harder. ‘You have to come with us, or you’ll die.’

Another growl.

‘Perhaps he wants to die?’ Sahara said. ‘It looks like he’s been through a lot.’

‘If he wanted to die, he wouldn’t have drunk the water or eaten the food.’

Sahara shrugged. ‘Why the attachment?’

‘What?’

‘Why do you care?’

Another very un-Henri-like question. Henri never involved herself in others’ emotions or motives, and here was her twin sister, openly asking questions so that she might understand Bleak better.

Bleak considered it. She cared because she and the beast had been through something together. Feeling the whisper of death alongside the beating heart of another creates a thread, a connection. But it was more than that with Rion, Bleak realised. Deep in her bones, she had started to feel a bond awakening, a buried instinct that told her the teerah panther was friend, not foe. How could she explain that, though?

Eventually, she sighed. ‘I don’t know ...’

Upon her words, a fierce, distant roar filled the air. It wasn’t Rion. Another sounded. The earth-rumbling noise sent a cold shiver down Bleak’s spine, and Rion’s hackles rose.

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

Sahara’s mouth set in a grim line. She nodded to Rion. ‘That’ll be his pride – his pack.’

‘Are they looking for him?’

‘No,’ Sahara said. ‘They’re contained in a pit beyond the walls of Freyhill, receiving the same treatment as he did.’

Bleak’s stomach churned as she looked to where Sahara pointed in the distance. ‘Why?’

‘Ines keeps them confined and tortures them, then sets them upon her enemies as she needs. The torture makes them as brutal as their captors.’

Bleak looked down at Rion, pity for him hitting her in waves. ‘That’s ...’

‘Horrible, I know.’ Then, on a sigh, Sahara said, ‘Wait here.’

Before Bleak could respond, the woman was off, her crimson cape billowing out behind her as she moved like liquid through the ruins.

Bleak tried not to look at Rion’s wounds. The thought of someone hurting him like that set her teeth on edge. She absent-mindedly stroked the big cat’s head and he didn’t object. Maybe he would kill her when he recovered. And if he did, she wouldn’t blame him, not after what he’d endured at the hands of one of her kind.

Sahara emerged, pulling a wooden cart after her, one of the wheels waving uselessly above the ground.

‘Get him in here,’ she said. ‘You take his front – I’m not dealing with those teeth.’

Despite the snarling and weak swiping of claws from Rion, the two women managed, with much effort, to get the beast into the cart.

‘If Henri could see me now ...’ Sahara muttered.

Together, they hauled the cart through the ruins, with Rion hissing every time they struggled over a particularly bad patch of rubble. When Sahara caught Bleak clutching her ribs and wincing through the pain, she insisted on taking the whole load.

‘No point in making yourself worse,’ she said. ‘Not far to go now anyway.’

Sahara led them deep into the fortress, where the red blooms became more and more prominent and the stone became sturdier. Bleak grimaced as the Valian’s thoughts got louder, and her temples began to ache.

*What will Geraad make of her? After all this planning ...? And the beast ... Will he see the connection? What this could mean for us, for Oremere?*

‘What ... What do you know of this place?’ Bleak asked, trying to focus on the task at hand. Hearing more of Sahara’s thoughts right now would only feed the ember of panic that had begun to flare to life.

‘Enough,’ Sahara said. ‘This is Westerfort, or was. It’s the biggest fortress in the realm, not that anyone knows about it, of course.’

‘So it really was wiped? From history, I mean. No one knows about Oremere?’

‘Hmmm, it’s hard to say. It was struck from written history. Books were burned. Hundreds, thousands of documents were destroyed and rewritten. But the people of Oremere were not exterminated, despite the attempts. People escaped. Underground, and to other continents. There are Oremians scattered across the realm, in hiding.’

Bleak marvelled at the scope of the deception. To conceal an entire continent, an entire race of people ... She took in the grey surroundings, the red flowers that seemed to feed off the eerie nature of the place, and the thin mist, still coiling around her ankles.

‘I can’t believe I’m here,’ she said.

‘Well, you are. It’s all true. Consider me your official welcome party.’ Sahara grinned. ‘Welcome to Oremere.’

THEY STOPPED in front of a massive pile of wreckage. Sahara put her body weight behind a large boulder and pushed with her shoulder. To Bleak’s surprise, the boulder rolled with ease, revealing a dark passageway.

‘My humble abode,’ Sahara said dryly. ‘Come on. Leave the cat for now, would you? I’d rather not be in a confined space with him just yet. You can bring him up some fresh water and food in a moment.’

Tearing her eyes away from Rion, Bleak obliged, following Sahara down into what could only have been a cellar in a past life. While Sahara lit the torches, Bleak realised this was more than just a camp; this was a *home*. A bed of dried grass was set in one corner, with a pile of grey blankets stacked neatly on the end. There was a bench pushed up against one wall, with a stove sitting on top. It wasn’t conventional, that was for sure, but little things, like the tattered books, two chipped mugs, a plate and a wash basin, made it homelier than any camp Bleak had seen in a long while.

‘Bits and bobs I’ve collected from around the fortress.’ Sahara waved her hand in their direction, setting a pot atop the stove and lighting a small fire beneath it. ‘If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say this place used to be where they stored wine and mead brought in from the port. Likely, it was just a holding place before they carted it off to the capital.’

Bleak’s attention snagged on the farthest wall, or rather, what was nailed to it: a massive hand-drawn map. It detailed the fortress in which they now stood, and the surrounding lands. Distances were scribbled across certain sections, pins were stuck at various points all over, and further north lay a

giant city. Two separate pieces of parchment had been stuck next to this, both drawings as well. The first outlined the levels within the castle: three floors of dungeons were set below the surface, four floors above. The second piece of parchment showed a rough sketch of the layout of the ground floor, depicting passages between the walls and markers for what Bleak imagined to be guards. In addition to the maps and floorplans were pages of logs showing initials and times, and barely legible notes.

Bleak glanced at Sahara. The Valian was scrutinising the papers herself, arms folded over her chest.

‘What *is* all this?’ Bleak asked finally.

‘This,’ Sahara said, turning to her, ‘is our salvation.’



## CHAPTER 3

She warrior matriarch, Henrietta of Valia, had long since ditched her disguise as a noblewoman, having escaped the clutches of King Arden. Now, as she climbed down from *Nadia's Voyager* into a small boat sitting atop broken shards of ice, she looked very much herself. Her face was free of the oily cosmetics, save for her eyes, which were lined with traditional Valian black kohl.

The bitter cold of Havennesse's Port Avesta bit into Henri's bones. The north-eastern continent's infamous winter season was in full swing, and the Battalonian ship could only stay an hour while its passengers disembarked onto rowing boats, lest the ship freeze in place. As she guided herself down the ladder and into the boat below, her thickly gloved hands already aching from the chill, Henri looked to shore. Beyond the ice of Hamasaand Bay stretched miles and miles of snow-capped pines and jagged mountain peaks. She loosed a clouded breath. It had been years since Henri had ventured this far from her home.

The boat rocked as a pudgy, middle-aged man clambered down beside her with none of her grace. 'Gods, I've never been so cold in me life,' he blustered, before glancing at her face. He looked again.

'Geez, long trip for you,' he said. 'You'll miss the summer winds soon enough, Valian.'

Henri didn't bother with a reply. Even with the additional furs, she looked like one of her kind. She had donned her usual forest-green leathers that clung to her like a second skin, and covered her from her ankles to the base of her throat. She wore heavy black boots that hugged her calves, and draped over her shoulders was a grey hooded palma fur that did wonders for

her chattering teeth. The tail of her midnight-blue braid had escaped from her hood and rested like a snake down her chest.

‘I’d heard you lot weren’t much for talking,’ the man said.

This time, Henri turned. She locked eyes with him, flashing a silent warning with her green-flecked graphite eyes.

The man raised his hands in surrender, and said no more.

Despite her cosy hood, Henri could feel the icy wind stinging the exposed skin of her nose and cheeks. She would have to wrap a scarf around the lower half of her face once they were ashore.

As a crew member took up the oars, Henri allowed herself to sink into the rhythm of the boat pushing through the chunks of ice. Although her journey had been long and tiresome, it now felt over too soon. Her people were in danger, as was the entire realm. She suppressed a shudder at the memory of King Arden’s madness, and the strange, magical taint that had filled her with fear.

The boat lurched, its bow scraping across the black gravel shore. After pressing a silver coin into the rower’s palm, she made for the luggage, her boots sinking into the fresh snow. Shouldering her pack, she looked to the looming snowy mountains, with the words from Queen Eydis’ letter echoing in her mind ...

*The mist is coming, and with it comes a power so hungry for magic, it threatens the whole realm. Something must be done. Or in time, all will be lost.*

‘Henrietta Valia?’ said a muffled voice. The girl was small, bulked out in various layers of fur, her entire face covered but for her warm brown eyes.

‘Eydis got my message, then?’ Henri said by way of greeting.

The girl shook her head. ‘Your arrival was foreseen,’ she said. ‘This way.’

Henri’s stomach swooped at the mention of another magic wielder. She followed the girl past the sheds. Behind them, a large sled rested upon the snow, with a team of twelve massive dogs harnessed and waiting, their black-and-grey coats gleaming in the sun’s glare. These were no ordinary sled dogs.

Henri suppressed a whistle of appreciation. Havennesse was renowned for its huge pureblood mountain dogs. These canines were muscular and

tall, reaching her waist in height, and she knew they were notoriously powerful and fast.

‘Your bag?’ the girl said, hand outstretched.

Henri took a scarf from one of the pockets in the bulky pack and then unburdened herself of it, watching the girl falter beneath its weight as she heaved it onto the sled. She tied it down to the cargo bed with thick ropes.

‘Thank you,’ Henri said, wrapping the woollen scarf around her face to cover her mouth and nose. She moved to take the reins, but the girl snatched them up.

‘I don’t think so,’ she said, stepping onto the footboard.

‘I know the way,’ Henri said. ‘I don’t need you to accompany me.’

‘You think I’d let some foreigner ride away with the best dogs in the country?’

‘These are Eydis’ dogs?’

The girl nodded, and then gestured to the space on the footboard beside her. ‘Come, daylight won’t last much longer.’

Henri did as she bid, and gripped the handle bar before her.

‘The name’s Mariette,’ said the girl.

‘Henri.’

‘I know,’ Mariette replied, craning her neck to perform one final check over the sled. ‘I hope you’ve got a good grip, Henri.’

Mariette whistled, and the lead dog barked in response. The sled slid forward and then they were off.

The speed with which they flew over the snow was unlike anything Henri had experienced before. As the sharp wind shot through her layers and burned her skin, she was quietly glad Mariette was controlling the sled. The dogs’ paws were a blur as they pounded the fresh powder, their tongues flapping about the sides of their mouths. Henri marvelled at their stamina, and the way their thickly muscled torsos powered the sled.

‘How long’s the journey?’ Henri called out.

Mariette didn’t take her eyes off the trail before them. ‘‘Bout three hours or so,’ she called back. ‘Depending on the conditions.’

From memory, Henri thought it was longer, but she’d never ridden with Eydis’ dogs. She turned her attention to their surroundings, and though she was frozen to her core, awe for the landscape swelled inside her. There was snow everywhere, and the deadly Hamasaand Ranges loomed over them to her right. They held the record for the highest peaks, and were twice the

height of any mountain in Ellest. Though, Henri realised with a jolt – *Oremere*. No one knew what landforms the secret continent held. Her stomach turned as she recalled her last conversation with King Arden, the one that had revealed her long-dead twin sister, Sahara, had known something of the place beyond the mist.

She had so many questions, about Oremere, about why the king was seeking magic wielders, about what her twin had known for all those years before her death. Henri was so *angry*. Sahara had left her with a responsibility she never wanted, she'd kept an infinite number of secrets from her, and then she'd gone and killed herself.

Henri's jaw ached, and she realised she'd been grinding her teeth. She'd done a lot of that lately; it came hand in hand with the sleepless nights. Even with the cold wind on her face, she could feel that her eyes were puffy with fatigue. Whenever she caught a glimpse of her reflection, she felt as though her once fresh face was dull and haggard. Older.

She focused once more on the landscape. To her right, the Hamasaand Ranges still towered, their dark jagged peaks and sheer cliff faces amidst the deadly snow and ice, more daunting than ever. And as they journeyed further inland, the Kildaholm Alps and the Forest of Wolves awaited them. The infamous landmarks both posed a threat and offered a challenge – calling the adventurer within, and feeding the fear of the squeamish.

After over an hour of sledding, they came upon a stone watchtower and a large warehouse near the outskirts of the forest. As they pulled up alongside the building, Mariette whistled loudly to the dogs. The sled slowed and finally came to a stop.

There was an ear-piercing creak from the metal doors of the warehouse as they slid open to reveal a massive lofty space within. Warm air rushed out and hit Henri's icy face just before three men approached, belting their fur coats in place.

'Lady Mariette,' one said, bowing his head in greeting. The others did the same, and began detaching the sled from the dogs.

From the cargo bed, Mariette took two sacks of straw and began laying it out across the snow.

'Can I help?' Henri asked.

'It's quicker if I just do it,' she replied, moving to the dogs and unbuckling the first harnesses.

Ignoring Henri, the dogs ran to the patches of straw and sat atop them, tails wagging, waiting for Mariette.

‘This yours, m’lady?’ one of the men said to Henri, tugging her pack free from the cargo bed.

‘Yes,’ she said, reaching for it.

‘We can take it to the towers if you wish.’

‘I can manage,’ Henri told him, taking the strap from his thickly gloved hand and shouldering the heavy pack. She paced in the snow and shook her hands, trying to get her blood flowing back into her aching fingers, while the men hauled the now empty sled into the warehouse.

Mariette was speaking to the dogs as she freed them from their harness contraption, in a tone much softer than the one she’d used with Henri. When the twelfth canine was finally released, Mariette strode to the straw where the rest of the pack waited. Henri had never seen so many dogs in one small space, and watched as Mariette bestowed affection and small treats upon them all.

Mariette glanced up at Henri. ‘There are some villages that train their dogs with punishment and violence.’ She gave the alpha dog an additional scratch behind his ears. ‘But we’ve found that kindness instils more loyalty.’

‘I can see that,’ Henri said, staring at the lead dog, noticing his odd eyes for the first time – one blue and one green. An image of Bleak, the odd-eyed Angovian, flashed before her.

‘This is Bear,’ Mariette said, smiling down at the eager canine. ‘He’s usually Queen Eydis’ constant companion. This is the first time I’ve ever had him pull a sled other than hers.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. You must be a very special guest, Henri.’

‘Remains to be seen.’

‘If Eydis sent Bear to get you, nothing “remains to be seen”.’

AS MARIETTE CARED for the dogs, Henri paced the grounds to keep from freezing. Her thoughts flitted from one to the next in a panic, the overwhelming desperation of her quest latching tightly around her chest. She needed Eydis’ alliance, and if she didn’t get it, she didn’t know what hope there would be for Valia and her kindred.

‘This way.’ Mariette interrupted her thoughts, leading Henri and the pack to the entrance of the Forest of Wolves. It began to snow in earnest, and Henri could do nothing to stop her teeth chattering as the silver flakes fell and settled in her furs.

‘Here,’ said Mariette, handing her a bronze flask.

‘What is it?’

‘Liquid fire.’

Realising she’d get no further explanation, Henri brought the flask to her chapped lips and sipped. The liquid was lukewarm and sweet at first, but as it made its way down her throat it fizzed into a slow burn, heating her from the inside out. She took another sip and felt the sharpness of her panicked thoughts begin to ebb away.

‘Better?’ Mariette asked, reaching for the flask.

‘Much,’ replied Henri, handing back the miracle drink.

‘Good. Though, I’d advise against drinking more than half a flask. Last time I did that, I ended up naked on one of the lower summits of Kildaholm freezing my arse off.’

Henri couldn’t contain the laugh that burst from her mouth.

Mariette grinned. ‘Trust me, it happens to everyone at least once here.’

‘It’s that powerful?’

‘When you get a taste for it. Or you’re challenged to a drinking game by one of the guards. Cocky bastards.’

Henri looked up at the canopy of the forest, so different from the bright treetops she was used to in Valia. Here, the snow-clad pines reached up into the sky with seemingly no end, and were so densely planted that each step had to weave between them.

‘Bear.’ Mariette turned to the lead dog. ‘Scout!’

The black canine took off up ahead, the other dogs not far behind him.

‘They let the wolves know we’re passing through.’

‘They communicate with the wild pack?’

‘Packs. Plural. Yes, a tradition that’s been around for centuries. This forest is theirs. We do not pollute it, hunt in it or camp in it, and so, when we are accompanied by our own packs, they allow us to pass through.’

‘And if you’re not with a pack?’

‘Then you’re fair game.’

‘They’ll attack?’

‘Hunt, attack, maul, eat ... The only person I know who’s ever entered the forest without a pack is Eydis. But she’s always had an affinity with animals.’

‘No wonder Wildenhaven is such a stronghold.’

The dogs came bounding back towards them; Bear gave three barks in quick succession.

‘Let’s go,’ Mariette said, swigging from the flask again and offering it back to Henri.

As much as Henri craved another wave of warmth, she shook her head. ‘I should keep my head straight,’ she said.

Mariette shrugged. ‘Suit yourself.’

Daylight was fading fast as the women and the pack wove in between the dark trunks, the forest taking on a blue hue as the snow continued to fall.

As it got darker, the howling began, sending goosebumps shooting over Henri’s already frozen skin. Sometimes, Bear barked in reply and the howling abated for a time, but it was never long before it started up again. Then, the group came upon a clearing, filled with a very different kind of tree to the tall pines.

These trees were warped, their bare branches circling the trunk in the most bizarre fashion. Each was almost identical, eerie skeletons that stood out against the white of the snow.

‘What is this place?’ Henri breathed, pulling her furs tighter.

‘The Valley of Twisted Trees,’ Mariette said, taking in the distorted shapes herself.

‘What makes them like this?’ Henri asked. They avoided going through the middle, instead opting to walk around the cluster of trees.

‘The official story is that there’s a wind tunnel here that strips the trees of their leaves and bark, and disfigures their trunks and branches.’

‘But?’

Mariette sighed as they got to the other side of the valley, where the pine trees began again. ‘But most Havennesse natives believe it’s haunted.’

‘Haunted?’ Henri scoffed.

‘Laugh all you want, but not even the wolves go here. Even though the hollows beneath those trunks make for the best dens in Wildenhaven.’

‘What would haunt a bunch of old trees?’

Mariette shrugged. ‘No idea.’

Henri got the distinct feeling that her guide was leaving something out.

NIGHT HAD WELL and truly fallen when Henri, Mariette and the pack emerged from the Forest of Wolves. Henri had never been so cold in her life, but she clung to her years of training and discipline. She had to be focused when she met Eydis, when the time came to ask for her aid.

The gatehouse was guarded by ten men, who opened the gates when Bear approached them with a bark.

‘Lady Mariette.’ The head guard bowed in greeting, and followed with a respectful nod to Henri.

Henri hid her surprise that a dog master was treated with the same respect as a visiting royal. But then, things always had been done differently in Wildenhaven.

They passed through the gatehouse and beyond the battlements, now sheltered at least from the battering wind. Inside stood three immense stone towers. Henri had forgotten how impressive they were. She’d expected them to seem smaller, as everything does with age, but they were grander and sturdier than ever.

Bear and the pack sprinted to the entrance of the first tower to the left, and Mariette paused before the doors of the third.

‘She’s in the great hall, then,’ she said, more to herself than to Henri, and turned to follow the dogs.

The guards of the first tower showed them into the cloakroom within, the warmth from the fire soaking into Henri’s nearly frostbitten limbs. The dogs were let through to the next room.

Dropping her pack to the floor, Henri unpinned her furs and shrugged them off, placing them on a nearby hook to dry out.

‘Leave your pack,’ Mariette said. ‘One of the porters will take it to your lodgings.’

Henri nodded, glancing at the next set of doors, where beyond, Queen Eydis was waiting. She took a deep breath as they opened, and Mariette led her through.

Numerous fires blazed within, sending flickering shadows across the grand room. Embellished torches lined the walls, along with animal hides and detailed tapestries. At the end of the hall was a high, brightly lit dais with three thrones. Lounging in the largest throne in the middle, with the



twelve sled dogs panting at her feet, was a striking, tattooed woman, who spotted Henri and smiled.

‘My Valian friend,’ she said, a low-cut silken gown falling around her as she stood. ‘It’s been far too long.’

Henri had to hide her shock as Queen Eydis descended from the dais and embraced her like a long-lost sister, her sheer gown billowing. The last time Henri had seen Eydis, she had been a gangly, awkward teenager whose limbs seemed too long for her body. Back then, she had worn baggy, unflattering men’s clothes to hide her frame from sight and always looked as though she would dart away to the kennels, more comfortable with the hounds than with her people. But now ... Her presence commanded the attention of every pair of eyes in the room. Her caramel hair was swept up at the back, held in place with two bejewelled pins, and her wardrobe ... It had changed from modest to daring; the dress she wore now was split high to the sides of her thighs, and dipped low at the back, revealing an elaborate tattoo that flourished across her pale skin in black ink. In a sheer nude colour, the garment looked like a mere extension of the queen herself.

‘It has been a long time, old friend,’ she said, squeezing Henri’s hands.

‘I should have come sooner,’ Henri replied, bowing to the ethereal, wintry queen.

‘It seems leadership has taught you some humility,’ Eydis said, smiling.

‘That’s the least of it.’

‘I have no doubt.’ She lifted Henri’s chin, and they locked eyes. ‘Your sister is never far from my thoughts.’

‘Nor mine.’

Eydis nodded. ‘Do you wish to clean up or rest before we catch up?’

Henri shook her head, her mouth set in a grim line. ‘I’m afraid it can’t wait. Where can we talk?’

Eydis followed Henri’s gaze around the room at the numerous servants looking on.

‘My court is to be trusted,’ she said. ‘However, should you feel more comfortable with privacy, it shall be granted. This way.’

Queen Eydis strode around the edge of the dais, her hemline trailing after her.

‘Mariette,’ Eydis said, craning her neck to see the dog master. ‘If Nicolai and Jarel are willing, I’d have them join us.’

‘Very good, my queen.’ Mariette bowed.

Behind the platform, a door was opened for them and Henri followed her friend through. There was a bark at Henri's heels and she looked down to see Bear racing after his master. He seemed even bigger in the domestic setting, and once he'd caught up, he padded along silently next to the queen. Only a few doors down from where they had exited the throne room, Eydis led them into a small, cosy sitting room. A fire was blazing in the hearth, and before it sat three velvet wingback armchairs, complete with matching ottomans and a small table between them.

Henri stood, hands clasped behind her back, waiting for the queen to sit.

'Mulled wine for myself and the matriarch, please, Ulrich,' Eydis said to one of the servants, who bowed his head low and ducked from the room at once.

Bear settled at the foot of one of the chairs, as though waiting.

'Henri,' Eydis said, when the door had clicked shut. 'Sit down, for Rheyah's sake. Make yourself comfortable for once in your life.'

The queen threw herself down into one of the worn chairs, and hoisted her feet up on the ottoman with a sigh. 'Despite the wonders these three towers hold, I swear this is my favourite place in the whole of Wildenhaven.'

'I can see why,' said Henri, finally letting herself sink into one of the chairs, as well as the warmth and peace of the small space.

Eydis grinned. 'Undo a few of those stifling buttons, kick off your boots. I'm sure whatever horror story you've come to tell me can be told in comfort.'

Henri did as the queen bid, lifting her feet to the foot rest and nearly moaning with relief. She studied her friend, who was much changed.

'You got a tattoo,' she said.

'I did. Do you know what it is?' Eydis leaned forward in her chair, showing Henri the markings on her back.

Henri frowned, examining the pattern, and then – a piece of the puzzle clicked in place for her, remembering the king's words.

*The mist has a rather peculiar effect on magic wielders. You see, it marks them – a tattoo across their whole body, invisible to the naked eye ... except on a full moon ...*

'King Arden, he told me something, but ... It can't be. It doesn't make sense.'

'So you do know, then.'

‘But ... I can see it. I thought the marks were invisible? I thought they covered every inch of skin? And if that’s the case, why have I never noticed marks on myself? On Allehra?’

Eydis shook her head. ‘Every full moon, I have more of my markings tattooed on permanently. Why should it be in moonlight alone that people see what makes me who I am?’

Henri didn’t know what to say to that.

‘As far as I understand it, only those Ashai who aren’t mist dwellers are marked. And even then, there are exceptions such as yourself, people who no doubt wear a talisman or an enchantment. I also believe the markings cover skin according to how much power one has. Fortunately or unfortunately, I am yet to decide, I am not a full-powered seer. I get mere glimpses, and these are not set in stone, not to be lived by.’

Henri nodded. That made more sense. ‘But this means you were exposed to the mist?’ she asked.

Eydis nodded. ‘On a journey to Qatrola. Our ship was caught in a violent rip in the Northern Passage, and for a moment, it dipped into the mist. It was only for mere moments, but we lost three crew members. It’s strange – everyone has such different reactions to it.’

Henri tipped her head back to rest against the chair and closed her eyes. She didn’t know what to believe about the mist. Whether the king had been lying for whatever reason, or if he was misinformed himself. Was Ines feeding him wrong information? And then he in turn was —

The servant boy, Ulrich, interrupted her thoughts as he re-entered the room with a tray of steaming mugs. Without a word, he placed it on the table before them and bowed low to Eydis.

‘Thank you,’ she said, smiling. ‘That will be all for the moment.’

‘My queen,’ he said, and was gone.

Eydis handed Henri a mug and then nestled herself back into the chair, this time tucking her feet underneath her, waiting for Henri to speak. Henri looked across at her friend, and whatever physical comfort she felt in the cosy room was pushed aside by the rolling anguish within her.

‘Eydis,’ she said. ‘It’s —’

‘I know.’

‘I can’t ... I can’t even make sense of everything yet.’

‘Together, then. Together we will make sense of it.’

‘Arden threatened Valia, my kindred,’ she said, and for the first time in a long while, Henri’s voice quavered. She took a sip of the hot mulled wine to steady herself, and felt it warm her from within. ‘It all feels so raw,’ she continued. ‘Everything that’s happened. Everything Arden told me. It was he who destroyed the sacred part of our forest. He’s been bottling mist. And there’s a whole other continent we don’t know ...’

Eydis’ eyes were glazed over, staring deep into the fire. She was as still as stone.

Bear stood up on his hind legs, pressing his front paws to Eydis’ armrest. He gave a soft bark, and Eydis jolted.

‘Sorry,’ she said quietly, smoothing the dog’s head with her hand. ‘Bear ... Bear is special. Or perhaps it is our relationship that is special. I’m not sure, I have never come across anyone similar. It is as though he senses my mind wandering too close to danger, too close to that seer’s edge, and pulls me back.’ Eydis gave a bitter laugh. ‘I doubt that makes any sense.’

Henri shrugged. ‘I’ve heard and seen stranger things.’ She was glad for Bear, for she had been on the verge of falling to pieces.

Eydis gently pushed Bear from her chair, and as though satisfied his master was back in the present, he curled up once more near her chair. The winter queen took a long drink from her mug and dabbed her mouth with the back of her hand. ‘I fear the light I must shed upon your tale will make our burden no easier to bear.’

Henri groaned, and tossed back the remainder of her mulled wine. ‘I’m going to need more of this, then,’ she said.

Eydis rang a bell beside her and Ulrich appeared. ‘More wine, dear boy,’ she said. ‘Probably best to bring us a pot to hang over the fire.’

‘Of course, my queen. Can I offer you some food? Or anything else?’

‘A wise suggestion, Ulrich,’ Eydis said with a smile, and the boy flushed. ‘Bread and cheese. And tell me, is there any word from Nicolai or Jarel?’

‘No, Your Majesty. They have not yet returned from the Kildaholm Alps.’

‘That will be all, then, thank you.’ Eydis shook her head when the boy had left. ‘Those two fools,’ she hissed. ‘Nicolai insists on taking Jarel on these damned hunts – primitive morons.’ She looked up at Henri. ‘Five silvers says I have to go out there and retrieve them at some point.’

Henri laughed. ‘Jarel is well, then?’

The queen's younger brother, Jarel, always had been the better behaved of the two siblings, but since Eydis had stepped into her role as queen, he'd regressed and now apparently gave her many headaches by befriending her lover, Nicolai.

'Jarel is a pain in my arse,' Eydis retorted, waving Ulrich back into the room and holding out her mug for a refill. Ulrich filled Henri's mug as well and then set the pot and ladle over the fire and the bread and cheese on the table. When he had left for the final time, Eydis turned to Henri, the light-heartedness gone from her face.

'Not two weeks past, we discovered a cult.'

'What?'

'A cult, devoted to Ines, Arden's so-called true queen of the realm. When he was actually doing his job, Jarel tracked down one of her worshippers, who was inducting our people into this fanatical group.'

'Here? In Havenness?'

Eydis clenched her jaw and nodded. 'Yes. There's a little village not far from the Hamasaand Ranges, usually known for breeding mountain goats – they make their living from milk and wool, but ... This crazed lunatic had taken over the village. We usually trade with these people – their goat's milk is unparalleled – but it stopped. And this is why. They had sacrificed all their goats to Ines, and turned their barns into shrines. Jarel was so disturbed that I took a small force down there. Some of them were so crazed they impaled themselves on the altars rather than speak with me. The others speak of nothing but Ines' generosity and incredible talents.'

'Have you found any others?'

'Cults? Not here, not yet. But my sources say Ines has established a dedicated following on each continent.'

'Ellest too?'

'She has King Arden on her side, Henri. It cannot surprise you. What surprises me is that he has not professed her his chosen goddess yet. A change in the religions of Ellest – that seems to be the path he intends on taking.'

'Surely not.'

'Though I am not a full-powered seer, I've had troubling visions.'

'Like what?'

'She intends to take Qatrola first, if she hasn't already. She started with so many people on the inside. And Qatrola is small and weak. Run by that

gods-awful regent. No doubt she has him in her pocket like the others.'

'King Arden's regent?'

'Unfortunately.'

'You yourself said that these visions aren't set in stone.'

'That I did. But sometimes you just know.'

'Know what?'

'How deep the fate runs ... Henri, my oldest friend. We must be the ones to stop her.'

'How? How do we stop her? I have Arden practically on Valia's doorstep. I came here for *your* aid.'

'And you shall have it, but the invasion of Havennesse is imminent.'

'As is the invasion of Valia.'

'No, not yet.'

Henri made to rise from her seat in frustration; however, Eydis knew her well, even after all these years. She simply rolled her eyes, and bid her sit back down.

'We are not here to argue,' she said. 'We are here to help one another.'

'I have nothing to give,' Henri said, holding her head in her hands.

'Henri, I have a well-trained army, but we do not have the numbers. We need you, and we need your kindred.'

'How soon?'

'Within a fortnight. Sooner.'

'Eydis, even if I *wanted* to help you, how do you suppose we ship the entire army of Valian kindred to Havennesse in time?'

'I never said ship.'

'Has the wine gone to your head? A ship from Angove is the only way to get across the East Sea.'

Eydis absent-mindedly stroked Bear's head, and rose to fill their mugs once more from the pot simmering over the fire. 'Did Mariette take you past the Valley of Twisted Trees?'

Henri nodded.

'Meet me in the cloakroom in fifteen minutes,' she said, already at the door, with Bear at her heels.

Henri groaned. Why did she get the feeling they were about to head out into the freezing night? She drank another half a mug of mulled wine while she waited. If her suspicions were correct, she'd be glad for a hot face and burning belly when they stepped out into the icy Havennesse air.

## CHAPTER 4

Sweat dripped from Swinton's brow onto the yellow parchment clutched in his hands. He watched as the droplets seeped into the ink, marring King Arden's perfect penmanship.

COMMANDER,

*In light of recent events, the time has come to prove yourself and your loyalty. We have reason to believe that my daughter's betrothed, Prince Nazuri of Battalon, has intentions against the union of our monarchies.*

*You are required to gain his trust. We need his alliance in the days to come. You must tell him of the one true queen, and her impending rule.*

*Get close to him, Commander. Force him to see the light as we see it.*

*Your son remains well, for now. Though his fascination with the castle maze has not gone unnoticed by our true queen. She has sensed him. What a shame it would be for him to discover what lies beneath —*

‘WHAT’S THAT?’ Fiore appeared in the doorway of his chambers.

Swinton jumped and crumpled the parchment, stuffing it in his trouser pocket. ‘Nothing.’

Fi frowned as he entered the rooms, closing the door behind him. ‘You ready?’

Cursing the Battalonian heat, Swinton retied the first few laces of his loose-fitting shirt. He was constantly sticky and lethargic here. He’d given

up wearing his usual black attire and leathers, for he'd nearly fainted from heatstroke on the journey to the capital. There was nothing for it today; formal occasions were formal occasions. He tucked the coin he wore around his neck, Yacinda, goddess of secrets, down the front of his shirt and turned to Fi.

'Let's get this over with.'

'You're not marrying him,' Fi quipped. 'Have some pity for the lass, old friend.'

'She's not marrying him yet. This is merely an introduction.'

'Lot of fuss and ceremony for an introduction.'

'Such is the way with most royals,' replied Swinton. 'And for the sake of the gods, tuck your shirt in.'

With his sword belted at his waist, Swinton strode from his apartments and into the palace hallways, Fiore trailing close behind. Though he had resided in the impressive structure for over a week now, the grand interior of the halls still took his breath away. Polished, intricately patterned tiles shone beneath his tattered boots, reflecting the glittering lights of the chandeliers above. As he walked, he marvelled at the gloriously high ceilings, and the towering stone archways covered in detailed mosaic reliefs. Despite being surrounded by such thick walls, the halls within the shiprock were wonderfully light, and surprisingly cool in comparison to the hot desert wind outside.

'Commander, may I offer you a refreshment?' Kamath, the Battalionian squire who'd been assigned to him, rushed forward with a tray of drinks, fresh-faced and bright-eyed.

'Kamath, you needn't wait around for me. I've told you this. When I have need of you, I'll send for you.'

'I can attend to you much faster if I am near, Commander.'

Swinton sighed. 'Any word from Ellest?'

'No, I visited the falconry this morning. No birds from Ellest have arrived.'

'And you sent the one I requested upon my arrival?'

'Yes, Commander.'

Swinton felt Fiore's gaze shift between them, though he managed to refrain from asking questions.

'Lead the way to the great hall, then,' Swinton told the squire.



Swinton prided himself on his sense of direction, but the echoing passageways of the Battalonian shiprock were disorientating. The palace was enormous, and spanned across many levels within the rock. So many, in fact, that elaborate pulley systems had been introduced in order to get from one level to the next much faster. Swinton preferred not to use these channels, as his stomach dropped uncomfortably whenever he found himself in one of the large crates used to transport people up and down.

The throne room was bejewelled with an array of stained-glass windows from which coloured reflections flickered across the polished floor. Numerous Battalonian nobles and courtiers filled the space; the formality of the occasion and the impending presence of a foreign princess had lured them in like moths to a flame.

‘Fix yourself up,’ Swinton hissed at Fi, his friend’s shirt still untucked.

The herald announced them, and Swinton plastered a warm smile to his face as he approached the dais and bowed deeply before King Roswall and Prince Nazuri in their glittering thrones.

The king welcomed them and bid them stand by the courtiers while they awaited Princess Olena’s arrival. Swinton shuffled into the crowd of elaborately dressed nobles and realised he was nervous for the girl. Here she was, with no family or friends to speak of, being married off to a stranger.

The herald announced Princess Olena of Ellest. Despite her grim expression, Her Highness looked striking in a deep-claret gown as she entered the throne room. The dress clung to her dainty frame and flowed out generously from her narrow hips. Her eyes had been lined with dark cosmetics, making her appear much older than her fifteen years.

Swinton watched as her first handmaiden silently accompanied her to the foot of the dais, to stand before the king and prince. Olena took a deep breath, tucked a loose golden strand of hair behind her ear, and curtsied, the layers of fabric rustling.

‘My dear child,’ said King Roswall. ‘It is such a pleasure to see how well you are adjusting to your new home. In Battalonian colours no less.’

Swinton heard a number of courtiers around him murmur their agreement at the princess’ chosen gown. Swinton wondered if she’d had any say in her attire today. Or if she even cared.

‘Your hospitality is unparalleled, Your Majesty,’ she said.

‘As are your graces, Princess. But! I cannot wait a moment longer,’ he said, turning to the olive-skinned youth beside him. ‘Princess Olena, may I present to you, my son – Prince Nazuri of Battalon.’

Prince Nazuri rose and swept down the steps of the dais. As he stood before the princess, his height was immediately apparent. He towered over her, his lean physique somehow exaggerating his stature, along with his finely made tunic billowing about his middle. As the prince took Princess Olena’s hand in his, Swinton could see how deeply tanned his skin was in comparison to the princess’ milky complexion. Streaks of gold ran through his dark hair, as though bleached by the strength of the Battalonian sun. The prince brought Olena’s hand to his lips.

‘My lady, it’s an honour to make your acquaintance,’ he said quietly. ‘I apologise for not being here upon your arrival, but my father bid me attend business in Hawkend.’

*You are required to gain his trust.* The king’s words echoed in Swinton’s mind. As did the enormity of the task at hand. *Get close to him, Commander. Force him to see the light as we see it.*

Princess Olena bowed her head. ‘No apology necessary, my prince. It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

Swinton squirmed on behalf of the princess. The stiff formality of their meeting, the audience looking on ... He could think of no worse way to begin a courtship.

‘Might you do me the honour of accompanying me on a walk?’ Prince Nazuri was saying. ‘We have much to learn of each other.’

‘Of course,’ said Princess Olena.

Prince Nazuri moved to offer his arm, but realised the princess couldn’t see him do so. Gently, he took her hand and looped his own arm through hers. Swinton noticed Olena’s subtle flinch.

‘Father, I ask for your leave so that I may give Princess Olena a royal tour of the palace,’ said the prince, looking from Olena to King Roswall.

‘But of course! Nothing makes me happier than seeing two great continents come together in such a beautiful union. Be off with you!’

Swinton and Fiore paid their respects once more to the king and followed the royal couple out. Although he had an entire guard at his disposal, Swinton preferred to be in the princess’ company as often as he could.

The betrothed pair strolled through the impressive halls. Swinton and Fi tried to maintain a respectful but practical distance from them, wary of striking the perfect balance between protecting the princess and invading her privacy.

‘I trust your journey was comfortable, my lady?’ said Nazuri, turning to gaze at Olena as he awaited her answer.

‘I’m not sure you would find many who deem the journey from Ellest to Battalion comfortable,’ she said.

A smile tugged at the prince’s mouth. ‘I am sorry to hear that.’

She shrugged. ‘What’s done is done.’

The pair let the words hang between them for a time.

Trailing behind them, Swinton allowed the simple phrase to sink into him as well. For all her youth, for all her sharp-tongued comments, the princess spoke the plainest of truths.

‘Where would you like to go?’ Prince Nazuri asked her.

‘Are there any gardens here?’

The prince nodded. ‘I know a place,’ he said.

Like Princess Olena, Swinton had never been to the palace greenhouse. It was vastly different to those he had seen in Ellest. The garden within was entirely underground, and yet natural light shone down through shafts above them. Upon taking only a few steps forward, greenery surrounded them. Rows and rows of flowers, fruit trees and sweet-smelling herbs filled the great chamber. Prince Nazuri led the princess and her guard through the twisting paths until they reached a quaint picnic area. The pair sat down on a sandstone bench, and Princess Olena ran her fingers across its engravings, her clouded eyes glazed over.

‘Your Highness?’ Swinton asked from beside her. ‘Are you alright?’

‘This bench feels similar to that in the gardens by the maze in Ellest. Is it of the same likeness?’ she asked.

Swinton suppressed his shudder at the thought of the maze. The princess would have no idea what horrors lay beneath it, what he had witnessed at her father’s bidding. The rotten stench of the place was etched in his mind, and bile burned the back of his throat at the memory. He focused on the bench. Swinton knew the one the princess spoke of. She had spent much of her time there alongside the boy she knew as the stable master’s unruly son. He could tell she felt Dash’s absence far more keenly than that of her family. Swinton turned his gaze to the bench itself.

‘It’s the same kind of shape as the one back home,’ he said. ‘But it’s made of sandstone, which is a golden colour, warm, like the sun ...’

Princess Olena smiled sadly. ‘Your description reminds me of a friend of mine.’

‘A good friend, I hope, Your Highness.’

‘My only friend.’

Swinton felt a stab of pity for her.

Prince Nazuri squeezed her hand. ‘Perhaps you can make some new friends here.’

‘My friend was my eyes, Your Highness. Can you imagine losing your sight not once, but twice?’

The prince blinked. ‘No. No, I cannot.’

After that, the pair sat in silence, the tension so palpable it was all Swinton could do not to shift from foot to foot in discomfort. Beside him, Fiore was fidgeting, and opposite, another Ellestian, Stefan, bore a pained expression.

Finally, the prince rose to his feet. ‘Leave us,’ he told the guards.

Prince Nazuri’s own guard vanished, as though they were very much accustomed to this kind of dismissal. Olena’s guard waited for Swinton’s signal, which he gave them. He couldn’t very well allow his entire guard to disobey the command of a prince. However, Swinton himself hesitated. He didn’t take orders from Battalion. Fiore stood firm beside him.

‘The commander stays,’ said Olena, as though reading Swinton’s mind.

Swinton readied himself for a disagreement with the prince, but Nazuri merely shrugged.

‘If he is friend to you, he is friend to me,’ he said, sitting back down.

Though Swinton highly doubted Princess Olena thought of him as a ‘friend’, he was relieved to be allowed in their presence.

*Get close to him, Commander.*

Swinton dismissed Fiore with a nod.

‘Do you like to read?’ the prince asked Olena, as though Swinton wasn’t there.

‘I can only read certain types of books,’ the princess replied.

‘Is it quaveer that you read? The olden-time book language for those who cannot see?’

‘Yes,’ she said, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘I read quaveer.’

The prince smiled warmly, and Swinton hoped that the princess could feel his sincerity.

‘I am glad. I had a great number of books sent here for you from Havenness.’

‘Truly?’

‘Yes. I didn’t know what you liked to read, so I asked for a broad selection. We can have more sent over as soon as you’ve gone through what we have.’

‘Havenness has quaveer books?’

‘Many,’ the prince allowed. ‘Their libraries are probably the most extensive in all four continents.’

‘That was very thoughtful of you,’ said Olena. ‘You have my gratitude.’

‘Olena.’ Nazuri’s voice dropped low. ‘We ... I feel as though we are on the same side, you and I.’

‘We are?’

‘Were you not opposed to this union?’

The princess said nothing.

‘I was,’ Nazuri admitted. ‘And as lovely as you are, I did not wish to marry someone so many years younger than I – or anyone at all, at this point in my life. What I would like, more than anything, is a friend. An ally within these walls.’

Princess Olena hesitated. ‘A friend? You want to be my friend?’

‘Very much,’ he said.

Swinton tried his best to study the gardens around them, but in truth, he was nearly holding his breath. An interesting choice of word, *ally* ...

‘Your friend ... Was your friend someone in your household?’ Nazuri asked her.

‘He’s the stable master’s son,’ Olena said.

‘I understand,’ he said. ‘My closest friend was a porter-in-training.’ He brushed the hair from his eyes and sighed. ‘Perhaps we can talk again tomorrow?’

Princess Olena nodded slowly. ‘I would like that.’

‘Then it is settled. I shall leave you in the company of your commander.’ Prince Nazuri dipped into a swift bow before the princess, and strode off down the garden path.

Olena turned to Swinton. ‘I suppose you heard every word?’

‘Occupational hazard, Your Highness.’

‘I needn’t remind you to keep what you overhear to yourself?’

Swinton shook his head. ‘Of course not, Your Highness. Princess, if I may be so bold as to offer some advice?’

‘You’ll no doubt give it regardless.’

Swinton rubbed his temples. ‘Be careful with what you reveal to the prince. We don’t know if he can be trusted yet.’

Olena gave a bitter laugh. ‘Frankly, I don’t know if *you* can be trusted yet.’

Swinton was horrified. Had he done something to offend the young royal? ‘Your Highness, I serve you.’

‘No, you serve my father. And even in that respect, you, like so many others, only serve him to serve yourself. And look where it’s got you.’

‘Your Highness?’

‘Babysitting a blind princess in the middle of a desert. You think I don’t recognise a punishment when I see one? Why do you think I’m here?’

Swinton swallowed, saying nothing.

‘Despite my blindness, and my youth, I know that trust needs to be earned, by princes and commanders alike.’

OUTSIDE, the sun blazed down on Battalon’s capital, Belbarrow, as Swinton and Fiore wove through the crowded streets. Swinton had chosen to board his stallion, Xander, at the secondary royal stables on the outskirts of the city, where the air was fresher, but it meant it was a trek to get there. Around them, hundreds of homes were built into the desert plains and cliffs, and dry heat radiated from the roofs of the buildings in blurry waves. The magnificent, jagged palace shiprock was at the heart, towering over the city, casting a long, dark shadow down the centre of the streets and markets.

Swinton had strapped his coin purse tight to his abdomen beneath his clothes, and left his signature battleaxes in his chambers, but as he moved between the street merchants and beggars, he held the hilt of his sword steady. Without Ellest’s royal sigil embroidered proudly on his chest, not many of the local commoners knew who he was just yet, and they certainly weren’t above robbing a foreigner in broad daylight. The crime in Belbarrow was out for all to see, a proud display of its people’s cunning and opportunism, whereas the swift thievery and underhand dealings of Ellest were all still kept in the shadows.

Cursing the heat, Swinton undid the first few laces of his shirt, the coin of Yacinda beating against his chest as they walked.

‘Dimitri,’ Fiore said, stooping to pick something up.

‘What?’

Fi handed him the torn piece of parchment from the ground, frowning.

Swinton’s stomach churned. He’d seen this flyer before, far across the seas, back home.

*Register today for generous rewards, and the opportunity to serve your crown.*

*Preserve your magical heritage.  
Seek the Temple Master for more information.*

HE WIPED his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt and looked out across the city before him.

‘Dimi?’ Fi pushed. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think Battalon’s a bloody furnace.’

An exasperated sigh sounded. ‘About the flyer.’

‘What about it?’

‘You’re not even slightly concerned? After what happened —’

‘Don’t speak of it.’

‘Dimitri —’

‘I said, don’t speak of it.’

Fiore shook his head. ‘I can’t believe you. You know as well as I do what goes on at that gods-damned tower and you let them —’

‘One brief stint as a guard there doesn’t make you an expert.’

‘It’s more than you can say,’ Fi snapped, straightening and facing Swinton.

‘You know *nothing* of what I know.’ Swinton’s voice went low, his burnt-umber eyes filled with darkness.

Fiore’s face softened. ‘Then *tell me*, Dimitri. Your secrets have kept you company far too long.’

‘This has nothing to do with me. Our duty is to the princess now. Moredon Tower, the search for the Ashai – they’re not for us to meddle in.’

‘Dimitri,’ Fi implored. ‘It’s followed us here. It’s not just Heathton, it’s not just King Arden. You won’t even ask questions. You can’t tell me things don’t seem amiss.’

Swinton thrust the scrunched ball of parchment into Fiore’s chest. ‘I have to get to the stables. I want to fit in a ride before supper.’

‘What happened to you?’ Fiore said.

‘No, Fiore, what happened to *you*? Where’s your loyalty? This phantom conspiracy you speak of – it’s treasonous. And I won’t be a part of it.’

Fi threw his hands up. ‘You’re *already* a part of it.’

*You have no idea*, Swinton thought, and kept walking. It wasn’t just the heat that pressed down on him now.



## CHAPTER 5

The roll of linen Dash Carlington had been fiddling with in the fabric shop fell, tipping over a heavy box on the way down. It crashed, shooting buttons in every direction. Several people in the shop gasped, and Mama flushed pink. Dash scampered to the floor, picking up as many as he could, Mama scolding him under her breath.

‘Wait outside,’ she hissed, knees cracking as she stood to put the box back on the shelf. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she said to the shopkeep.

Outside, Heathton’s high street was bustling with people running errands and doing their household shopping. Dash leaned against the window and watched the passers-by. Middle-aged women in swishing skirts and aprons gave him distrustful looks as they came and went from the fabric shop, no doubt thinking him a pickpocket on the prowl. He scowled back at them. He was no pickpocket. He’d never dream of such a thing. Knights didn’t steal. *Unless* it was biscuits from the castle cook. *That* was different.

Pa had recently received a generous tip for caring for one of the noblemen’s horses, and Mama was eager to make new clothes for them all, which meant buying new fabric. It was a bright day, and Dash couldn’t help but think of his friend, Princess Olena, and how if she were here, the two of them would be sitting on the stone bench in the royal gardens, the sun warming their faces. She would be asking him to describe the sky to her, and Dash would be her eyes.

Someone pushed past Dash, nearly sending him sprawling across the dirt road. A large hand caught his elbow and hoisted him up. Dash’s eyes met the wicked grin and crooked nose of a tall stranger.

‘You should really be more careful,’ the man said, revealing a gold tooth as he winked.

But before Dash could argue that it was *the man* who’d bumped into him, the stranger’s tattered tailcoat was already disappearing into the crowded street.

Frowning, Dash’s attention was drawn back to the bustling town centre. The markets in Heathton were a hub of activity, as always. The cobblestone laneways were jam-packed with people scuttling to and from the main town square. Some of the shopfronts had taken to selling from tables on the street, while other vendors sold wares straight from packs strapped onto their fronts. Things seemed busier than usual. Dash spied a troop of guards stationed nearby, and he marvelled at the sight of their crisp black uniforms, the royal sigil of two crossed battleaxes circled with a crown of fire stitched proudly onto their chests.

‘Happened under the commander’s watch, didn’t it? Why do you reckon he was sent to Belbarrow?’ said one of the guards to his companion.

The companion looked bored. ‘Glorified babysitter.’

‘Well she escaped, didn’t she? Someone’s gotta pay for that.’

Dash took a few steps after them, listening intently.

‘How’d she escape, though? We’ve got the best guards in the realm.’

The first guard shrugged. ‘Inside job, I reckon. Everyone’s saying so.’

‘I’ve been stationed under Swinton my whole life. There’s no way he’d botch something like this up. He’s due for a knighthood any day.’

‘Wouldn’t hold your breath now.’

It wasn’t the first time Dash had heard stories of the Valian who had escaped the castle, nor was it the second, or third for that matter. But it *was* the first he’d heard about someone helping her, and the commander at that. The commander was nearly a knight – he would *never*.

From the bedtime stories his mama told him, the Valians were some of the best warriors in all the lands, so there must be an epic tale to go with her escape. He’d have to ask Mama when she was in a better mood. Or perhaps he could sneak a question into his next letter to Olena. She had the sharpest ears of anyone he knew.

‘Master Dash.’ Mama’s crisp voice sounded from the shop entrance. ‘Make yourself useful and carry these bags,’ she said.

He ducked inside and did as she bid, while she pressed her silver into the shopkeep’s greedy palm and apologised again for Dash wreaking havoc

on the place. When they left the shop, Mama's walk was brisk as she zigzagged in and out of the people shuffling down the street, and Dash had to jog to keep up with her. Though he caught her looking back every few moments to check he wasn't too far behind. The streets became more crowded as they got closer to the town square, where the wealthier vendors were trading. Stalls with large cloth awnings displayed dried and fresh fruits, leather goods, trinkets and preserves.

Mama stopped by the fruit briefly to purchase some peaches – a rare treat for Dash and his pa.

'Not that you deserve it,' Mama added, though her smiling eyes betrayed her sharp remark. 'Come now, let's get away from this madness.'

But as they turned to head back towards the main cobbled street, someone hit the gong on the podium in the centre of the square and the crowd became suddenly compact, trapping them.

'A message from your king,' called a herald, his voice echoing across the throng of people.

Mama's hand gripped Dash's arm as she craned her neck to see what was going on. Dash could hear the sound of another person walking up the steps of the podium, but all he could see were the backs of other people.

'Not long ago, a prisoner escaped from the castle,' a deep, familiar voice rang out. 'We are currently seeking knowledge of her whereabouts. The escaped prisoner is none other than Henrietta Valia, traitor matriarch of the Valian Forest. She is a dangerous Ashai, and we ask that anyone with information come forward at once ...'

Dash realised who was speaking now. It was Tannus, the royal weapons master, the man who trained the squires.

'We will be patrolling the streets until further notice,' he continued. 'We will be searching any suspicious properties at will. Should we discover information being withheld, punishments will be severe.'

There was a cry from nearby, and Mama gasped.

'Mama.' Dash tugged on her arm. 'Mama, what is it?'

Mama was fixed to the spot.

'I did nothing – *nothing* wrong! I've never seen the woman in my life, *please* —'

Dash's stomach lurched. Although he couldn't see what was happening, he was scared. There was desperation in the man's voice, and no one was doing anything to help him. Mama's arms gripped Dash tightly, and pulled

him to stand in front of her. Then her hands cupped his ears. Dash fought to move them, but she only clamped down harder, muffling the sound of the man's cries. Dash squeezed his eyes shut, too.

MAMA BARELY SPOKE on the walk back to their cottage beyond the royal stables. Dash was glad for the bags in his arms, for they stopped his hands from shaking. He still wasn't sure what had happened in the town square, but he knew Mama was upset. And he could still hear the man's pleas in his head.

'Move along now,' Mama hissed, as they passed through the gatehouse and made their way around the back of the stables. Pa wasn't there.

When they finally got back to the cottage, Mama fumbled so much with the key that the bunch clattered to the floor. Berating herself, she picked them up and eventually, the lock clicked and the door swung inward.

'Emmett?' Mama called out Pa's name. 'Emmett, are you here?'

Dash slid the bags of fabric onto the kitchen table. He didn't know why Mama was calling out like that. Their cottage was so small, if Pa were here, he would have heard the door open.

Mama loosed a heavy breath, sat down on one of the old wooden chairs, and looked to Dash. 'Boil some water for me, will you, Dash?'

Dash found that his hands had steadied as he fixed the pot over the stovetop to boil. Mama had shown him how to brew tea only a few days ago, and he was happy to put the new knowledge to use.

'What happened, Mama?' he asked.

Mama looked at him, tired and sad. 'You're too young to understand, Zachary,' she said.

Dash swallowed. 'Am I in trouble?' He was usually in trouble when Mama used his real name.

Mama took a deep breath and stood. 'Not yet, Master Dash,' she said with her best smile. 'But you will be soon if I don't see that bed made.'

Dash followed her gaze to where his bed covers trailed out of his bedroom. 'Mamaaa ...'

'Quickly now,' she added, taking the rattling pot from the stove. 'You don't want your pa to see that mess.'

DASH WAS SUPPOSED to go to the stables to help Pa with the feed at dusk, but Mama insisted he help her wash, peel and boil the potatoes.

‘Pa will be cross,’ Dash said.

‘No, he won’t, he’ll be glad for a hot dinner in his belly. Now, peel.’

Mama kept him busy all afternoon and all evening. So busy that Dash rarely had a second to let his mind wander to Olena’s special quaveer books, which he’d been reading at night and kept hidden beneath his mattress.

Mama moved one of the chairs by the stove so Dash could stand and stir the gravy.

‘Make a figure eight with the spoon, Master Dash,’ Mama bristled. ‘Your father won’t want lumps.’

The rich smell of the pork cooking in the oven made Dash’s mouth water. It had been some time since they’d had a roast dinner. More often than not it was some kind of broth or stew with hard bread and soggy vegetables. Mama had even put a mug of mead on the table for Pa.

‘Dorothy,’ Pa’s voice boomed from the doorway. ‘Where is that boy? He’s due for a hiding! I had to water and feed over forty —’

Dash dropped the wooden spoon in the gravy.

‘Emmett,’ Mama said, her voice light as she used another spoon to retrieve Dash’s sodden one from the boiling sauce. ‘I needed Dash’s help this evening.’

‘What? Dore, do you know how long —’

‘Emmett,’ she said again. ‘I really needed the extra help.’

Pa glanced from Mama to Dash, and then back to Mama. ‘Well ... I imagine this dinner should be mighty fine, then.’

‘At the rate he’s going, he might be on track to being the next royal chef,’ Mama joked.

‘I don’t want to be a chef, I want to be a —’

‘A knight,’ Mama finished for him with a smile. ‘We know.’

‘Dash,’ Pa said, kissing Mama on the cheek. ‘Go clean yourself up before dinner. I can see dirt on your face.’

Dash hopped down from where he stood on the chair, and ran to the bathing room. He couldn’t believe Ma had got him out of trouble with Pa just to cook dinner. Taking the pitcher of water by the vanity, he stood on the small stool Pa had made for him and poured the water into the basin.

His face was indeed dirty, and he snatched a clean rag from the shelf and plunged it into the icy water.

‘Lucky he’s so small – he couldn’t see anything, and I covered his ears. Emmett, it was horrible. And the worst part was, I believed him. I truly believed he’d done nothing wrong, and they ... They did that anyway.’

‘Is this all over the Valian?’

‘Yes. You didn’t lay eyes on her, did you?’

There was a pause, and Dash splashed the water about in the bowl.

‘When she arrived with the commander. Though she didn’t look like a prisoner to me ... Dore, something isn’t right about all of this.’

‘I know. And the commander is in Battalon?’

‘He is.’

‘I don’t like this.’

‘Nor do I, but we must go about our business as usual. There is nothing to be done,’ Pa said.

‘Master Dash,’ Mama called. ‘I hope you haven’t drowned in there?’

‘Coming!’ he called back, though he desperately wanted to hear more of their conversation.

‘Have any Ashai come forward?’

There was another pause.

‘They have, but the truth is, we never see them again.’

Dash’s stomach swooped. The warrior woman had been a magic wielder ... That didn’t mean they were all bad, did it? He stepped down from the stool, his legs wobbly.

‘*I think you have magic,*’ Olena had said to him. But he hadn’t believed her. Hadn’t wanted to. No one in his family had magic, he’d told her.

LATER, he sat on the floor in his room in his nightshirt and bit into the peach Mama had bought, the juice trickling down his chin. He wiped it away and stared at the letter that had arrived two days ago. It was taking him forever to decipher it. He could only use the spare moments before bed each day to run his fingers along the perforated marks and consult Olena’s alphabet. Quaveer. He’d promised her he would learn.

*Dear Dash,*

*You are sorely missed. Belbarrow is such a strange place, and friendships are not so easily forged when one is a blind, foreign princess.*

*Though my tutor tells me my Battalonian speech is coming along, language is only one of the many barriers I face. I wish you were here, Dash. To help me see Belbarrow for all it is. The palace within the shiprock feels how I imagine the castle maze back home would, though I am slowly memorising the paths.*

*I'm sorry to hear they've taken your books away. I would write to them to object, but I fear from here I do not have a say in such things.*

*Prince Nazuri has had quaveer books shipped from Wildenhaven for me. I have found many tales you would like. As there is not much excitement to relay from my side of the realm, perhaps I will share them with you in these letters. No doubt they will help you practise reading quaveer.*

*My favourite story so far has been of a faraway land, ruled differently to how our continents are governed. Instead of one ruler, this kingdom was led by two royal families, the Ashdowns and the Goldwells, and a third advising family. One of the kings, King Edric Goldwell, reminded me of my own father – a trained warrior, capable of leading men into battle. Only King Edric didn't. He joined forces with King Valerio Ashdown and instead, they built grand fortresses together, and a gated land unlike anything I've ever heard of. It was the biggest fortress ever seen, stretching all the way down the entire coastline. A place for knights to train and ride. The sort of place you would love, no doubt.*

*I do hope you're not still upsetting the cook. Say hello to my brother for me if you see him.*

*Your friend always,  
Olena*

DASH PLACED the gnawed peach pit on the ground and wiped his hands on his trousers. He missed Olena's stories. He missed her witty remarks about the noblemen, and how she treated him like a friend, not a child. He missed

*her*. After rummaging under his bed, he pulled out a fresh piece of parchment. Dash wasn't going to let Olena down.



## CHAPTER 6

*S*alvation. The word had churned in Bleak's mind all night, the lure of hope making her stomach squirm. 'Salvation' was too heavy a word to be thrown around. It bared deepest desires and vulnerabilities, and had the potential to obliterate.

Despite her utter exhaustion and the comfortable bed on offer, Bleak didn't sleep at all. Instead, she tended to Rion above ground and practised her knots on her spare length of rope. The familiar rhythm of loops and pulls did nothing to soothe the initial ember of panic that had now set fire to a chasm of unease inside her.

*Our* salvation, the Valian had said. She wasn't alone out here, then. *Who* was she with? The man she'd been thinking about? How much did they know about Oremere? About what had happened here all those years ago? The past felt so far away that Bleak herself didn't know. She had been so young, so scared.

*'Faster, Alarise ...'*

Her mother's warning rang through her head so clearly, it was as though she stood beside Bleak now. After all this time, it was one of the few things that hadn't faded into obscurity. Bleak remembered the *fear* more than anything, the panic lacing her parents' words. Sometimes, it felt as though these things had happened to a stranger, as though she was looking in on someone else's life from afar. She could feel so removed from it all, numb, apathetic. Then at other times, she felt *everything*.

*Salvation ... Whose? And at what cost?*

Bleak did her best to gently clean Rion's wounds. She dabbed thick salve over the heated gashes in his flesh, ignoring his half-hearted growls of

protest.

‘If I didn’t know any better,’ she muttered to him, ‘I’d think you’d started to warm to me.’

The next morning, the smell of frying meat tickled her nose, and Bleak woke to find herself beneath the open sky, pressed against Rion’s rising and falling side.

*I slept out here?* She sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. *For how long?*

The muted colours and grey clouds of Oremere made it hard to discern how late in the day she’d slept. There was the clatter of a pan, followed by a curse from below.

Stiff and aching, Bleak stood, clutching her ribs and gritting her teeth against the pain as she climbed down into the cavern. The smell of searing meat filled the bunker, and her mouth watered instantly.

‘Morning,’ Sahara said, lifting a chipped mug to her lips.

‘Morning,’ Bleak croaked.

Sahara nodded to another steaming mug on the bench. ‘Yours.’

Bleak picked it up and sniffed. ‘What is it?’ she asked, scrunching up her nose.

‘Vitamin supplement tea. Tastes like shit. But it’ll get some colour back into your cheeks and some energy back into your bones.’

Bleak blew away the steam and sipped. Sahara wasn’t wrong. It tasted like dirt.

‘That’s why I make it hot. Tastes even worse cold.’

Bleak forced herself to take a long swig, and watched Sahara knock the rest of hers back in one smooth gulp.

‘Best to get it over with.’ She wiped her mouth on the back of her sleeve. ‘So,’ she said. ‘You didn’t feel like sleeping in a proper bed last night?’

Bleak flushed. ‘I went to check on Rion. I ... I must have fallen asleep out there, sorry. I hope you made use of the bed at least?’

Sahara didn’t look fazed. ‘No. My lap of the perimeter took longer than I expected. I returned after first light. The beast looked much improved when I passed.’

Bleak nodded. ‘I think so. And he hasn’t tried to kill me yet, so that’s something.’

‘Progress.’ Sahara scraped a pile of crisp meat from the pan. ‘Eat. Then we’ll take a look at those injuries. We should have done it last night.’

As Bleak ate, Sahara prepared a basin of water and doused a clean cloth in clear liquor. The mere scent of the alcohol thwarted Bleak’s appetite and sent her yearning for a sip. But she chewed mechanically on the salted meat, distracting herself with the maps on the wall again.

*Salvation ...*

Sahara took her plate and sat her down on a stool beneath one of the torches. Leaning close, she began to clean the cut on Bleak’s forehead.

‘This should have had stitches,’ the Valian said as Bleak’s hiss of pain whistled through her teeth.

‘I was short on physicians.’

Sahara rinsed the bloody rag in the basin. ‘I’ll bet.’

Bleak watched the water turn murky. ‘How long have you been here?’ she asked.

‘About ten years.’

‘*Ten* years?’

Sahara nodded. ‘It took me a year to discover the fortress. My first twelve months in Oremere are a bit of a blur now. But I remember wondering if I was dead, and if this was some sort of deranged afterlife. I figured I was still alive when the agony of hunger didn’t abate. I started living off the land, though “living” is a term I’d use loosely. Munching on dried grass fronds and the occasional hare isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Eventually, I stumbled across this fortress. It stretches all the way down the south coast of Oremere.’ She gestured to the map on the wall.

‘Why ... Why didn’t you go back? Once you knew ...?’

‘Once I knew I wasn’t going to die?’

Bleak nodded.

‘I tried. For a time. But after a while, I realised the future of the realm depends on what happens *here*, in Oremere.’

Bleak frowned at the weight of those words, her thoughts drifting back to Valia. ‘You don’t think Henri has a right to know? That you’re still alive, I mean?’

‘I don’t presume to know what people have and don’t have rights to anymore. All I know is that this place, as lonely and brutal as it is, offers me a purpose, one that is more real, more justified than what I had back in Valia.’

She smeared a paste into the wound on Bleak's forehead and wiped her hands on a nearby rag. 'In Valia, you learn discipline, tolerance for pain and brutality through tradition, not necessity. Here, it's different.'

'But your sister —'

'Loved me fiercely, as I love her still. But she was made for Valia, and I was not.'

'But Oremere ... It's barren ... There's no one here. What could you possibly find here?'

'Answers, Bleak. Truth. A shot at a future not just for the Valians, but for the entire realm. What occurs on this continent in the months to come will rewrite the history books.'

Bleak looked to the maps and logs pinned to the opposite wall. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'll tell you anything you want to know, but first, I need to know about *you*. Who you are. Where you came from. Then we can talk about the rebellion.'

Goosebumps rushed in a wave across Bleak's skin. It was really happening. Rebellion. There was a war underfoot. And Oremere was at its heart.

She stood, bracing her aching ribs with her hand. She approached the maps, reached out and traced the sketch of Westerfort all the way down to the border of Valia.

'I'm an Ashai,' she said.

'I gathered,' Sahara replied and pointed to Bleak's wrist. 'My mother would have only given you those markings if you were. What's your ability?'

Bleak strongly debated not telling her. Her magic had already invaded Sahara's mind. What if the Valian decided she didn't want Bleak around? What if ...? No, Sahara was Henri's sister. And despite Bleak and the Valian queen's rocky start, she trusted her, and by extension, she would trust Sahara.

'I'm a mind whisperer,' she told her.

Sahara let out a low appreciative whistle. 'Good thing I found you when I did. Ines would have paid a massive bounty to get her hands on you.'

A chill ran down Bleak's spine. 'I think ... I think I came from here. From Oremere. But before — before it was like this.'

'You're a mist dweller.'

*It's not every day you bring a mist dweller into our keep.*

'The last person to call me that was your mother. I still don't understand it completely,' Bleak said.

But Sahara offered no further explanation.

'We fled,' Bleak continued. 'My parents and I. I don't know where from exactly. I was only a child.'

'Do you remember any details? About the home from which you fled?'

Feeling anxious, Bleak pulled her length of rope from her pocket, its coarse texture comforting her. She sighed. 'I remember the gates. Huge iron gates at the entrance of the city. When we left, there was blood dripping from them.'

'Freyhill,' Sahara started. 'You're from Freyhill? The capital of Oremere?'

Bleak didn't answer.

'Do you remember your name?' Sahara pressed. 'I'm guessing it's not ...'

Bleak shot her a look. 'Bleaker Senior was my guardian in Angove. The name is his, and I've had it as my own for as long as I can remember. It's more my name now than the one my parents gave me will ever be.'

Sahara touched Bleak's shoulder again. 'I understand. You need not tell me if you're not ready.'

Another stark difference between Sahara and her twin. *Empathy.*

'Why don't you tell me what you *do* remember, then? About your life in Ellest. How you came to be camped out in Westerfort with a teerah panther ...'

Bleak cleared her throat and looped the length of rope between her fingers. *Loop, pull, tighten.* All these years later, she could still hear Senior barking instructions at her.

'I was careless,' she found herself saying. 'I'd been seeking a cure for my magic, and King Arden, he found out. Someone tipped him off. A force from the King's Army showed up in Angove and summoned me to the capital ...'

The words began to flow freely, and Bleak realised she hadn't been given the opportunity to tell her story in a long time. She fell into a rhythm, telling Sahara how Henri and the Valians had saved her in the Hawthorne Ranges. How she'd met with Allehra and Athene's daughter, Luka, both of whom had helped her try to control her magic. About how Commander

Swinton and Fiore had arrived in Valia to escort Henri and her to the capital. And of Bren, her voice softening, how her best friend had followed her across the continent to ensure her safety, only to be left behind in the forest.

Sahara drank her words in, obviously starved for news from her homeland. Her eyes brightened at each mention of her sister and mother.

It wasn't until Bleak got to the part about the inn in Hoddinott that she faltered. She remembered falling into that darkness, the darkness within herself. The way that her power had buzzed through her entire being and slaughtered a dozen men.

The rope stilled in Bleak's hands as she spotted something on the wall she hadn't seen before. A triangle, with a name at each point. 'Ines' scrawled at the top, 'Arden' at the bottom left, and 'Roswall' at the bottom right. Bleak's skin crawled.

'He knew,' she said. 'King Arden knew when I tried to use my magic on him.'

Sahara was quiet.

Bleak struggled to find the words. 'There was something not quite right about it ... It wasn't as though he had the ability to block magic himself, and it wasn't the same muffled sensation the Valian herbs produce. It was different, unnatural, if that makes sense?'

Sahara nodded, and pulled the triangle diagram from its pin in the wall. 'It does make sense. You see, King Arden is getting his power through Ines – she channels it down to him. We know that she's been working her way into the other continents. We have reports that she's spent years in each, getting to know the lands, establishing followers.'

Bleak had waited long enough. Had told Sahara enough of her story. 'Who is "we"?', she demanded. 'What are all these plans for?'

'It's not enough for me to tell you. Let me *show* you.'

'What?'

'Come with me, mist dweller,' Sahara said with a wink, snatching up a pack from the floor. 'We're going to rebel headquarters.'

*Mist dweller. Bleak. Alarise. Thief. Drunk. Gutter rat.* She'd been called so many names over the years, she didn't know which, if any, were truly hers.

'And if I don't want to come?'

Sahara shrugged. 'Then you'll get none of the answers you're so desperately seeking.'

'Have you found the answers *you* were looking for?'

'I've found many answers here. Unfortunately, a lot of them simply led to more questions,' Sahara replied, her eyes lingering on Bleak's wrist markings once more.

Bleak looked down at them herself. 'This used to be a leather cuff,' she said. 'But when Arden took the cuff, the markings seeped into my skin.'

Sahara tucked her hair behind her ear, shaking her head slightly. 'That is some *serious* Valian magic ... I hope Allehra knew what she was doing.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Because I don't think my mother was trying to help control your power, Bleak. If, at removal by an enemy, the enchantment transferred to your skin ... then I think she was trying to get you to unleash it.'

BLEAK HAD RECOVERED ENOUGH to make the journey to rebel headquarters, as had Rion, much to Sahara's dismay. He padded along through the ruins behind them, growling occasionally at any spider sparrows that dared to flutter too close to him. With her ribs still tender, Bleak wore a light pack, while Sahara carried the brunt of whatever equipment they needed. As they trekked through the rubble, avoiding slippery patches of loose gravel, Bleak marvelled anew at the immensity of the fortress. Even in its state of disrepair, it was breathtaking.

'What happened to this place?' she asked, struggling over the sharp remains of a fallen watchtower. Rion leaped effortlessly over it.

Sahara paused, resting on her hiking stick, and wiped her brow with her sleeve. 'Ines,' she said. 'This is where she breached Oremere's defences and invaded.'

Bleak swore under her breath. For someone to have the amount of power it would have taken to bring down the great fortress ... She couldn't fathom that type of power.

They continued on, and the eerie silence of Oremere pulsed around them. They could have been the only two people left in the realm. But Sahara's thoughts were never far, and Bleak, not usually one for conversation, found herself prompting Sahara, merely so her thoughts weren't so loud.

‘You can ask about her, you know,’ she said in the evening as they made camp at the outskirts of the fortress. ‘Henri, I mean.’

‘I know,’ Sahara replied. ‘I’m trying to decide if I want to hear it or not. Sometimes, it’s easier to remain ignorant.’

Bleak nodded. She knew all about wanting to remain ignorant.

Sahara sighed, passing Bleak a piece of flatbread. ‘Tell me. What happened to her after you got to Heathton?’

‘I was told by one of our companions that she left for Valia.’

‘Is that so?’ Sahara’s brow furrowed.

‘It’s what I was told.’

‘By whom?’

‘Commander Swinton.’

‘Ah yes, I remember him. Henri and I met him when we were children. No knighthood for him yet, then ... Do you trust him?’

Bleak’s history with Swinton was as brief as it was complex, but surely he would have had no reason to lie to her at that point? As far as he was concerned, she had been a day away from being shipped off to Moredon for life imprisonment.

‘I believed him,’ she told Sahara.

Sahara ran her fingers through her hair, looking uneasy.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s just ... It doesn’t seem like something Henri would do – go back to Valia, which had no doubt been threatened or compromised. The Henri I knew would have sought an ally. But then again, I don’t *know* her, not anymore.’

Bleak didn’t know what to say. How well could you ever know someone? And if you could know someone well, did they ever change?

‘She was always the better choice,’ Sahara said quietly.

‘What?’

‘For queen. She was every bit the Valian ruler, and she didn’t even know it. She was so blinded by her fierce loyalty to me that she couldn’t see it. I had no magical abilities from Allehra. And I let despair get the better of me. I sank into it, relished it, until it took over those parts of my life that felt joy. Henri hated me for it. As I got closer to giving in, I began to dream. Strange, ethereal dreams where a voice would whisper one name – *Oremere*. It was at the forefront of my mind so much that I started to carve the name into trees, into anything, without even realising I was —’



‘It was you,’ Bleak blurted. ‘I found it carved into a stone down by one of the streams.’

‘Yes, that was me. Henri noticed, but never really asked. I think she thought it was the name of a lover. I was already convinced I was not a fit ruler for Valia, but the voice I heard soothed me – it led me to the border of mist. It told me that I was making the right choice, that Valia would flourish under Henri’s rule. I already missed my sister, even before I left, but I couldn’t find my way back to her. She couldn’t help me. I had to do right by her, and by the Valian people. The mist was the answer.’

Bleak sat in stunned silence. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said finally.

Sahara gave her a grim smile. ‘My friend Geraad likes to say, “we were not put on this realm to make apologies, only to make change”.’

Bleak took another bite of her flatbread. The sentiment was all well and good, but sometimes, a person could be sorry all the same. ‘What about the mist?’ she asked instead.

‘What about it?’

‘I don’t understand it. It seems to change, killing some, and not others ... How?’

‘It’s our understanding that originally, the mist was created by the ancestors of the kings of Oremere. It was designed to keep Oremere a secret from the outside world after the rulers of the other continents became threatened by the Ashai’s growing power. Our rulers agreed to cut themselves off from the rest of the realm, and Ellest, Battalon, Havennesse and Qatrola wiped Oremere from the history books. Ines, however, found a way to weaponise and control the mist ...’

Mist rolling through open windows and through the cracks under the doors flashed before Bleak’s eyes.

‘She meant to purge Oremere ...’

Sahara’s eyes had glazed over. ‘Yes. Exterminate and conquer,’ she said.

AFTER A DAY OF HEADING SOUTH, the women and panther headed inland. Here, the mist was thicker, reaching knee height and dancing between their legs as they trekked through the long grass fronds. It tickled Bleak’s exposed skin, and whispered to her magic. It was a strange sensation. She felt as though she might drift off somewhere, to set her power free.

Rion snarled from behind her and she jumped.

‘What is it?’ Sahara said, unsheathing her sword, looking around sharply for the threat.

Bleak frowned. ‘I think ... I think the mist calls to magic.’ She held out her hands, watching the mist rise and weave between her fingers. ‘I was floating away for a second there, being lured into it – Rion, he stopped me.’

Wide-eyed, Sahara looked between Bleak and the beast. She sheathed her sword. ‘Good thing we kept him around, then.’

Still startled, Bleak gave Rion a grateful glance and continued after Sahara. However, she fell back a little, to stay closer to the panther.

Much of the journey was across the flat, grassy plains. The day remained grey and muted, making it hard to keep track of how long they’d been walking. As they travelled, they talked. Bleak told Sahara more about her last few months in Ellest, and Sahara listened, never interrupting or pushing her for more information. It felt good to talk to someone.

Finally, the straight line of the horizon changed. Up ahead was a cluster of grassy hills and knolls. If Bleak squinted, she could just make out a tiny cottage nestled in the valley. Her heart sank. The way Sahara had been talking, she had expected something grander. Something worthier of a revolution. When they reached the foot of the hills, Bleak spotted movement. Goats. Dozens of goats grazing freely across the land. Some standing dangerously close to the edges on the rocky outcrops of the hills.

‘What is this place?’ she asked.

‘Our headquarters.’

‘I was afraid you were going to say that.’

‘And I was afraid *he* was going to do *that*,’ Sahara said, pointing at Rion, who was prowling towards the livestock.

Bleak swore. She knew she should decide *against* getting between a teerah panther and his next meal ... She darted after him anyway. ‘Rion,’ she hissed. ‘Rion.’

But Rion pounced, and without a sound, had a goat between his teeth, blood dripping from his maw. Bleak sighed. She couldn’t blame him. He was a wild animal, and how long had it been since he’d had the freedom and ability to catch his own prey?

Sahara shook her head. ‘Let’s hope he’s satisfied with just one. This way.’

They left Rion at the foot of the hills, while Sahara led Bleak up into the valley, towards the cottage. Upon closer inspection, it looked terrible. The

door had been kicked in and its windows were boarded up. It was covered in a decade's worth of dirt and cobwebs. Most offensive of all was the smell coming from within. Apparently, the goats used the cottage as shelter; droppings and matted fur carpeted the dusty floorboards.

*How can a rebellion be planned in a dump like this?* Bleak bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from commenting aloud.

Sahara strode across the room to the fireplace and crouched to remove the grate. Bleak folded her arms across her chest and waited. There was a loud screech, and Bleak peered over Sahara's shoulder to find that she'd removed not only the grate, but the lid to a trapdoor.

Relief washed over Bleak.

'Follow me,' Sahara said. 'Pull the lid back across the top when you're in.'

Bleak clung tightly to each rung of the metal ladder as they descended down a dark shaft. She couldn't see Sahara below her, or anything for that matter. It took an age to reach the bottom. When Bleak finally stepped down onto flat ground, she felt dizzy.

She heard Sahara groping in the dark for something and —

Light filled the chamber, and Sahara tugged her sleeve, pulling her out into an underground village. It was unlike anything Bleak had ever seen. The hills had been hollowed out and transformed into a network of torchlit passageways and doors, a fully functioning hub of activity.

And there were *people*. From *Oremere*. Oremians, as Sahara called them. Some were carrying baskets of food, others were loitering in alcoves chatting, and there were *children*. Bleak stared after a group of ten or more who passed in single file, clutching books to their chests.

'You're here,' said a deep voice.

It was the bearded man Bleak had seen in Sahara's thoughts. His deep-auburn hair was unkempt, and he looked older in the flesh, perhaps in his mid-forties. He strode towards them.

'Geraad.' Sahara smiled, pulling him into an embrace.

'You're two days early,' he said by way of greeting, though his eyes brightened at the sight of her.

'I know. And I brought a friend.' Sahara pulled away and motioned to Bleak to come forward.

'So I see,' Geraad said, studying her with suspicion, noting her odd-coloured irises.

‘She’s not a spy.’ Sahara rolled her eyes. Then to Bleak, ‘Geraad thinks everyone’s a spy.’

‘Everyone’s a spy until proven otherwise,’ he quipped, at last tearing his eyes away from Bleak and back to Sahara. ‘We have much to discuss.’

‘Bleak will sit in on the meeting.’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Have I led you astray yet?’

‘That’s not the point, we don’t *know* her —’

‘I’m the last one to have seen King Arden,’ Bleak interjected.

Geraad opened his mouth to protest, but she forged on. ‘I’m an Ashai. A mind whisperer. I could prove useful.’

Geraad didn’t hide his surprise. He looked to Sahara for confirmation.

‘That’s right. And Bleak’s got a much better understanding of all the shit going on in Ellest than any of our sources. The information we receive is usually two months out of date.’

‘Let me listen,’ Bleak said. ‘Then I can at least tell you everything I know.’

Geraad shook his head in disbelief at Sahara. ‘She’s on you,’ he told her.

‘Fine.’ Sahara reached across to a golden bell hanging from the wall. In three quick motions, she rang it.

With a final sigh, Geraad led them down one of the passages, and stopped to unlock an iron door.

‘*This* is headquarters,’ Sahara told Bleak under her breath. ‘The rest of the compound is a surviving colony of Oremians.’

‘What? How? How does Ines not know? How did they survive her invasion?’

‘Casimir.’

*Casimir*? There was that damn supposed hero’s name again. The supposed saviour of the Ashai folk who’d died in the second wave of plague all those years ago.

‘Casimir had this place built in secret, knowing he’d be unable to stop the plague, the invasion.’

There were *actual people* living beyond the mist. Despite the proof in her surroundings, Bleak could hardly believe it.

‘Are they all from here? The people?’ she managed, as Geraad led them through another thick door.

‘Most of them. We have the occasional Ashai who moved here from the other continents, when the land was prosperous, when it was a haven of sorts for people with magic. From what we know, Oremere has been shielded from the rest of the realm for a long time, but for much of that, it was in peace, until Ines. She changed everything.’

Footsteps sounded behind them and Bleak whirled around to find a young woman with blonde hair shaved close to her skull, jogging to catch up with them. A quiver of arrows and a bow swayed on her back.

‘Didn’t think you were due back so soon,’ she called, clapping Sahara on the shoulder when she reached them.

‘You know I like to keep you lot on your toes,’ Sahara said.

‘That you do. I see you’ve adopted a stray?’

‘Introductions later,’ Geraad’s voice growled up ahead. ‘Council room, five minutes.’

‘I see he’s in a good mood today,’ said the woman. ‘Should be pleasant for your newcomer.’

Bleak tried not to shrink as she was about to be scrutinised yet again. But the woman just smiled and followed them through to an antechamber. It was a simple space: various weapons hung from the wall and on the bench below, and someone had laid out a platter of fruit and bread.

‘Grab something to eat,’ Sahara said, helping herself. ‘Not sure how long we’ll be in there.’

Feeling completely out of her depth, Bleak followed Sahara’s lead, and with their plates piled high, they went through yet another door. A well-lit council room awaited them. In the centre was a large oak table surrounded by chairs and stools, while the walls ... The walls made the display in Sahara’s cabin look like child’s play. Here there were dozens of maps and charts, profile drawings of people, scraps of what looked like uniform material, and numerous tallies and figures that made no sense to Bleak.

Geraad was already seated, surprisingly not at the head of the table, talking with a younger man and woman on either side of him. Sahara sat down at the head, and Bleak slid into the seat next to her, finding herself suddenly without an appetite. The woman from the passageway dropped into the chair next to Bleak, dumping her bow and quiver on the floor with a satisfied sigh.

‘Who are we waiting on?’ Sahara called out, looking around the table.

‘Daleren,’ Geraad said. ‘He was doing watch on the outer perimeter, so word —’

A door on the other side of the room burst open. ‘I’m here, I’m here,’ said a weathered, grey-haired man in between wheezes.

‘Don’t kill yourself on our account,’ said the younger-looking man on Geraad’s right.

‘Geraad, tell your brat offspring to shut it, will you?’ snapped Daleren. ‘You know how I feel about impromptu meetings.’

‘My fault, Daleren,’ Sahara said, standing to full height.

Silence fell over the group of rebels as they looked from Sahara to Bleak. Bleak tried not to squirm in her seat. Their gazes were intense, and their questions pummelled into her mind without mercy. She rubbed her temples and waited for Sahara.

Sahara sat down and leaned back in her chair with the relaxed air of someone who’d done this a million times before. ‘Everyone, this is Bleak.’

Bleak waited for the rebels to question and protest as Geraad had done. But they simply waited.

‘Bleak,’ the Valian continued. ‘Meet Oremere’s Council of Rebels. You’ve been introduced to the charming Geraad already, and Fletch.’ She waved in the direction of the archer. ‘Daleren’s made his usual dramatic entrance. And the youngsters over there are Jaida and Geraad’s son, Kyden. Together, we’re the leaders and schemers of Oremere’s uprising.’

It sounded impressive enough, but looking around the room, Bleak wasn’t filled with confidence.

Sahara forged on. She explained that each person in the room led a particular aspect of the rebellion. ‘I direct the combat training for this colony. I’m also in charge of planning our military tactics,’ she told Bleak.

‘Made sense to put a Valian in charge of all that fighting,’ Daleren offered.

For a moment, his weathered, tanned skin reminded Bleak of her guardian, Senior, and she was hit with a sudden wave of grief. She missed his gruff nature, his southerner’s accent and his reassuring presence in the thick of any storm. Death was like that, Bleak knew. Often lulling the bereaved into a false sense of normalcy, until a small detail triggered a memory. Sometimes, it was as though she had to come to terms with the fact that Senior had died all over again.

Sahara ignored Daleren's comment. 'Geraad is in charge of policies and communications. Fletch there trains the archers and manages our network of spies.'

Fletch gave Bleak a mock salute.

'Jaida —' Sahara indicated the younger woman with the razor-sharp cheekbones, probably about Bleak's age — 'is our merchant adviser. She sets up trades with other colonies, as well as with people outside of Oremere. Daleren is in charge of resources; he finds us everything from weaponry to midwives. And finally, Kyden, Geraad's son, is the pretty face of our rebellion. Geraad writes the fancy speeches, Kye delivers them to the Oremians.'

As Sahara finished explaining, Bleak glanced between the harried, middle-aged man and the light-auburn-haired Kye. The latter flashed Bleak a wicked smile.

*Makes sense*, Bleak thought.

'We each have counterparts in our neighbouring colonies.'

'How many other colonies are there?' Bleak blurted out.

'We're one of three,' Geraad answered. His eyes hadn't left Sahara the whole time, but finally they slid to Bleak. 'With the three colonies' combined resources, we have tracked Ines' movements. We've learned everything we possibly can about her. From what we've gathered over the years, she has the ability to host the magic of other Ashai. Which is why the crowns across the realm have sought Ashai folk. They send them to Moredon, and if their powers are deemed worthy enough, they're offered to Ines.'

Bleak's heart pounded in her throat. *Host the magic of other Ashai?*

Geraad was still speaking. 'We know that her army —'

Bleak nearly choked. 'Army?'

Geraad nodded solemnly. 'Led by two of the vilest people you'll ever come across, Langdon and Farlah.'

*Farlah ...* Why did the name sound familiar?

'They're cousins. Born and raised by torturers as torturers,' Sahara added. 'If our sources are correct, they sailed around the realm with Ines.'

*That's it.* The realisation dawned on Bleak. *With Bren and Senior out on The Daybreaker.*

*'My lady may wish to speak with you ... You don't strike me as the sort of fellow who would be familiar with nobility ...'*

Bleak could picture it as though it were yesterday: the strange red flag dancing in the wind, proudly displaying the hand-painted face of a woman ...

‘I’ve met her,’ Bleak muttered quietly, still half trapped in the memory. There was pain, the day that foreign ship pulled up alongside them. An insistent humming that had pierced her very mind.

‘What’s that? Speak up, newcomer,’ Daleren called.

Bleak cleared her throat. ‘Farlah, I met her. Just briefly, years ago out at sea. She was escorting her *lady* with a guard, apparently from Battalon. They were heading for Qatrola, so they said.’

‘Thank the gods she didn’t realise what you are.’ Sahara ran her hands through her hair. ‘It was Ines, you know. Calling out to me in my dreams, whispering the word “Oremere” over and over again in my head. She was luring me to her, thinking that I was the twin with the power ... I don’t know if she has realised the truth yet.’

Bleak rubbed her eyes. There was so much to take in.

‘What do you mean, *what* she is?’ Fletch asked suddenly, studying Bleak with a newfound intensity.

Bleak gave a curt nod of permission to Sahara. They had already told Geraad. And if Oremere used to be a haven for Ashai, she’d be damned if she couldn’t be honest about who and what she was here.

‘Bleak is a mind whisperer,’ Sahara said. ‘King Arden attempted to imprison her at Moredon Tower. She escaped. I want her to understand what it is we’re doing here, so she can decide for herself if she wants to join us.’

There it was. Something Bleak hadn’t had in a long time – choice.

She ignored the well that opened up in her chest and turned to Sahara. ‘And if I do, what’s the plan?’

Sahara smiled. ‘I’ve told you of Casimir ...’

‘That he had these structures built before he died?’

‘Casimir’s not dead,’ Geraad said.

*What?*

‘Ines has him. He’s been her prisoner all this time.’ Sahara turned to face her fully. ‘And we’re going to rescue him.’



## CHAPTER 7

Freezing didn't cover it. Despite a second cloak of palma fur from Eydis, Henri felt as though her core had turned to ice, along with her bones and the blood in her veins. On Northern Kildaholm thoroughbreds, they cantered through the snow. They plunged after Bear and his pack, back into the Forest of Wolves, the wild animals howling all around them.

Henri was a confident rider, and had been for many years. She'd received the best training to be had in all of Ellest, but nothing compared to the icy descent into the dark, snow-capped forest. Fresh snow was falling still, and Henri felt a stab of pity for her mount. However, Eydis had said they were bred for this.

With Eydis as a guide, and the sure-footed steeds beneath them, it didn't take as long to reach the haunted valley as Henri had estimated. The waving, twisted trees greeted them, and Henri, despite the years of training, discipline and battle, shuddered. When she dismounted, she sank a foot or more into the fresh powder and wondered if she'd ever feel her toes again.

Eydis lit a torch, and beckoned for Henri to follow her into the centre of the valley.

*This is mad. Eydis is mad,* Henri thought as she followed her friend, leaving the horses on the outskirts of the trees. The dogs followed their master, so close to Eydis' feet that Henri marvelled at how she didn't trip over them. Bear waited for them at the base of one of the biggest trees. He'd dug a hole. A tunnel – a tunnel through the snow, that led to a dark den beneath.

'Ready?' Eydis said.

With her hands tucked under her arms, Henri glared at her. Giving her a grin, Eydis threw the torch down into the hole. Without a moment's pause, Bear dived in, and barked from the other side.

Eydis followed, leaving Henri no choice but to get down on her hands and knees in the cold, wet snow and crawl in after her. If she didn't die from frostbite, she was going to kill Eydis.

'Alright?' Eydis said.

Henri looked around. They were in some kind of cavern, and it was ... warm, or *warmer* at least, in here, out of the vicious wind. The space was big enough for both women to stand, and Eydis moved the torch around so Henri could take it all in. The earth had been tunnelled away and packed solidly into sturdy walls. Before them, the cavern split into seven tunnels veering off in different directions.

'What is this place?' Henri breathed.

Eydis began walking towards the middle path. 'The East Sea Underpass.'

'The *what*? How long has this been here?'

'A long time.' Eydis shrugged. 'I'm surprised your mother didn't tell you about it.'

'Allehra knows this is here?'

'Of course she does. How do you think we kept our trading with Valia secret for all these years?'

'It leads all the way to Valia?'

'Felder's Bay.'

'And the other tunnels?'

'They create a network under the sea. The most right used to lead to Belbarrow River, and one of the ones on the left splits into two – to Qatrola and Oremere.'

'Aren't you concerned this is how Ines plans to invade?'

Eydis shook her head and crouched down beside Bear. With her arms around the massive dog, she looked back up at Henri. 'Bear and his pack are the only ones who can get through. It's a unique talent of their breed.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'The network is guarded by lisloiks.'

'Nymphs?'

'Similar. Lisloiks were once water nymphs, but when the mist spread, they became trapped down here. Now, they patrol the network – misleading

anyone who attempts to pass through. They confuse the minds of travellers so effectively that they wander the passages until they die of exhaustion or thirst – then the lisloiks take them.'

'For what?'

'To feast upon, from what I've heard.'

'And you want us to travel through these networks?'

Eydis smiled. 'Essentially, yes.'

'Right,' Henri said, grinding her teeth. 'And tell me, how does your dog fit into all of this?'

'Bear is a special breed, with the ability to keep a person from being lured into the traps of the lisloiks.'

As they moved further into the passage, Henri could hear the dripping of water, and saw that the walls were wet.

'How long until we're under the ocean?' she asked, feeling claustrophobic all of a sudden.

'An hour or two,' said Eydis. 'I haven't made the journey in a while.'

'You've come to Ellest like this before?'

Eydis shook her head. 'I've never gone across the whole channel. I've only inspected the tunnels and supervised their upgrades every few years.'

Henri shook her head in disbelief.

Eydis stopped walking and gripped Henri's shoulder. 'This is how we get word to Valia. This is how we get your kindred here. Will you help us?'

Henri felt her power swell in her palms as the pressure settled upon her. 'I have to speak to Allehra.'

'Allehra doesn't command the kindred anymore, *you* do.'

'I would seek her counsel.'

'And what counsel would she give? That it is a bold and dangerous move? That the kindred should remain hidden in their trees?'

'We are not cowards,' Henri snapped, although she knew Eydis was baiting her.

'Then *prove it*. Come to our aid, and we shall come to yours when the first battle is won. Mark my words, Henri – there will be a war, and we will both need all the allies we can get. Is that not why you came to me now, and not Allehra?'

Henri said nothing, staring down the dark tunnel ahead.

'Sahara's death changed Allehra, Henri. She now seeks to protect the kindred, in the way she couldn't protect your sister. She wants to protect

*you ... But hiding is not what Valians are born for. Hiding is not what you spend your whole lives training for.'*

As Eydis spoke the words into the darkness, and Henri's power thrummed through her, she knew her friend was right. She knew she was yearning for this fight, and had been for a long time. Slowly, she turned and locked eyes with Eydis.

'The Valian kindred won't cross the waters of the East Sea,' she said. 'They will trek beneath them. As a Queen of Valia Forest and the kindred, as your ally, and as your oldest friend, you have my word: it will be done. Valia will come to your aid.'

HENRI HAD SENT the missive with one of Eydis' dogs then and there. Five hundred kindred. Three days' time. The halfway point. Henri had tucked the parchment into the pouch around the dog's neck before Eydis had whistled, sending the canine bounding off through a pitch-black tunnel. Both rulers had watched him disappear with the flick of his tail, and stood there until the soft tapping of his paws had ceased. Henri had longed to go with the dog, to step out at the other end onto the sandy banks of Felder's Bay, and feel the sun's warmth on her skin once more. She felt as though she'd never be completely warm again, like the ice of Havennesse had leached into her bones. As Eydis led them from the cavern beneath the Valley of Twisted Trees, Henri had allowed herself a moment, just a moment, to yearn for the vast canopies of Valia. She missed the deep thrum of power that beat in the living bridges there, the fresh southern air and the roar of the waterfalls. She missed her own bed, and her training circuit. Her kindred ... She missed them, too. Tilly, Marvel and Petra. Their fierceness, their loyalty, their banter. A head of fiery red hair flashed in her mind, and her stomach dipped.

Yes, she thought, *I miss her, too ... I've been missing her for some time now.* No matter where they were, she realised, Athene always felt like home.

'Henri?' Eydis was saying. 'Henri, are you listening?'

The two women were once again sitting before a roaring fire in Eydis' private study, surrounded by Eydis' remaining dogs.

Henri snapped out of her reverie. 'Sorry,' she muttered. 'What did you say?'

Eydis crossed and uncrossed her long legs, her thick fur cloak falling about her carelessly.

‘Has anyone ever told you, you make for sorry company?’

Despite herself, Henri laughed. ‘Not in so many words.’

‘Were we not on the brink of war, I’d perhaps try to talk you out of your sombre nature – there is much fun to be had in Wildenhaven,’ Eydis said, leaning forward and pouring more steaming tea into Henri’s cup.

‘With you, I don’t doubt it.’

Eydis smirked. ‘One of these days, Henri —’

There was a loud bang, and the double doors of the study flew open. Two towering men, faces flushed from the cold, both wearing thick red palma furs over their armour, stormed in. The slighter of the two had the same shade of caramel hair as Eydis, the same full lips. Jarel, the queen’s brother. The last time Henri had seen him, he’d been but a child. Henri looked to the other man. He was enormous, broad and tall, with a head of silver-streaked hair and a lined, tanned face. Eydis was already at his side, fire in her eyes. She wrenched his face down to hers and kissed him hard, before slapping him on the chest with the back of her hand.

‘You blithering fools,’ she snapped. ‘Where in the realm have you been?’ Her brow knitted into a furious frown.

But the man’s gaze slid to Henri’s. ‘My queen, should you not introduce your foreign guest first?’

Eydis tutted. ‘You know very well who she is, Nicolai. Henri – I apologise for the tardiness of these idiots.’

Henri couldn’t contain the smile that tugged at her mouth. Gods, she hoped Eydis never changed.

‘My lady.’ Jarel rushed forward, his hair falling into his eyes and his face flushing deeply as he took Henri’s hand in his and pressed his lips to it.

Eydis made an exasperated sound and rang for wine.

Nicolai looked from the silver bell back to Eydis. ‘You’re going to want a level head for the news we have,’ he said.

‘Gods.’ Eydis threw herself back down into her armchair. ‘By the sounds of it, I’m going to need something much stronger than wine.’ She thrust her hands out to the empty chairs. ‘Must I drag it out of you two, then? Henri and I have other things to do than stand around with you lot.’

The porter, Ulrich, opened the door, a tray balanced on one hand. His eyes widened at the rugged sight of Nicolai and Jarel.

‘My lords, I didn’t know of your return – I’ll fetch more glasses at once.’

Eydis groaned. ‘Unfortunately, it seems we’re in need of more sobering refreshments, Ulrich. Would you prepare some more tea? For four?’

When Ulrich had left, Henri turned to Jarel. ‘It’s nice to see you again,’ she said. ‘You’ve changed much since we last met.’

‘And you, my lady,’ said Jarel, full of formality.

Henri looked at the weary faces, so familiar with one another. Eydis hadn’t taken her eyes off Nicolai; she waited expectantly. Nicolai rubbed his creased temples with his fingers, revealing nails that were lined with dirt; they hadn’t stopped to rest or bathe before returning to their queen. He looked to Eydis now, his face fallen, clearly disappointed he did not have better news to bring her.

‘It was as we expected. The villages of Hallowden, Briarfort and Direbreach have fallen to the cults. They speak of Ines as their goddess, *the* goddess. She has them convinced that she is Rheyah incarnate, that she and the huntress are one.’

‘Go on,’ Eydis said, leaning back in her chair, her eyes not leaving Nicolai’s.

‘Every single person in Hallowden has succumbed to her madness. I tried to speak with them, but they only chanted of her power, her beauty and how they are her children, ready to make the realm hers. They spoke of her immortality.’

‘Immortality?’

Nicolai glanced darkly between them and nodded. ‘Yes. She has promised them eternal life.’

‘What?’ Henri cut in, unable to mask her disbelief.

‘Sounds about right,’ Eydis muttered, taking a steaming mug from the tray Ulrich presented.

Quiet settled over the small group. Something trickled down Henri’s palm; she realised she’d been clenching her fists so hard that her fingernails had broken the skin.

‘How did they behave towards you?’ Eydis asked Nicolai.

‘Mad, but we were unharmed,’ he replied.

Jarel shifted in his seat, his eyes betraying guilt. ‘I shouldn’t have let him go alone,’ he cut in, gripping Nicolai’s forearm.

‘Our queen’s orders were for you to stand down. It was nothing. I’m unharmed.’

Eydis’ gaze flitted between the two men, a muscle sliding in her jaw. ‘Show me.’

Nicolai looked right at her, and sighed heavily. ‘It looks worse than it is.’

Eydis said nothing, but Henri noted that her fingers gripped the arms of her chair so hard, the skin around her knuckles was bone-white.

Only Henri’s training kept her still as her stomach churned at the thought of what they might be about to learn. *Aren’t things bad enough?*

Nicolai’s mouth set in a grim line as he shrugged off his palma furs and unstrapped the armour covering his chest. Beneath it, his clothes were torn, as though a crazed mob indeed had clutched at the fabric and wrenched it blindly. Unable to hide his wince, he rolled up his undershirt, revealing the tanned skin beneath, littered with old scars. He kept rolling the material up to his ribs. At the sight of it, even Henri had to suppress her gasp of horror. She risked a glance at Eydis, anticipating her wrath, but her friend’s face had gone sickly pale. Henri’s eyes went back to Nicolai’s wound. His flesh had been branded. It was not a clean mark – the surrounding skin was burned and festering – he had clearly fought with all his might. The brand was clear enough nonetheless. It was a woman’s face, blistered and raw.

‘Has it been tended to?’ Eydis said flatly.

‘It’s fine.’

‘I asked a question. And I expect an honest answer this time.’

‘No, my queen, but —’

Eydis rang a bell. ‘Mariette.’ Eydis’ voice was hard when the kennel master appeared at the door. ‘Take Nicolai to the infirmary. I task you with this for discretion. You understand?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ the woman said, turning expectantly to Nicolai.

‘But —’ Nicolai said.

‘Go. Jarel can tell us the rest.’

Nicolai’s face flushed. He opened his mouth as though to argue again; however, the challenge in Eydis’ glare silenced him and got him to his feet, his ripped shirt billowing. He bowed his head first to Eydis, and then to Henri, and left, Mariette on his heels.

An icy rage had settled over Eydis.

‘Sister, it’s my fault —’

‘Jarel,’ the queen snapped, ‘were orders obeyed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you are not to blame. Tell me what happened.’

Jarel flinched at his sister’s words, but nodded. ‘We followed the rumours up the mountain. The first two villages were empty. The livestock had been branded with the same mark as ... as Nicolai. It’s her face, Eydis, the brand.’

‘I gathered as much. Continue.’

‘The tracks from the village led us to the next – they’re joining, you see. About halfway to the third village, we heard them. It was like a huge ... celebration. We could see them from the hideout Nicolai had set up. It was a ceremony – they had a great fire, which they danced around as they heated the branding irons. People were lining up to get the mark, fighting over who got it first. Some people were covered in them ...’

There was a green tinge to Jarel’s face, and Henri realised he was in shock. She knew the queen’s brother had gone through rigorous training, though she doubted he had seen the horrors of war before.

‘Was there a leader?’ Eydis asked.

‘We couldn’t see one at first, but Nicolai spotted her, standing at the edge of the ... initiation.’

‘Her?’

‘Not Ines, someone else.’

‘Nicolai recognised her?’

Jarel nodded. ‘Farlah.’

Eydis’ face fell, and Henri watched as her friend steeled herself against whatever demons lay beneath the surface there.

‘Who’s Farlah?’ Henri cut in. She needed to have the whole story. Five hundred of her best kindred were a day’s march beneath the East Sea by now – like hell she’d accept anything less than the complete truth.

Eydis met her gaze and understood. ‘Ines has two commanders, Langdon and Farlah, cousins. Torturers, from a line of torturers. Even some who know nought of Oremere have heard those names before.’

‘Are they Ashai?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘How did Nicolai recognise Farlah?’

‘Nicolai’s from Qatrola. He spent time in one of the prisons in Tokarr, where Ines has been in power for years. Farlah has free rein over the cells



there. She took an interest in him.'

Henri didn't try to hide her shudder. 'Why?'

'Sometimes, there's no reason to madness.'

Henri nodded. That concept was familiar to her. 'How did he escape?'

'Eydis rescued him,' Jarel said, his eyes gleaming with pride. 'She rescued them all, and sent that bitch running back to Oremere with her tail between her legs.'

This was news to Henri. 'Why didn't you kill her?'

Jarel jumped to his sister's defence. 'She did what —'

Eydis raised a hand and he fell silent. 'Henri thinks like a warrior,' she said, 'as I wish I had back then. I was young, Henri, drunk on the glory of an unlikely victory, and I wanted to send a message, a warning to whoever the enemy was, that we would not be conquered.'

'A taunt?' Henri said, struggling to keep the edge from her voice.

'I was young.'

Jarel looked ready to jump down Henri's throat at the hint of criticism. Henri met his gaze and held it. *Let's see you try*, she thought. She was itching for a fight, pent-up power filling her veins. But then she remembered. Hadn't it been her impulsive actions with Bleak and the King's Army that had set everything in motion with Arden?

Eydis rubbed the bridge of her nose. 'She recognised Nicolai in the village. She had him branded, and let him go ... A message for me.'

Jarel reached out and gripped his sister's shoulder. 'It cannot be undone. You weren't to know. And if it weren't for you, Nicolai and the others would not be alive today.'

'Is there more?' was all she asked.

'Nicolai fought them off, he fought the whole time, but they overwhelmed him. Once he was branded, they released him, but it's ...'

'I know,' said Eydis. 'Farlah is combining them all into one army.'

'But it's not an army,' said Henri. 'It's an untrained, chaotic mob. They can be overcome —'

'Three villages and counting will start making an impact on our produce, our livestock. And Ines doesn't care about their level of combat skill; she will throw the weight of our own people at us, to diminish our strength, our resources, before she hits us with her real forces – the masked soldiers of Oremere.'

‘You’ve seen this?’ Henri asked, ignoring the surge of her own power at the thought.

‘I don’t need to.’

Henri let her head sink to her hands, a headache suddenly blooming behind her eyes. She took a deep breath and looked between brother and sister.

‘King Arden is part of these forces?’

‘You felt her power in him, Henri,’ Eydis reminded her gently.

Henri swallowed the lump in her throat and tugged down the sleeves of her leathers to stop the goosebumps racing up her arms. She wouldn’t forget the strange pulse of foreign magic, nor the king’s naively victorious face as he had wielded power he thought was his. It had felt wrong, and ancient, as though it could burst free of its host at any moment.

Concern furrowed the brows of both siblings before her. Their mirrored mannerisms hit Henri in the chest, but she pushed Sahara from her mind. Sahara had abandoned her, had left her to face the impossible alone. Eydis and Jarel didn’t deserve the envy that poured towards them from her in that moment. And Sahara didn’t deserve to be missed, not now.

‘The immortality rumour.’ Eydis chewed the inside of her cheek as she mulled it over. ‘It’s not true. Or, I don’t think it is. But there’s something not right there. We don’t know the whole story.’

Nicolai did not make a reappearance, and Henri could sense Eydis’ impatience growing as the hours passed and word hadn’t arrived. The queen’s fingers tapped incessantly on the armrest of her chair.

‘Eydis,’ Henri said. ‘Go to him. I’ll retire for the night anyway, and Jarel looks as though he could use a bath and some rest as well.’

Eydis’ eyes snapped up to Henri’s, as though she’d almost forgotten she was there, the exhaustion clear on her face. She nodded.

Henri stepped outside, the sudden chill of the passageway taking her breath away. She made to duck back inside to get her furs, but the heated voices within stopped her.

‘— his queen first, his lover second to that. How dare he —’

‘He was only trying to spare you anguish, Eydis,’ Jarel’s voice sounded.

‘That is not for him to choose!’

‘I agree, which is why you know the truth.’

‘And how much truth is that? Whose truth? I need people I can trust, more than ever. Do I not deserve honesty from him?’

‘Sister, we both know this is not about what happened at the village.’

‘Oh? You know something I do not, brother? Tell me.’

There was silence, and Henri debated striding back into the study at the opportune moment.

Then Eydis said in a quiet voice, ‘You think I like sending him to the infirmary with *her*? You don’t think I wish I could tend to my lover’s wounds myself? I am the Queen of Havennesse. I have an army of lunatics wreaking havoc on my lands, and a force of much deadlier warriors on my doorstep. I am queen first, always.’

‘I know.’

Henri heard footsteps, and moments later, came face to face with Mariette.

‘Need something?’ the kennel master said, looking pointedly at the door before rapping her knuckles hard against it.

Henri schooled her face into a mask of neutrality. ‘I forgot my furs,’ she said, and opened the door without waiting for a response from within.

Mariette said nothing about her loitering, not then and there in any case. She had informed them that Nicolai’s wound was infected, and that she’d spiked his tonic with a sleeping draught so he was forced to rest. Henri had snatched up her furs and pulled them tight around her. She left them, the enormity of the night finally taking its toll, exhaustion tugging at her like an insistent child. She returned to her lavish guest chambers and closed the door behind her. Like most chambers she’d seen so far in Wildenhaven, the space was cosy. Thick fur rugs and opulent soft furnishings blocked out the chill in the air, along with a massive, full fire. She went to the settee at the end of her four-poster bed and sat, reaching down to unlace her boots. It had been a *very* long day. She pushed them off at the heel and rested her elbows on her knees, sighing heavily. Tomorrow she’d start the journey through the tunnels beneath Havennesse and the East Sea to meet her kindred. Tomorrow, they would be officially at war.

## CHAPTER 8

The Battalonian training arena was a flat, dry expanse of earth, unprotected from the sun, with tufts of fountain grass everywhere. They waved in the blistering breeze, making a mockery of Swinton. It was too damn hot for armour, and so he wore only light boots, linen pants and a loose shirt, while most of the Battalonians trained shirtless. Swinton watched Fiore spar with Prince Nazuri in the training ring, their chests shining with sweat. The young prince was *good*. Better than good, and Fi wasn't holding back as he lunged and struck with the wooden practice sword. Prince Nazuri matched him blow for blow, using his slender frame to his advantage.

Swinton turned back to his own sparring partner and readied himself. His opponent lunged for him, but Swinton was fast and deflected the blows with his battleaxes. He feinted left, and sidestepped a strike. He kept his feet grounded, noting the undisciplined nature of his partner's footwork. With an angled swipe of his leg, Swinton struck his opponent's feet from beneath him and ended the round with his battleaxe poised at his partner's neck. The man nodded at him and accepted Swinton's hand up. Swinton paused to wipe the sweat from his eyes. The heat slowed him. His whole body was slick with perspiration, and it made every move ten times heavier. But it would mean that when he left Battalon, he would be stronger and faster than ever.

'Dimi,' called Fi.

Swinton looked up to find Fi grinning with an arm around Prince Nazuri.

*What in the realm ...? Fiore is friendly with the prince?*

Swinton approached cautiously. 'What is it?'

'His Highness thought you might indulge him in a round?'

'I wouldn't dream —'

'I insist, Commander,' the prince said, stepping forward from beneath the weight of Fi's arm. 'You've been watching us like a hawk, it only seems fair that you get a chance.'

Fiore laughed at this. 'Dimi's always watching, Highness.'

'It's my job,' Swinton said pointedly.

'I would expect no less from King Arden's most esteemed military man,' Prince Nazuri offered.

Swinton bowed his head in thanks.

'Are you ready, then, Commander?'

Swinton gripped his battleaxes and nodded. 'Yes, Your Highness, on your mark.'

The prince didn't hesitate — he lifted his shield and brought his broadsword over the top, advancing. Gravel crunched, and Nazuri struck with the precision and speed of a Battalonian viper. Silent and fierce, his attack came in a burst of drives and lunges.

'Your style is unique, Highness,' Swinton said, deflecting the prince's overhead thrust with his axes crossed before him.

'As is yours, Commander. No doubt you have benefitted from your traditional schooling as well as training at the hands of Captain Murphadias here,' said Prince Nazuri.

'Yes, I have, Your Highness.'

The prince nodded, switching sword hands. 'I was trained in the swordplay customs of all four continents of the Upper Realm,' he said. 'So I have a similarly mixed style.'

Swinton lunged, catching Prince Nazuri by surprise. The royal stumbled back and Swinton struck again, and again.

'Dimi,' Fiore warned softly from the sidelines.

But no, if Swinton was to gain Prince Nazuri's trust, he would have to do it right. He kept his attack sharp and focused, driving the prince back into the sand. Prince Nazuri slashed the battleaxes away and jabbed, and Swinton easily dodged the strike. Swinton took a deep breath and readied himself for the final attack. He plunged forward, becoming one with his axes as he whirled them at the prince. Prince Nazuri evaded the blows, and

began to retreat, shrinking back, until Swinton had him pinned against the wall on the far side of the training area.

‘Dimitri,’ Fiore said. ‘That’s enough.’

Swinton stepped back from the wide-eyed prince with a bow. ‘His Highness will never improve if no one seeks to challenge him in the ring.’

‘Your Highness,’ Fiore began. ‘Forgive the commander, he’s —’

‘There is nothing to forgive, Captain Murphadias. Commander Swinton is right. If my soldiers sought to test me properly, I would be a better swordsman, and perhaps the commander wouldn’t have bested me.’

Swinton returned his axes to the straps on his back and bowed in acknowledgement.

‘Commander, I wish to train with you from now on. You have proven yourself a worthy opponent.’

Swinton ignored Fi’s furrowed brow and bowed again. ‘As you wish, Your Highness.’

SWINTON’S Battalionian chambers were far more spacious and decadent than his rooms back in Ellest. When he returned to them, he exhaled a deep breath of relief. He’d made progress: the prince had noticed him. It was the beginning of a slow and delicate game, but Swinton had won the first round.

Swinton washed himself quickly and efficiently with the sponges and soaps Kamath had left for him. The squire was good-natured, but his enthusiasm made him a royal pain in Swinton’s backside. He was also certain that Kamath had to be reporting his movements to someone. Whether it was King Arden in Ellest or King Roswall of Battalon, he didn’t know. Either way, Swinton knew he could trust no one.

He towel-dried himself and dressed in a clean shirt and pants. He tied up his hair so at least the nape of his neck was cool, and wandered back out to his bedroom. And stopped in his tracks. Therese, one of the Ellestian housemaids, was straightening the sheets on his bed.

‘Good afternoon, Commander,’ she said, curtsying.

Even though the young redhead had journeyed with them from Heatton, Swinton was yet to become accustomed to her presence in the shiprock palace. She seemed too timid and delicate for this harsh place.

He nodded in greeting and made to leave. He hated being present when the servants tended to the household chores in his chambers. Plus, Therese made him nervous.

‘Commander?’ she called as he grasped the doorhandle.

He turned to face her. ‘Yes?’

She was blushing furiously and could hardly meet his eyes. ‘I wanted ... I wanted to thank you.’

Swinton frowned. ‘What for?’

‘For requesting me. I ... I prefer being in your service than ...’ Her eyes went to the floor. ‘I am grateful.’

Swinton stared at her. He *hadn’t* made that request. ‘You’re ... You’re welcome,’ he said finally.

As Therese left, a messenger appeared at the door with a note for him. He glanced at the royal seal, *Prince Nazuri’s* seal. It had been tampered with, clearly opened and resealed with fresh wax. He glanced at the porter, but his face was schooled into neutrality. Saying nothing, Swinton broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. It was an invitation to dine with Prince Nazuri and King Roswall later this evening. Swinton toyed with the chain tucked into the front of his shirt. He’d never dined with King Arden, not in this respect. It seemed like an odd request from the Battalonian royals. Perhaps ... Perhaps Swinton’s prowess in the training ring had impressed the young prince? Whatever their motivations, it brought Swinton another step closer to Prince Nazuri, as King Arden had ordered.

Beside Swinton, the messenger cleared his throat, and Swinton realised he was waiting for a response.

‘Tell the king and prince I would be honoured,’ Swinton said.

‘Very good, Commander,’ the messenger replied, before ducking out of the room.

LATER THAT EVENING, Swinton was escorted to a dining hall he hadn’t seen before. It was smaller than the one in Ellest, though just as decadent. This must be where the royals dined each night, while where he’d been dining these past weeks accommodated the rest of the household and staff. There was probably another hall somewhere for formal feasts, but for all his training and keen observations, Swinton was still a stranger to the layout of the palace.

The table was set with bronze plates and cutlery, with matching goblets and wine decanters. Swinton was glad he had changed. He now wore a deep-navy tunic with his father's sigil, a pair of crossed battleaxes, emblazoned on the breast, and a pair of crisp black pants. Kamath had made himself useful by cleaning his boots, too. And so, standing beside the dining table, shifting from foot to foot, Swinton waited for King Roswall and Prince Nazuri to arrive.

The commander let his mind wander, and though he tried not to dwell upon how difficult these last few weeks had been, his mind kept looping back to the subject. Being in a foreign continent was hard enough when he didn't speak the native tongue fluently, but to make matters worse, he and Fiore were drifting apart. His one ally, his one trusted friend here, was keeping busy, keeping his distance. It was Swinton's own fault, he could acknowledge that to himself at least. He'd been harsh on Fiore in the weeks before their departure from Ellest. He'd seen him making eyes at the drunk Angovian girl, Bleak, and had exchanged harsh words with him about loyalty and inappropriate relations. The guilt Swinton felt for it was extraordinary. He'd betrayed his friend and the girl, leaving her to rot in a cell before being shipped off to Moredon Tower. Then there were the flyers. The ones that seemed to have spilled across the seas from Ellest and into Belbarrow. The ones that Fiore was obsessing over. Despite Swinton's orders, he had the sinking feeling that Fi was going ahead and investigating without him, which could get him into *serious* trouble.

'Good evening, Commander,' said a warm voice from the doorway.

King Roswall and Prince Nazuri strode in, each looking suitably formal.

Swinton bowed low. 'Your Grace, Your Highness, you honour me with this invitation.'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' King Roswall said, beckoning Swinton to his seat at the table. 'My son tells me you made quite the impression during today's training session.'

'His Highness exaggerates my talent, I am sure.'

'Zuri is not inclined to pointless flattery,' King Roswall said, leaning back to allow a servant to drape a serviette across his lap.

Heat flushed up Swinton's neck. 'Of course not, Your Majesty.'

Prince Nazuri laughed. 'Rest easy, Commander. I merely told my father how refreshing it was to duel an equal opponent for once.'

'Your Highness is too kind.'



Swinton could have sworn the prince rolled his eyes at this, but King Roswall was beaming.

Swinton dared to raise his goblet of wine. 'A toast, to Your Majesty's generosity.'

King Roswall smiled and clinked his goblet against Swinton's. 'Thank you, Commander.'

What followed was an eight-course feast, punctuated with polite conversation about Ellest's traditional military training, how Swinton was surviving the Battalonian heat, and the preparations for the upcoming Festival of Lamaka. Unfortunately, the chatter veered onto a topic that Swinton felt uneasy discussing: Princess Olena.

'I must admit,' said King Roswall, his cheeks and nose flushed from the wine. 'I didn't know what to expect from her. I'm sure you won't mind me saying that a blind princess isn't a king's first choice companion for his heir. But I'm quite taken with her, as is my son.'

Swinton bit his tongue to quash the urge to defend Princess Olena, and noted that the tips of Prince Nazuri's ears had turned pink.

King Roswall continued. 'The late Queen Nadia and I were subject to an arranged marriage, but were lucky enough to find love as well.'

'I'm glad to hear it, Your Majesty,' Swinton said. 'I'm sorry for the loss of Her Majesty. I hear she was much loved by her family, and by the people.'

The king's eyes stared blankly for a moment. 'Yes, she was much loved. A wonderful queen, and a wonderful mother to Nazuri. He feels her loss keenly, I'm afraid. As do I.'

'I am sorry.'

King Roswall smiled sadly. 'Thus is the nature of life, is it not? Love and loss so intricately entwined. You cannot have one without the other, unfortunately.'

'Well said, Your Majesty.'

'A rarity for me, Commander. Usually poetics are Nazuri's strength.' King Roswall spooned the rest of his double-chocolate flan into his mouth.

Swinton could feel his own face growing warm from the wine, and covered his goblet when the servant next tried to refill it.

The king leaned back in his chair, hands on his bloated belly. 'I think I'm going to have to retire for the evening, Commander. Before I fall asleep.'

‘Of course.’ Swinton pushed his chair back and got to his feet.

‘What’s that?’ Prince Nazuri asked, standing and taking a step towards Swinton.

‘Your Highness?’

King Roswall noted his son’s gaze and pointed to Swinton’s chest, where to his dismay, the chain bearing Yacinda’s coin had escaped his shirtfront.

‘What pretty little trinket is that?’ King Roswall said.

Swinton held the coin out from his chest for the king and prince to see.

‘May I?’ the king asked, palm outstretched.

Swinton swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. He hadn’t taken off the coin in ten years. But there was nothing for it. He unfastened the chain and placed the necklace in King Roswall’s outstretched hand.

Swinton gripped the back of his chair as his magic slammed into him. It had been so long since he’d felt it that it came pummelling back into him all at once. It took everything he had to keep his face neutral and his stance relaxed.

‘It’s an interesting design,’ said King Roswall, examining the markings on the coin. ‘What’s it for?’

‘Good luck, Your Majesty,’ Swinton managed.

The king rolled the coin between his thumb and forefinger, just as Swinton so often did. But now, Swinton was dying to have it back. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep his discomfort at bay.

‘Does it work?’ Prince Nazuri asked, examining the coin in his father’s hands.

‘Some days more than others, Highness.’

The king laughed. ‘Right you are, Commander. Right you are.’ He tossed the coin back to Swinton.

It was too late – the premonition had already hit.

*THE STREETS of Heathton were deserted but for a swarm of tiny white butterflies spiralling gracefully in and out of the alleys. Shops, windows and doors were all boarded up; there were two with thick red crosses painted on them, the paint dried in drips down to the ground. The air was stale, with a faint lingering sourness. Further in, the smell was stronger – decay, death. The town square had been abandoned, though a rotting corpse was still*

*chained to the platform in the centre. Plague. The plague had swept through Heathton.*

*Now, in its desertion, the capital seemed vast. Its archways higher and more formidable than before, its passageways narrower and more claustrophobic ... A yellowed copy of the town gazette skidded across the dirt in the cool breeze. Plague Targets Ashai read the headline. The wind picked up and sent the paper tumbling down a cobblestoned alley, the cloud of white-winged insects gliding through the infected air after it.*

KING ROSWALL WAS BIDDING them goodnight, already halfway out of the dining hall. But Prince Nazuri was gazing at Swinton, a crease of concern between his brows.

‘Are you quite well, Commander?’

Holding his hands behind his back to hide their shaking, Swinton thanked the prince profusely for his hospitality. When Prince Nazuri had finally left, Swinton near collapsed onto the dining table, steadying himself once more against the back of his chair, his legs weak and his heart hammering. He clamped the coin and chain back around his neck.

*Gods, what did I just see?* His heart sank. A plague to target the Ashai, as it had last time, leaving his kind near extinction. A plague in Heathton where ... Where it would infect —

Swinton sprinted through the network of hallways, sweat beading at his hairline. He had to find Fiore. The desperation felt as though it would burst through his chest. He cursed the disorientating corridors, and the unhelpful guards and servants.

*Fi, where in this gods-forsaken place are you?*

After what felt like forever, Swinton found him at a bar in the soldiers’ barracks, surrounded by a group of entranced Belbarrow guards.

‘Fi,’ he rasped, ‘I need to speak with you.’

The guards glared at him. He was no doubt interrupting another of Fi’s infamous tales.

‘What is it?’ his friend said.

‘Come, you must come with me.’

Frowning, and sliding some silver across the table to his companions, Fiore stood and followed Swinton from the room.

‘What is it? Are you —’

‘Not here. Somewhere safe.’

Noting the desperate plea in Swinton’s eyes, Fi nodded. ‘This way.’

With his hand on the hilt of his sword, Swinton powered after Fiore. They left the shiprock palace behind and hurried down a narrow path into the hot night.

‘Where are we going?’ Swinton said, trying to catch his breath.

‘Somewhere we can’t be overheard.’

Without another word, Fiore led him through various side streets, past numerous raucous taverns and brothels. After a time, the noise faded as they delved deeper into quieter alleys and the terrain began to incline. It wasn’t long before Swinton’s calves were burning, and sweat dripped between his shoulderblades.

‘Not far now,’ Fiore said, eyeing Swinton’s damp brow.

They came to a series of white stone buildings with rounded domes atop, and stopped outside a thick wooden door. Fiore fumbled with a set of keys, and matched one to the lock. ‘In here.’ Fiore beckoned Swinton to follow.

They entered a stairwell and climbed up.

‘What is this place?’ Swinton breathed, as they reached the top and Fi unlocked another door. Inside were lavish apartments.

‘The Murphadias family home,’ Fi replied, closing the door behind them. The Battalonian leaned against the wall, crooking a leg and resting it up underneath him. ‘What the hell is going on, Dimitri?’ he said, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Swinton exhaled heavily and began to pace, running his fingers through his hair and toying with the coin around his neck.

‘Dimitri.’

Swinton stopped. ‘I need to know if there’s a way to get a message to Ellest, a confidential message, without fear of having it intercepted.’

‘To the king?’

Swinton shook his head, and finally met Fiore’s eyes. ‘No,’ he said quietly. ‘To the stable master.’

Fiore pushed himself off the wall. ‘What?’

‘There’s going to be an outbreak of plague.’

Fiore stared at him. ‘How do you know? Is there plague here?’

Swinton pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes against the headache that was coming on. ‘No.’

‘Then *how do you know?*’

Swinton opened his eyes and reached to the back of his neck, unclasping the chain for the second time that night. He held out the necklace to Fiore, the coin dangling between them, while Swinton’s magic slammed into him once again.

‘Because ... I saw it ...’ He braced himself against the wall with his forearm. ‘I’m one of them, Fi,’ he said. ‘I’m an Ashai – a magic wielder.’

‘What?’

Swinton allowed himself to sink into the feeling he was so unaccustomed to. He pointed to the necklace Fiore was now studying. ‘That, that has helped me control it – suppress it, even.’

‘You ... *You of all people*, have magic ... are a seer?’

Swinton nodded.

‘And you saw a plague hitting Ellest?’

‘Heathton. It hit Heathton – infecting magic wielders.’

‘And you want to tell the *stable master*? What the hell is going on?’

With his back against the wall, Swinton slid down to the white floor, and rested his head in his hands.

‘Is Carlington a magic wielder?’ Fiore asked. ‘Dimi?’

‘No,’ Swinton said, and loosed a breath. He took his chain back from Fi and clasped it back around his neck. ‘Carlington is no Ashai. But his son is ... *My son* is.’

## CHAPTER 9

Dash's hands were dry and cracked from scrubbing pans and grating Pa's shirts against the washboard. For days he'd been helping Mama around the house with the cooking and cleaning. He'd never known just how much mess and work three people created. Mama had even made him pour boiling water over a dead chicken and pluck its feathers.

Today was the first day Pa had insisted he needed the extra set of hands in the stables, and even though Dash was only mucking out the horses' stalls, he was happy to be out of the cottage.

When he was done with the stalls, Dash helped Pa with warming up the horses for the morning. He was good with horses, even Pa said so. And knights had to be good with horses, so it made Dash happy. Although Pa had forbidden him to train with the squires, whenever he could steal away from his chores, Dash practised his footwork and strikes behind the stables. He needed to stay strong.

Olena liked horses, too, and was an excellent rider, though she had rarely been allowed out before she'd been shipped off. Dash didn't understand all the rules the king had enforced on his daughter. With the right horse and skill, it didn't matter whether or not you could see ...

'Dash?' Pa called from the stable entrance.

'Coming!'

Pa stood in the archway, holding a scroll of parchment out to Dash.

'Another letter from Princess Olena,' his father said slowly.

Dash made to take the parchment, but Pa held it just out of reach.

‘Son ...’ Pa started. ‘Has anyone told you to be careful of what you write in these letters?’

Dash frowned. ‘No?’

Pa nodded and knelt so they were eye to eye. ‘Listen carefully, as I’ll only say this once. Princess Olena’s mail is not private, not secret, Dash. I have no doubt that her letters and yours get opened by half a dozen people at least before they reach you. You *must* be wary of what you put down in written words, for anything you write here,’ he waved the parchment, ‘can be used against you later. You’re a good lad, son, and I know the princess is your friend. But she leads a life of risk, of *danger* that I cannot protect you from. Your mama and I ... We don’t want you to get caught up in anything.’

‘But, Pa, why —’

‘Gods, Zachary.’ Pa gripped his shoulders tightly. ‘No questions now. Just heed my warning, you hear?’

Dash made to take the parchment from Pa.

‘Do you hear me, Zachary?’ Pa raised his voice and made Dash jump.

‘Yes, sir,’ he replied.

‘Good. Here you go, then.’

Dash hesitated. It felt like the outstretched letter would somehow burn him now, but Pa shoved it into his hand and returned to the stalls. Dash climbed up into the rafters of the stables, one of his favourite hiding spots, and took Olena’s alphabet from his pocket. He took it everywhere with him, so he could study in any spare moment. He spread the letter out before him, and closed his eyes. He always closed his eyes when he explored the perforated markings with his fingertips; he felt comforted by the fact that Olena probably did the same. Just as he was about to begin deciphering the letter, he heard Pa curse from the workshop. Dash froze, startled.

‘Pa?’ he called out, tucking Olena’s letter into his shirt pocket and climbing down from the rafters.

‘You need to run down to the blacksmith for me.’

‘Ma said —’

‘I *know* what Ma said. But I’ve got no one else to help me. Go to the blacksmith on Kemp Lane, *not* Blackmore. Say Carlington sent you, and that you need this,’ he passed Dash a broken bit, ‘soldered back together. Ask them to put it on the account. Wait there until he does it. Understand?’

Dash took the broken pieces. ‘Why —’

‘For the gods’ sake, Dash!’ Pa threw his hands in the air. ‘Can you just do as you’re told *for once*?’

‘Yes, Pa.’

‘Put some of that speed to good use, will you?’

Dash took off from the stables and through the courtyard. It wasn’t long before he was flying down the streets towards the markets. The cobblestone laneways were less crowded than they had been when he and Mama had gone into town, and he found he could run freely between people without barrelling into anyone. There were less merchants selling their wares as well.

*Kemp Lane.* Dash’s eyes searched the street signs, and he spotted it just past the podium in the town square. Just as he plunged into another sprint, Dash skidded to a stop.

There were no crowds to hide the man from Dash’s line of sight this time. The man who had cried out and begged for mercy only days earlier was still chained to the post. Dash stepped closer to him, only to reel back in horror. The man was covered in bloody gashes and filth, his knees pulled up to his bare chest and his head hanging limply.

‘Away with you, boy,’ the man croaked, unmoving. ‘Lest they brand you a sympathiser.’

‘For what?’

‘Whatever they please.’

‘Who ... Who did this to you?’

‘Leave me to die in peace,’ the man said.

‘What did you do?’

His wasted body heaved with the effort of breathing, and he lifted his face to Dash. The man’s eyes were so swollen he couldn’t open them, and his nose was broken and bloody. Dash swallowed. *Who had done this?*

‘Get out of here. Don’t draw any more attention.’

Dash paused for a moment more, and then backed away, hurrying along to Kemp Lane.

His hands shook as he handed over the bit to the blacksmith and repeated his father’s request.

‘Relax, lad,’ said the man behind the counter. ‘I won’t bite.’

But Dash just stared at him. He needed air. Fresh air. Dash stepped out of the shop into the damp breeze and studied the grey cobblestones beneath his boots. So that was why Mama hadn’t wanted him to go back into town,



and why she had been so upset that day. Was that man going to die now? How could everyone just walk past him like that? And what did he mean by being branded a *sympathiser*?

There were dark clouds rolling in above, and it smelled like rain. Dash was hit anew with the need to see Olena. She would know what to do, she *always* knew what to do.

Suddenly, something white fluttered before his face and Dash leaped back, waving it away. A tiny butterfly, its wings as delicate as a flower. He breathed a sigh of relief. And then noticed a whole swarm of them, no bigger than thimbles, dancing to an inaudible rhythm, and tickling his skin. They were pretty little things.

The sound of a bell toll filled the air, echoing from the castle temple across the sprawling town. It sounded again, and again, deep and insistent. It didn't stop.

The blacksmith appeared at the door. 'Laddie,' he said, peering up towards the castle. 'You best take this and be heading home.'

Dash took the paper bag offered, frowning as the man closed the shutters over his shop windows.

'Are you closing already?' asked Dash.

'Aye. You know what that bell means, don't you, laddie?' the man said over the noise.

Dash shook his head.

'Get back to your pa, boy,' the blacksmith said. 'It means there's been a death in the royal family.'

## CHAPTER 10

From the grassy knolls above rebel headquarters, Bleak sat beside Rion and watched the dawn break upon Oremere. Her fingers worked her length of rope into various knots as shades of blush and gold bled into the sky, fighting the deep greys and eeriness of the mist.

The rebels had sat in the council chamber detailing their plan until the wee hours of the morning. Bleak had been left feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, still unable to fully comprehend the scope of their organisation, their ambition. And the fact that, according to them, the legendary Casimir was still alive. She'd opted to sleep out in the open, beneath the stars, away from the constant hum of the new minds she had to contend with. Since her time in the dungeons at Heathton Castle, the idea of confined spaces for long periods of time made her nauseous. Here, the land stretched out before her, vast and desolate, the mist still whispering between the blades of grass. But with Rion nearby, she felt safe. Her instincts told her that he wouldn't let her be lured away by its song. His sturdy flank beside her seemed to act as a blanket over her ever-eager magic.

'Wondered where you'd got to,' said Sahara, appearing from below. She eyed the dried blood on Rion's muzzle and chest. 'Hope he hasn't depleted our livestock supply ...' She was still wary of him, as he only seemed to tolerate her for Bleak's sake.

Bleak merely shrugged and turned back to the horizon.

'Have you thought about joining us?' Sahara sat down on the grass.

Bleak *had* thought about it. A lot. Her mind was buzzing with their plans, with the risks. 'I thought Casimir was dead,' she said.

Sahara shook her head. ‘Ines spread that rumour when the plague hit. You know who he is, then? What he means for this continent? The realm, even.’

‘He was a famous Ashai – a healer, a leader, years ago ...?’

‘Of sorts. I was only young myself when he was most prominent, but my mother told me stories. He is one of the most powerful Ashai ever known. He travelled the realm helping other Ashai. His counsel was always highly sought after. He’s an Oremian, a mist dweller, like you.’

Bleak didn’t say anything.

‘And not just any mist dweller,’ Sahara, undeterred, continued. ‘He’s a member of one of the original ruling families of Oremere.’

Bleak’s breath caught in her throat. ‘As in, he’s a king?’

‘He was prince at the time of Ines’ takeover. One of two.’

‘He had a brother?’

Sahara shook her head. ‘Oremere had a unique ruling system. Two royal families shared the monarchy equally, with a mediating family alongside them. It meant that in a realm of power, one person never had too much. Ines slaughtered them all. Casimir was the only survivor, and we intend to put him back on the Oremian throne. To restore the original rule of this place, and free the Oremian people.’

‘You’re all mad.’

‘Bleak, if we do nothing, the mist will continue to spread. She will take the entire realm as her own.’

*Bren. And all of the Claytons.* Their faces flashed before Bleak’s eyes and she felt a pang of loneliness. She missed them, missed *Bren* most of all.

‘She’ll set more plagues upon the continents —’

‘Plagues? Ines was responsible for those?’ Bleak’s hand went to her thigh, where beneath her pants, her own skin was scarred and mangled from the disease. Only Bren knew of what had happened to her, had seen the wound fresh and seeping after Senior had taken her back to shore. Bleak rubbed her leg, where her marred skin tingled. Were it not for Senior and Bren, her fate might have been very different.

‘She unleashes it upon the cities,’ Sahara was saying. ‘And then has her lackeys search for the marked victims who are still alive. They get taken to Moredon and Oremere. During the last plague, Casimir was captured. And as far as we know, he’s been imprisoned at Freyhill ever since. However, we’ve just received word from our sources that he’s not being kept in the

heavily guarded dungeons. Ines has allowed him to wander the castle keep. Which is why we have to strike now.'

'If he's been a prisoner for the past decade, what use do you think he'll be?' It came out much harsher than Bleak had intended.

'Casimir is no ordinary man! His power is the only one of its kind in existence.'

'And that is?'

'He can age people.'

'What?'

'At his touch, he can age a person, whether it be by a few years, or by decades to the point of death. As long as he has physical contact with the person, he can age them.'

'What in the realm's the point of that?'

'Every time he ages someone, he buys himself more time.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that Casimir himself doesn't age.'

'What?'

'I don't know exactly how it works. There has only ever been one other Ashai of his kind in history – his grandfather, who had the same name. It's why some people think Casimir's immortal; they don't realise they were two separate people. Anyway, the ageing process seemed to freeze once the grandfather reached peak physical condition. The same could be said for our Casimir.'

'You've *seen* him?'

'From afar, when I've been scouting. I've seen him inspect the teerah pits with Ines.' Sahara glanced at Rion, pity in her eyes.

'If he's by Ines' side, what makes you think she hasn't turned him?'

'He has time on his side. He's been *waiting*.'

'Waiting? For whom? Does he know there's a bunch of rebels in Oremere plotting his rescue?'

'I don't have all the answers.'

'Then what makes you think that when the time comes, if by some miracle you get to him, he won't kill you or hand you over to Ines?'

Sahara smiled sadly. 'The man saved three colonies' worth of Oremians with his secret bunkers. When he's ready, he'll unite his people once more.'

'I don't think —'

The sound of rocks falling nearby jolted both of them, and sent Sahara's hands flying to her sword.

'Bloody nuisance,' Geraad's gruff voice sounded as he came into view, and Sahara's shoulders sagged with relief.

Then, he noticed Rion. In an instant, Rion was up on all fours, snarling as he prowled towards them, claws out.

'Liir help us,' Geraad yelled, stepping back and pushing Sahara behind him.

Bleak ran to Rion and stood before him. 'He's a friend,' she said, pressing a palm to the beast's muscular chest. 'An ally.'

He hissed, not taking his eyes from the stranger.

'Rion,' Bleak said softly, moving her hand up to his neck and drawing his head down to hers.

The teerah panther broke his stare with Geraad and met her gaze. He huffed loudly, his warm breath hitting her face. A growl rumbled, but he gazed at her a moment longer, before stalking off, disappearing down into the valley.

Bleak turned back to Geraad's gobsmacked face.

'What in the name of all the gods did I just witness?' he spluttered. 'Was that ...? That was a teerah panther.'

'It was,' Sahara said, smiling widely.

'And he ...' Geraad stared at Bleak. 'You ...'

'You'll find the words soon enough,' Sahara told him. 'Bleak and Rion have a special *bond*.'

She emphasised the word 'bond' in a way that Bleak didn't understand, as though Sahara understood something about Rion that she herself did not.

'I saved him,' she told Geraad. 'He was dying, and I gave him my food. I think he's decided not to kill me to return the favour.'

Geraad craned his neck to peer down into the valley, but the silvery-black coat was nowhere to be seen.

'An Ashai from Oremere, in league with a teerah panther ...' he muttered, stealing a meaningful glance at Sahara. Then he gathered himself. 'We need an answer,' he said to Bleak. 'About whether or not you'll join us. We *have to* move quickly, while we know Casimir is still out in the open. A person with your talents could prove valuable to our mission, and we need every advantage we can get. But, if you're with us, you're with us all the way. Fletch explained the risks last night well enough.'

Bleak nodded. Yes, Fletch had gone into extensive detail about the dangers of being involved with the rebels of Oremere.

‘This is just as much your fight as it is ours,’ Sahara said quietly. ‘Ines threatens your kind most of all.’

Bleak took a deep breath. ‘You really think I’m from Freyhill?’

‘Yes. The gates you described to me are those at the entrance to the castle.’

‘And you truly think Casimir will have answers? That he’ll be able to help take on Ines?’

Sahara nodded.

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat. ‘Then I’ll join you.’

The Valian beamed at her.

Geraad simply gave her a curt nod. ‘We leave at dawn.’

THE NEXT MORNING, the sky yawned daybreak, and the group of rebel leaders and their underlings shouldered their packs. Sahara had insisted it was safer to travel by day, given that the pride of teerah panthers often roamed free during the night, and were on the hunt for rebels to maul. Bleak didn’t have the guts to ask if Sahara or any of the others had ever been attacked by Rion’s companions.

Even in the golden light of dawn, the plains of Oremere were grey and misty. Bleak waited with Rion outside the rundown cottage. The beast seemed to know that they were going somewhere, and he wasn’t to be left behind. He sat on his haunches beside her, his silvery-black coat gleaming across his muscular back in the fresh light. He laid a heavy paw across the scar on her thigh.

Could he sense it? What had happened to her?

She placed a hand over his paw. They sat together in silence, and waited some more.

*What is this thing between us?* she wondered. She got the distinct feeling that it was more than a shared handful of dried meat and half a canteen of water.

They were joined by the others, long before the sun had reached its full height. Geraad glanced at Rion with unease but said nothing, opting to move to the front of the company rather than stand beside the hulking beast.

Bleak smiled to herself. For once, no one was game enough to challenge her; Rion would be joining them whether they liked it or not. And that made Bleak feel safer than she ever had before.

Hoisting packs and weapons high onto their backs, they started the journey with no formalities or flourish. Bleak looked back at the grazing goats, oblivious to the scarred history of the land, and the looming danger. But as the rebels began their descent into the grassy plains, Bleak realised that for the first time in a long while, her hands were steady and her head was clear. Although the hum of thoughts from the Oremians around her was present, panic did not rise in her chest.

THE LONG GRASS scratched at their exposed skin and the mist swirled around their ankles. At the rear of the group, Bleak walked beside Rion, who cast a long shadow over half the company and left deep pawprints in the earth. She got the impression the rebels didn't exactly like having a giant panther at their backs, but they kept their feelings to themselves, only glancing occasionally at him with nervous eyes.

The problem with big journeys, Bleak realised, was that there was too much time to think. She couldn't stop her mind from wandering back to Bren, questioning where he was now. Had he stayed in Angove with his family? Or had he perhaps journeyed back to Valia, to see Tilly? Her stomach dropped to her feet at the thought of them together. Had he forgotten about her already? Did he even know what had become of her? She knew it was selfish. Bren had offered her everything, had been there for her through her worst days. All she'd given him was pain. He deserved to be happy. But she found herself constantly revisiting their last few conversations, their arguments, and for some reason, that one drunken night almost two years ago. A memory that both embarrassed and excited her all at once. She didn't know how she felt about it anymore. She had always thought of it as a mistake, but now ...

She didn't know how long it had been since she'd had a drink, a *real* drink. And while the thought of wine still filled her mouth with saliva and set fire to a burning thirst within her, she was glad for it. She suspected that while many of her ailments were cured by the drink, numerous ones were also caused by it.

Sighing, she looked to the muted sage-green surroundings. The mist made the ground beneath their boots soft and damp. They'd been walking since dawn, for how many hours she didn't know; she only knew that she was tired.

*Two more days of this ...* The sleep she'd had the night before had been one of the worst in her life, leaving her eyes puffy and irritated. She didn't know whether the mist further inland was stronger, or whether the fears and paranoia of the others had leaked into her mind, but she had tossed and turned so much that she was now covered in patches of dry mud.

Fletch had laughed at the sight of her. 'Anyone would think you'd slept in the sty,' she'd said. The smile had died on the archer's lips when she'd spotted Rion, growling softly behind Bleak.

Now Sahara, Geraad and Daleren were leading the group, while Bleak remained at the back. It was best for her not to be in the middle of all those minds.

As the light began to fade on their second day, Sahara fell back to walk beside her. 'You recognise anything?' she asked.

Bleak shook her head. 'I don't really expect to. I was young, maybe five, younger even.'

'Still, something might jog your memory.'

She hoped so. She didn't know what exactly had occurred here with her parents all those years ago. Casimir would have the answers for her. He had to.

'You spoke in your sleep last night,' Sahara said, putting a hand on Bleak's shoulder.

'I did? What did I say?'

'You said you were sorry.'

'For what? To who?'

Sahara shrugged. 'Don't know. You just kept saying sorry.'

A sinking feeling eased its way into Bleak's stomach. She was sorry for a lot of things.

They set up camp moments before the sun sank below the horizon. Without its warmth, the air turned chilly, and Bleak found herself huddling up to Rion to stop herself from shivering.

Sahara warned against a fire, explaining to Bleak that the Freyhill watchtowers weren't too far out, and that if they spotted smoke this close to



the capital, they wouldn't hesitate to investigate, or worse still, set the teerah panthers on them.

Bleak ran her hands along Rion's side, her fingers catching on his jagged scabs and bald scars. When they heard the roaring in the distance, he tensed beside her, as though he was feeling the pain of his pride, wherever they were out there in the darkness.

Fletch and Kyden took first watch, while the rest of the group settled down on their bedrolls for the night. But the mist tickled Bleak's skin, and the echoing roars of the teerah pride punctuated the quiet. Neither she nor Rion slept.

## CHAPTER 11

On the third night, Bleak and the rebels reached the borders of Freyhill. The plains dropped off, revealing the walls and sprawling city below. Fletch and Jaida, who'd been the source of much jovial banter, grew quiet. Sahara swung her pack around to the front of her body and began emptying its contents. Guard tunics. They were simple: black with long sleeves and a single red bloom embroidered on the breast.

'Put these on,' she told them.

Bleak's pulse began to race. They'd gone over the plan a dozen times, but now ... It was *real*.

She turned away from the group and swapped her dirty tunic for the new, pulling the scratchy material over her head. The collar was higher, and it irritated the soft skin above her collarbone. It was then she realised that she could no longer feel Rion's hot breath on the back of her neck. She whirled around but saw nothing in the empty night air. He had gone. Hot tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them back. There was no room for feelings here. She could only hope that Rion had left Freyhill, could only pray that he wouldn't be captured by Ines.

She rejoined the group and surveyed the vast city below, sleeping in the mist. Around the townhouses and taverns was a wall, the thickest Bleak had ever seen. If she squinted, she could make out the movements of the guards on patrol between each of the watchtowers. The maps she'd seen at the rebel headquarters hadn't done it justice. Beyond the first wall, at the heart of the city, stood another, surrounding Freyhill Castle. The stronghold was four times the size of the castle in Heathton.

‘How in the realm are we going to get through all of that?’ she hissed at Sahara. The underarms of her tunic were already damp with sweat. Though she knew the plan by heart, it didn’t make it any less ludicrous. ‘More importantly, how in the realm do you think we’re going to get *back out*?’ she added.

‘There.’ Sahara pointed to a small gate on the west side. ‘That’s where they bring in the livestock, that’s how we —’

‘I know,’ Bleak said. ‘I just —’

Geraad shifted beside Sahara. ‘*You* agreed to this,’ he growled.

‘*I know.*’ Bleak ground her teeth. The tetchy rebel was beginning to get on her nerves. ‘Let’s get on with it.’

Sahara gave Fletch a nod. The archer knelt on one knee and nocked an arrow onto her bowstring.

‘Ready,’ she said, not taking her eyes from her targets.

Bleak and the other rebels descended from their vantage point, slipping through the long grass like shadows. Bleak’s heart was like a rock in her throat and her palms grew clammy as they reached the base of the hill and crouched in the dark, opposite the gate. She followed Sahara’s gaze upwards, in time to see one of Fletch’s arrows shooting through the night air.

They didn’t hesitate. The rebels bolted across to the gate. As planned, it was unlocked, and they passed through quickly and silently, into Freyhill.

The post on the other side of the wall had been vacated, and Daleren and Jaida took up the free positions, expressions sombre.

‘Bleak and I will take the high street,’ Sahara said, signalling to the main road through the city. ‘Geraad and Ky, you take the eastern side. We rendezvous at the square.’

Kyden nodded and gave Jaida a brief hug. ‘See you on the other side.’

The young rebel squeezed him back. ‘Don’t mess up that pretty face of yours.’

‘Geraad —’ Sahara began, taking a step towards him.

He stepped out of reach. ‘I know,’ he said quietly. ‘You too.’

She nodded. Tearing her gaze away from Geraad, Sahara turned to Bleak. ‘Let’s move.’

The pair started off down a narrow alley, towards the high street. Sahara moved with the ease and grace of a true Valian, blending her movements with the shadows of the night. They reached the main road quickly, and

were soon able to hear movement from inside the townhouses, even seeing the occasional flicker of candlelight from within. However, there was no one on the streets, as though there was some kind of curfew in place.

A deafening roar sounded and Bleak jumped.

*The teerah pit must be close.* She hoped that wherever Rion was, he was far from it.

‘Bleak,’ Sahara whispered.

Bleak followed the Valian’s gaze, and a wave of familiarity washed over her. Up ahead was the main entrance to Freyhill Castle, and an elaborate pair of iron gates, leading into the primary gatehouse. Intricate swirls of metal swept across the bars and ended in sharp spears. Bleak gripped Sahara’s arm.

When she had last seen those gates, one had been knocked from its hinges, blood dripping from its spikes.

‘Bleak?’ Sahara was squeezing her shoulder and peering into her face. ‘Bleak,’ she hissed. ‘Let’s go.’

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Sahara’s hand flew to the hilt of her sword.

‘You two.’ A guard came into view. ‘What are you doing? Me and Trenton are on high-street guard tonight.’

Sahara’s fingers curled around the grip of her sword.

*Don’t,* Bleak said into Sahara’s mind. The guard reeked of alcohol. His eyes were glassy and unfocused. Bleak was all too familiar with that look.

She took her chance.

*The new guards were supposed to be posted on the eastern gate.* The guard’s thoughts slurred into her mind and she didn’t hesitate.

‘Isn’t this the way to the eastern gate?’ she said, pointing to the iron bars up ahead.

The guard swayed. ‘That’s the main gate, you fucking idiot,’ he scoffed. ‘East gate’s that way.’

‘Shit,’ Bleak said. Then, feeling bold, she stepped forward and gripped the guard’s arm. ‘Keep this between us, hey?’

‘Get off me.’ The guard shoved her back. ‘Where’d they find you? A fucking farm somewhere? Get to your post.’

Bleak backed off. ‘Sorry, sorry,’ she muttered.

The guard walked off, and Sahara turned to Bleak, an incredulous expression plastered to her face.

‘What in the realm was *that* about? Are you *trying* to get us killed?’

Bleak held out the set of keys she’d pickpocketed. ‘Thought these might come in handy,’ she said.

Sahara shook her head in disbelief. ‘You’re a woman of many talents ...’

‘Apparently,’ Bleak said.

Sahara took the keys, and held out the leather strap for Bleak to see.

Carved into it were the words: *Long may she reign*. A chill passed through Bleak, sending a rush of goosebumps racing across her skin.

They reached the rendezvous point and crouched down under the cover of a locked market stall. They were at the town square. At its heart, elevated on a podium, were flogging posts. Bleak’s skin crawled. She was at the enemy’s front door, the possibility of answers just beyond the walls ... She swallowed hard. Geraad and Kyden came into view, and beside her, Sahara’s shoulders sagged with relief.

‘There’s a problem,’ Geraad said, crouching into hiding beside them.

Sahara swore. ‘What is it?’

‘The boat’s been chained up,’ Kyden said.

Bleak’s heart sank. The boat was supposed to get them across the moat undetected, to a servants’ entry at the rear of the castle.

‘We have to call it off,’ Geraad murmured. ‘There are too many variables now. It’s too dangerous.’

‘No,’ Bleak found herself saying. ‘We didn’t come all this way to fail.’

‘We didn’t come all this way to die either,’ Sahara said.

Bleak looked to the gates. ‘The drawbridge is down ...’

‘There’s no way we’re just strolling across that and into the castle grounds,’ Geraad snapped.

‘What if ...?’

Geraad opened his mouth to snap at her again, but Sahara shot him a warning look.

‘What if what?’ the Valian asked her.

‘What if I could ...’ Bleak chewed her lip.

‘What, Bleak? We can’t stay here any longer. If you have an idea, let’s hear it now.’

‘I could enter their minds, use their thoughts against them, to let us in. Like I did with the guard just then.’

Geraad glanced questioningly at Sahara, but she dismissed him with a wave of her hand. ‘You really think you could do that?’

‘I will not risk *your* life, *my son’s* life, at the hands of some untrained Ashai,’ Geraad hissed.

‘You already have,’ Bleak replied through gritted teeth. ‘You’re the one who said a person with my talents could prove valuable to the mission. *You’re the one* who said if I’m with you, I’m with you *all the way*. Here I am, Geraad. Where the fuck are you?’

Geraad opened his mouth to argue.

‘Shh!’ Sahara stretched out a trembling hand, her finger pointing to a lone figure coming into view beyond the gates.

‘Casimir,’ she breathed.

‘What? How do you know that’s him? Have you ever met him?’

‘It’s him,’ Geraad said quietly. ‘And yes, I have. A long time ago.’

Casimir’s tall, thin frame crouched down beside the flowerbed, fingertips absent-mindedly brushing the petals.

‘We utilise Bleak’s magic,’ Sahara said firmly, not taking her eyes off the Ashai leader.

‘It’s too easy,’ Kyden said. ‘It has to be a trap.’

‘If it’s a trap, we’re already caught,’ Geraad allowed, monitoring Casimir’s movements.

‘We go in pairs across the bridge,’ Sahara said. ‘Bleak and I first.’

The fire Bleak had felt mere seconds ago was snuffed out by fear. Terror clawed her insides as Sahara made her move. They headed to the drawbridge and Bleak tried to focus on mirroring Sahara’s casual gait, but she could hear the Valian’s thoughts, assessing the potential threats ahead, of which there were many. They crossed the bridge, their boots tapping softly on the wood.

At the mouth of the courtyard, just through the gates, Bleak spotted a quartet of guards.

‘The one with the longsword,’ Sahara said under her breath. ‘He’s the captain of the castle foot guards. Target him. The others won’t question him.’

Bleak didn’t wait. She lunged with her mind.

It wasn’t smooth as it had been with Luka, the young Valian she had trained with. It was a hard and fast descent into the captain’s mind. A clumsy and desperate attempt. It was enough. She felt the man internally

question their presence, felt his urge to sound the alarm bubble near the surface of his consciousness. But Bleak used her magic to soothe him, to throw a mental blanket over his instincts. She created the feeling of recognition, of trust, clearing a pathway in his mind for them as though she was dragging a stick through sand.

Bleak turned expectantly to Sahara when they reached the four men. 'Give them the keys, then,' she said.

'Keys? What keys?' said one of the foot guards.

The captain turned to him. 'We've got orders to check the northern gate,' he said, his voice impatient. 'This lot are keeping an eye on the prisoner.'

The younger guard fell silent.

'Well?' Bleak said, elbowing Sahara.

Sahara produced the keys Bleak had stolen and held them out. Bleak snatched them and offered them to the captain. As his hand gripped the leather strap, she locked eyes with him.

'Long may she reign,' she said.

'Long may she reign,' the captain replied, and led his soldiers away.

Sahara exhaled loudly beside Bleak. 'Gods,' she muttered. 'I don't know whether to be impressed or terrified.'

Bleak said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever gods were listening and looked around the courtyard. Knotted trees punctuated the grey grass and cobblestone walkways, and a garden full of blooming red flowers stretched from the keep to the castle entrance. Suddenly, deep, rumbling animal snarls, almost beneath her feet, filled the quiet.

She cursed. The teerah pit was only metres away from them, with no cover over the top. Bleak craned her neck to see in, and had to muffle her gasp of horror with her hand. In the dirt cage below were about fifteen giant beasts, wildly pacing the cramped space, gnashing their teeth and hissing. If she squinted, Bleak could make out the discarded heads of prisoners who had been thrown in. Apparently, the teerahs didn't eat the heads.

Sahara's cold fingers clamped so hard around Bleak's arm, she nearly yelped with the shock.

'There,' the Valian said.

Casimir was where they had seen him before. He was unguarded, standing by the wine-coloured blooms.

'Stay here,' was all Sahara said, before striding across the courtyard.

Bleak held her breath as Sahara took a wide berth around the panther pit, where, as though they could sense strangers in their midst, the beasts roared, white spittle foaming at their mouths. Bleak breathed out shakily as Sahara reached Casimir, and rested a gentle hand on his arm.

Bleak jumped as she heard a sound to her right, but it was too late. Pain slammed across the back of her head, causing warm blood to trickle down the nape of her neck, and then, there was only black.



## CHAPTER 12

The network of tunnels beneath Havenness and the East Sea was dark and vast. Henri's arm ached from holding the torch high, and her eyes were strained from squinting into the black before her. The massive canine, Bear, padded silently beside her, his focus solely on the path ahead, his ears flicking at every drop of water, every stone scuffed. The walls either side of them were covered in glittering crystals of salt, and coarse dirt grated loudly beneath Henri's boots. She ducked as the ceiling of the tunnel lowered unexpectedly and ignored her squirming stomach, breathing steadily through her nose. The thought of hundreds of gallons of water above her did nothing to alleviate her discomfort. She pressed on. In that respect, Valian training had its perks.

Henri didn't know how long she'd been walking, but she wasn't tired. She was eager to meet her kindred, and, if she was honest with herself, eager to see Athene. Although her relationship with her first-in-command was rife with complexities, Henri realised that she sorely missed her friend's company, and found her mind constantly wandering back to her. She'd been too hard on Athene in the past few months, and longed for the opportunity to explain her actions, her attitude, to make things right between them.

As woman and dog trekked through the damp underground, the high-pitched calls of lisloiks could be heard. Eydis had told her of them; once creatures of the Northern Passage waters, they'd been trapped in the tunnels below the East Sea after the mist had spread south of Qatrola. Their wails were oddly entrancing and Henri felt her legs stray from their path. She made to turn left, but a sharp bark from Bear set her footing right. Each

time the eerie sounds tugged at her, Bear nipped at her ankles, and she would thank Rheyah for the dog's company, and bestow praise upon him. He didn't seem bothered, just focused, knowing that the sooner this leg of the journey was over, the sooner he would be reunited with his master.

They stopped twice. Henri shared her water with Bear while they sat on the wet ground. She tugged her cloak around her against the cold, still fighting her underlying twist of panic, of feeling trapped. Valia's open treetops and golden beams of sun seemed further away than ever.

They didn't stop for more than two hours at a time; moving forward soothed her, as did Bear, it seemed. There was no notion of time without access to daylight, and so she had no idea how long they'd been travelling beneath the sea. The tunnel looked as it had at the beginning: gloomy, damp and never-ending. She tried not to think about the fact that she still had to make the journey back to Wildenhaven.

Weariness gripped Henri's body and her eyelids grew heavy as they passed more of the same, the salt crystals glimmering beneath the flickering light of the torch. The passage smelled of the sea, only staler, and the further they travelled, the thicker the air became in Henri's throat. She looked to Bear. The dog was tiring as well, his tongue flapping outside his mouth.

Just as she was about to take a break, he froze, ears pricking. Henri halted alongside him, waiting. His long, loud howl pierced the quiet and echoed down the tunnel. A shiver of goosebumps rushed across Henri's skin, the cavern falling silent once more. They waited.

A foreign bark sounded in the near distance, and Bear took off, his paws hammering against the wet ground. Henri's heart leaped. She raced after him, the thrill of the chase pumping new energy through her tired limbs. Eydis' dog Kadi came bounding into view, and just behind him was Athene. The breath left Henri's lungs. The two women crashed together in a tight embrace. She smelled the same, Henri realised, like fresh soil and Valian herbs, like home.

'Henri ...' Athene breathed.

Behind her, the rest of the kindred caught up. Marvel, Tilly and Petra rushed forward.

'Henri!' They flung their leather-clad arms about her back, lifting her into the air.

A well of emotion caught in Henri's throat. She'd missed these women – her kindred, her family.

'It's about time,' she managed.

Marvel laughed and clapped her on the back. 'Haven't seen us in months and that's what you've got to say?'

'There's plenty to say,' Henri replied. 'Though I'd rather say it from the comfort of the Wildenhaven halls, wouldn't you?'

There was no time for chatter. The kindred, five hundred strong, filled the passage behind Henri's elites. Familiarity swelled in Henri's chest, but she wouldn't show her relief, her gratitude. Not now. Not yet. Now she had to be strong.

MARIETTE WASN'T THERE to greet them when Henri and her kindred army arrived at the Valley of Twisted Trees. Instead, the kennel master's timid apprentice, Taro, stood shivering at the opening of the cavern.

'Where's Mariette?' Henri asked as the youth handed her a thick cloak.

'She was called away, m'lady.'

'Where?' Henri demanded, ignoring the muttered curses behind her as her kindred stepped out into the icy air of Wildenhaven for the first time.

'I could not say, m'lady.'

'You don't know, or you won't tell me?'

'M'lady, I mean no disrespect. I don't know ...' But then Taro pushed back his shoulders and met her stare. 'Though, if I did know and was ordered by Her Majesty to keep the matter confidential, I would do so,' he added bravely.

Henri felt a surge of pity and patted him on the shoulder. 'Good to know, Taro. Good to know.'

'Her Majesty has made arrangements in our third tower for your army. Though she did say it may be a little cramped. If they prefer, alternative accommodations can be made in the nearest village.'

'The tower will be fine for now.'

Bear and Kadi darted ahead, barking and howling into the night, listening for wolves while the rest of the company trudged through the knee-deep snow. She looked at Athene. Something was wrong. Her friend's usual lingering gaze had been replaced by quick, worried glances, her eyes never quite meeting Henri's.

Henri turned back to the apprentice. 'Taro, I will need to make a formal address. Does the third tower have a space for such a purpose?'

'Yes, m'lady. Queen Eydis selected it with that in mind. She foresaw that you would need such a space. She said to speak with your people and greet her in the morning.'

Henri's skin crawled at the thought of Eydis seeing her decisions before she made them. Henri had always been intensely private, and her friend's ability to invade that privacy greatly unnerved her.

The kindred barely spoke as they marched the rest of the journey to Wildenhaven. It was too cold to waste energy on conversations. The opportunity for questions would be upon them soon, and Henri knew she had a lot of explaining ahead of her. She was weary at the thought of it alone.

Finally, they reached the looming towers, the massive structures casting long shadows over the torchlit snow.

'Gods, I haven't been here since we were children,' Athene murmured.

'Still incredible, isn't it?' Henri found herself saying, taking in the well-guarded gatehouse and thick grey stones of each building.

'It's no Valia Forest, but I suspect it'll do.' Athene gave her a small smile that didn't reach her eyes.

*Yes, something is definitely not right,* Henri thought. They needed to get inside, and get to the bottom of things.

Finally, they entered the hall of the third Wildenhaven tower. Several fires were roaring. The kindred were seated at long wooden tables that stretched down the length of the entire room. The women spoke quietly between themselves, their soft whispers only fuelling the pit of anguish in Henri's stomach. Food and wine were served and Henri made her way towards the empty seat beside Athene. But she didn't sit. Instead, she took a deep breath and stepped up onto it, and the hall fell silent. She had never formally addressed her people. The last formal address had been when Sahara had died, and Allehra had made a tribute to the fallen heir and instated Henri as ruler. She searched her kindred's faces for any signs of doubt. She found none. She saw only loyalty.

Henri took another deep breath through her nose and stood straight with her shoulders back. She hadn't had time to bathe and change into clean leathers, but it hardly mattered. A wartime announcement perhaps better suited her current bedraggled and filthy appearance.

‘My kindred,’ she said, her voice projecting to the furthest reaches of the crowd. ‘Months ago, I was summoned to the capital by the king, along with the Ashai girl we know as Bleak. What you do not know is that upon arrival in Heathton, we were imprisoned and threatened. King Arden made his true nature clear. The one which we have long suspected. He has aligned himself with a false queen who calls herself Ines. She is the self-proclaimed ruler of what was, until now, a secret continent beyond the mist, a place called *Oremere*.’

There was a collective gasp from the kindred, and chatter began to hum among them.

The whispers hushed as Henri continued. ‘Ten years ago, it was *King Arden*, with the assistance of this false queen, who released the mist that destroyed what we now call the Forest of Ghosts. I heard the confession from his own lips. Our once sacred part of Valia, invaluable because of the herbs it grew, became nothing more than a graveyard, leaving us vulnerable with a limited supply of our herbs. While I was in the capital, he made new threats against Valia, and intended on keeping me captive for his false queen, as a means of experimentation. After I discovered this, I managed to escape. I came to Havennesses to join forces with our longstanding ally and friend, Queen Eydis. Havennesses is in need of our aid. Queen Eydis has foreseen an attack on this continent by Ines and her armies. She has already conquered Qatrola, and is in the ears of both King Arden and King Roswall of Battalon. We cannot let our sister stand alone. We have long since allied with Havennesses, and we do so now.’

‘Is Bleak here?’ Athene asked.

‘No. She was taken prisoner, separately to me. I haven’t seen her since.’ Henri let her words sink in, ignoring the crestfallen look on Athene’s face, and returned her gaze to the crowd. ‘Should you have any qualms about the nature of my decision, I suggest you air them to me privately, or keep them to yourself. We train at dawn, and we meet Queen Eydis at noon. Until then, feast and rest, my kindred.’

She sat down next to Athene, avoiding her friend’s attempt to catch her eye, full of questions about Bleak, no doubt. Henri ate little, as anxiety throbbed tight and insistent in her chest.

LATER THAT NIGHT after she'd freshened up, Henri did something unusual. She invited her kindred to drink with her in private. They deserved to enjoy each other's company before they went off to battle – their first battle in a very long time. They arrived dressed in their leathers and weapons, with bewildered expressions on their faces. Not once in the ten years that Henri had been in command had she hosted an intimate evening for them. Henri regretted that. And yet here they were: Athene, Tilly, Marvel and Petra.

'Thank you for coming,' she said, and gestured for them to sit.

'Quite a spread,' Tilly said as she surveyed the cheeses, dried meats and wines. She took the seat on Henri's left.

Henri sat at the head of the table, with Athene on her right side, always her right-hand woman. She could feel Athene's nervous energy, despite the talisman the warrior wore. She was worried about Bleak, and Henri knew that her words would bring her friend no comfort.

*Gods, that poor girl. A fate worse than death.* Henri hadn't been able to do anything. *Every woman for herself,* they'd said.

But it was clear that Bleak wasn't the only worry here. Henri met each of her kindred's eyes. 'Before we go into strategy, someone needs to tell me what's wrong. Now.'

The women exchanged anxious glances, their faces lined with something troubling: *pity*.

'What is it?' Henri demanded, turning to Athene.

But it was Tilly who spoke. 'Much has happened in your absence, Henri.'

Henri's magic flickered to life. 'Tell me.'

'The mist,' Athene said. 'The mist has spread. Through the Forest of Ghosts, into main Valia.'

'What?'

'Allehra tried to contain it with fire, like last time. She did her best, Henri. But a large part of the forest, of Valia ... The keep was destroyed.'

Power surged through Henri's veins, sending the goblets on the table flying. No one moved.

'And Allehra?' she asked, clenching her fists so hard at her sides they drew blood from her palms.

Athene reached for her. 'She ... She was badly burned, Henri.'

'But she's alive?'

Athene nodded, her posture rigid.

‘Will she live?’

Athene’s expression matched those of the others, a tight, unreadable mask.

Finally, Petra answered, ‘We don’t know. She’s been left in the care of the head groundling healer, the one they call Maman, and another, Lyse.’

Henri nodded. ‘Then it is up to her,’ she said.

*Until we meet again*, their parting words to one another. Now, ‘again’ might never come to pass.

Taking a deep breath, Henri pushed one of the platters towards Athene. ‘Queen Eydis has her own forces,’ she began. ‘But they don’t have our training, our skill. I want the kindred to be in the front lines of this battle, protecting as many of Eydis’ people as we can.’

There was a momentary pause, a ripple of shock across the women’s faces. But Henri was not ready to talk about Allehra. Her kindred followed her lead.

‘Does Eydis still prefer dogs to people?’ Tilly asked, carving a generous slice of cheese and leaning back in her chair.

‘She is much changed.’

‘How?’

‘She’s grown into her own skin, her crown. She’s part Ashai now.’

‘What?’ Athene said.

‘She has visions – not many, and not all are guaranteed to unfold in the future, but she has magic and she knows how to harness it.’

‘There was no magic in her family ...’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ said Henri as she poured herself a glass of sparkling wine. She raised her goblet to Marvel and Petra, who were gaping at her from their end of the table.

Henri took a long drink.

Petra grinned broadly, downed her drink and poured another. ‘So is the queen’s brother still as handsome as he was?’

‘Jarel?’ Henri said.

‘We enjoyed ourselves the last time we met,’ Petra said, smirking.

‘Really?’ Henri, it seemed, was the only one who was surprised.

Her kindred drank and talked long after the food was cleared away, and Henri mostly listened. They spoke of everything – history and gossip, battle tactics to come, and who had taken whom to bed over the last few weeks. Henri dared a glance at Athene, but her name wasn’t mentioned in those

conversations. Had she ...? Henri couldn't think of it now. Each of her kindred deserved her attention. For a moment, though, she felt a pang of sadness. Sahara should be here. These warriors were *Sahara's* kindred, too.

It was well into the early hours of the morning when the warriors lurched to their feet to take their leave.

'Athene,' Henri said. 'A word.'

Athene bowed her head and bid the others goodnight. Tilly, Petra and Marvel each embraced Henri, and thanked her for the evening. Henri promised them they would do the same again soon – a victory dinner.

When they had gone, Athene and Henri didn't sit back down; instead, they stood at the edge of the table a few feet apart from one another.

'I want to know how bad she is,' Henri said, meeting her friend's eyes.

Athene nodded. 'It's not good. She has burns to much of her body, and some are getting infected as she's not looking after herself. The groundlings had sedated her when we left.'

'She does not want to heal.'

Athene bowed her head.

Henri swallowed the lump in her throat. 'She wants Enovius to take her to Sahara ...'

'I'm sorry,' Athene said. Though her voice was tender, Athene stood just out of Henri's reach, her expression unreadable. Henri wanted to close the gap between them, but recalled with a flush of shame how hard she'd been on Athene the last time she'd expressed herself. Perhaps she no longer felt those things.

Heart pounding, Henri took a step towards her friend. She needed to touch her, to feel her warmth when everything else was so cold. To Henri's horror, Athene stepped back, maintaining the distance between them.

'If that's all ...' the warrior said, making for the exit.

'That's not all,' Henri said, taking another step towards Athene.

Athene didn't move this time, and Henri stood before her, Athene's breath tickling her face. Athene's braid was loose, and tendrils of her fiery red hair fell about her eyes. Henri took a final step forward and pushed them back, noting the change in Athene's breathing, her breasts rising and falling quickly. Henri let her hand brush Athene's throat, where the skin was soft and pale, her life's blood pumping fast through her veins there. Athene didn't move as Henri closed her hand around the delicate column and pushed her back against the wall, feeling Athene's throat bob as she



swallowed. And then Henri leaned in, and pressed her mouth to Athene's. Athene's lips were heated and eager, and Henri's stomach swooped as the mouth beneath hers opened and welcomed her kiss. A tremor shook Henri, causing her breath to hitch as Athene kissed her back, her tongue hot and insistent. Out of breath, Henri stepped back and brought her hand to her mouth.

'I've missed you,' she said roughly. She strode across the room to the door, her mouth singed.

'Henri, please, don't leave.'

Henri picked up a chair and jammed it under the doorhandle before moving back to Athene, and reaching for her laces. With painstaking care, she unlaced the ladder of ties down the front of Athene's leathers, revealing a strip of exposed skin down her middle. Goosebumps rushed over both of them, and Henri let her fingers skim across Athene's stomach as she worked the ties. Finally, with the laces undone, and her heart in her throat, Henri pushed the jacket piece from Athene's shoulders.

'Who said anything about leaving?'

## CHAPTER 13

Bleak awoke with a start, her nostrils burning and a pungent aroma filling them. Smelling salts, she realised as she reeled back. Blindfolded, she struggled in her shackles, bound by the wrists and ankles, her whole body stretched out, exposed. The back of her head throbbed.

Someone waved the smelling salts below her nose again, and the chains rattled as she lashed out, panic rising.

‘You’ll break a bone flapping about like that,’ said a man’s voice.

Bleak’s blood went cold.

‘Wouldn’t want to do that,’ he said. ‘Not yet anyway.’

Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it might burst through her chest. There was only one place she could be. Only one place they’d take her after the botched rescue attempt of their most prized possession. The dungeons of Freyhill.

She heard the quiet breaths of the man near her, and a dripping sound nearby. As the sharp scent of the salts faded from her nose, the smell of damp and decay became more pronounced. Bleak reached out with her magic, only to find it trapped within her.

‘What ... What have you done to me?’ she croaked. ‘How long have I been here?’

The man was pacing. She could hear his boots tapping against the stone floor. He ignored her.

Bleak tried to remember something, anything about how she’d got here. But she’d been out cold. For hours, days ... She didn’t know.

‘What do you want with me?’ she pleaded. ‘Where are the others?’ Terror was near choking her, its vice-like claws around her throat making it hard to swallow.

‘The others left,’ he said.

The breath went out of Bleak. *They’ve gone? They left me?* Why was she surprised? They’d come for Casimir. Casimir was the prize. To sacrifice her for him? There was no question. And it was all her fault. She’d been the one to insist on entering the courtyard. She’d thought she’d somehow be able to master her magic enough to get in and out of the castle grounds alive. Though her heart was sinking with the knowledge, she didn’t blame them for leaving. She just thought ... She didn’t know what she thought. Not anymore. The only thing she knew was that she’d die here. She’d finally taken her fate into her own hands, and it had led her here. She was responsible.

The man had stopped pacing. She couldn’t hear his breathing. Where had he gone? What were they going to do? She struggled in her chains, desperate and panicked.

The sweet smell of perfume suddenly filled the chamber.

‘You’re not at all how I imagined, Alarise,’ said a silken voice.

Bleak flinched at both the name and the hand that touched her face and pulled the blindfold from her eyes.

*Alarise. Alarise. Alarise.* The name her parents had gifted her. The name she’d tried to fade into obscurity. There was no forgetting it now.

The woman who stood before her wore a headwrap of deep violet, her face awash with hundreds of freckles. Thick, dark lashes framed piercing sapphire eyes, her lips stained crimson. Long fingers played with layers of sparkling jewels hanging in a mass around her neck, accentuating the plunging neckline of her collared gown.

Ines followed Bleak’s gaze, and a smile tugged at those stained lips. ‘A gift, from King Arden. It’s beautiful, yes?’

Bleak was silent. She tried to keep calm, to keep her body from betraying her fear, but the restraints jangled as tremors took hold of her.

Ines took a step forward, and the chains rattled loudly as Bleak jerked away from her touch. Ines ran a soft, clean hand down Bleak’s grimy face, letting it trail down her neck and over her breast, hovering over her heart.

‘It pains me to see you like this, Alarise,’ she said.

Sweat trickled between Bleak's shoulderblades. The familiarity lacing Ines' voice was stomach-churning. Bleak was going to be sick.

'How,' she managed. 'How do you know my name?'

Ines tilted her head, her eyes boring into Bleak's odd-coloured irises. 'I'm saddened that you don't remember me.'

'I knew you?'

Ines smiled. Gods, if she wasn't so terrifying, she would have been beautiful. 'I take it you don't remember the Ashdowns or the Goldwells, then?'

'No,' Bleak croaked.

'No one does anymore, I suppose.' Ines twisted her necklaces between her fingers. 'The names of the ruling families of Oremere are just whispers in the mist now.'

'The ruling families? What ... What did I have to do with them?'

'You? Not so much. Not now. But your parents, the Thorntons ...'

The name jolted through Bleak like lightning.

'The Thorntons were the long-reigning mediator family. The advising couple to the royal couples. A system unlike anything this realm knows now. The power to contain all power.'

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat.

'I knew you were an Ashai from the moment your mother fell pregnant with you,' Ines said. 'Your parents were non-Ashai – it often skipped a generation in the Thornton family. But you, I knew you'd have abilities. Do you know how rare it is that the magic of the ruling families aligns in the one generation?'

Bleak didn't know what she was talking about. Ruling families. Magic aligning. Her memories from this place were murky, and she had no way of knowing if Ines spoke the truth or was playing mind games with her.

'You, little Prince Ermias and my beloved Casimir, all Ashai, all under the one roof.'

'What ... What happened to my parents?' Bleak's voice trembled as she forced out the words. She was no fool, she knew her parents were long dead, but she had never said it aloud, never allowed herself to imagine *home*, and what that meant or had meant to them all.

A vision slammed into Bleak. Bright corridors and velvet drapes. The light, melodic notes of children's laughter, and the harried steps of parents close behind.

‘How —’ But another vision cut her off.

*INES STOOD BEFORE FOUR THRONES, her blue robes billowing. Two kings and two queens sat straight-backed in their chairs, a simple crown adorning each of their heads.*

*‘Majesties.’ Ines bowed. ‘I come bearing alarming news.’*

*‘Lady Ines,’ said the dark-haired queen. ‘Tell us.’*

*‘One of my priestesses has had a vision ... concerning Prince Ermias and the young Lady Alarise.’*

*‘Go on.’ One of the kings leaned forward in his throne.*

*‘They will fall in love.’*

*Relief washed over the king’s face. ‘What of it? A union between great families would be cause for celebration.’*

*‘On the contrary, my king.’ Ines’ voice was as smooth as ever. ‘A union would disrupt the structure of your rule. To have the mediator family marry into a ruling family would leave the monarchy unbalanced. It would risk everything your ancestors fought so hard to establish.’*

*‘They are children. My son can barely hold a practice sword, let alone fall in love.’*

*‘It has been foreseen,’ Ines said simply.*

*‘And what do the high priestesses advise, then?’ said a voice from the back of the throne room.*

*Bleak gasped. Mama. Gesa Thornton.*

*‘Lady Thornton.’ Ines bowed her head. ‘The priestesses advise that the children be separated. There is already a bias forming between them. It already places an imbalance between the Goldwells and the Ashdowns.’*

*‘You can’t be serious,’ scoffed a familiar voice. Father.*

*Gabriel Thornton joined his wife as they approached the foot of the dais.*

*‘Hester, Valerio,’ he said, looking to one of the royal couples. ‘We cannot put so much faith in these visions. What’s to say if we separate them, they won’t find each other later in life? I thought our reign was stronger than that.’*

*The royal couple exchanged glances, and Queen Hester spoke softly. ‘Although it is our family who stands to lose power if this union came to*

*pass, Gabriel, we would never wish to part such friends. Valerio and I will leave the decision to Edric and Freya. It is their son the vision concerns.'*

*Gabriel and Gesa Thornton looked to the Goldwells.*

*'Separate them,' Edric said firmly. 'I will not have this reign of peace collapse for the sake of a childhood friendship.'*

*'Very well,' Ines said.*

'THE VISION WAS TRUE ENOUGH, at the time.' Ines' voice brought Bleak back to the present, where she hung aching between the shackles. 'What they didn't account for was the tendency children have for breaking the rules. After all, prohibition is the seed of revolution, yes?'

Bleak bit the inside of her cheek. *Ermias* ... The name stirred with familiarity in her mind, but she couldn't bring him to the surface.

'Of course, the Goldwells and the Ashdowns were so concerned about the possible budding romance between two children that they didn't see what was right in front of them. Me. And Prince Casimir Ashdown.'

'What?' the word tumbled from Bleak's mouth.

Ines smiled. 'He was older than you and Ermias. The easier mark of the three noble Oremian Ashai children. Young men are far less discerning than children. They each suspect that they're something special, that they deserve more than the gods have gifted them. Be that confirmation, and they're yours. So I started with him. We shared our darkest secrets, and the depths of our magic together. Imagine, a prince of Oremere and the Lady of the Oremian Priestesses ... By the time he realised what I was doing, it was too late.'

'What were you doing?' The longer Bleak could keep her talking, the better.

'Sourcing magic from all over Oremere – the continent full of eager Ashai folk. The haven for those from other, more backward continents. *Be safe in Oremere*, that's what we told them all.' Ines studied Bleak again. 'Aren't you glad to be home, Alarise?'

'I don't understand. What do you want with me? You have Oremere already.'

Ines ignored her question. 'You know, for a little while, I thought I'd lost you. When I took Freyhill Castle with the mist, your parents managed to escape. I found them in the end, but you ... You slipped through the

cracks, somehow. For years I searched. Langdon and Farlah, too. Every damn continent. But then, you practically *begged me* to find you. I heard so much talk of some moronic Ashai girl seeking a “cure”,’ Ines spat with scorn. ‘Imagine, receiving such a gift from Rheyah herself, and throwing it back in her face.’

For a split second, Bleak was wrenched back into the past, to a tattered, gold-toothed stranger down at the docks in Heathton.

*‘Your search. It draws attention. The wrong kind of attention. You need to stop.’*

‘I had the healers turn you away, of course,’ Ines was saying. Her eyes went to the markings on Bleak’s wrist, her mouth curling into a sneer. ‘I see Allehra is still up to her old tricks.’ She traced the dark pattern with a long fingernail.

Bleak shuddered. ‘What do you want with me?’

‘Alarise, I would have thought that was obvious ...’

A humming sound vibrated between Bleak’s ears, and slowly, it infiltrated her mind.

‘What —’ She tried to speak, but the humming grew louder and louder. She’d felt this pain before. Years ago. Aboard *The Daybreaker* with Senior and Bren, when they’d met the torturer called Farlah —

She cried out. The humming sharpened, like a blade to her mind now.

‘I want your magic,’ Ines said. ‘It’s a specialty of mine, being able to host other Ashai’s powers ...’

Bleak could barely hear her. Beads of perspiration formed at her hairline and trickled down the side of her face. All her life she’d wanted to cure herself of her power, but now ... in the hands of Ines ...

‘That’s your ability, then?’ Bleak gasped through the pain. ‘To steal other people’s magic?’

‘Who said anything about *stealing*, Alarise? You’re going to *give* it to me.’ Ines pressed her thumb to Bleak’s wrist. ‘Every Ashai has a pressure point, you see. Though of course, it can take some time, some persuading, to find it.’

Bleak squirmed. ‘How many powers do you have now?’

Bleak felt something quiver in her veins, and move towards where Ines’ thumb was pressed into her skin.

‘Not enough,’ Ines said, frowning at Allehra’s markings. She released Bleak’s wrist and glided towards the door, ringing a little bell that hung

from the frame. The sound was sweet and soft.

‘No,’ Bleak’s throat was raw.

‘Oh, Alarise, they *all* say no at first.’

Bleak shrank away as much as the chains would allow.

‘Your flinching wounds me,’ Ines said, readjusting her jewels. ‘*I’m* not the one who’s going to hurt you.’

‘Please —’

‘A little time with Langdon ought to have you feeling differently.’

There was the scrape of metal on stone, and Bleak twisted to see a pale-haired man dragging a dagger along the wall. An icy shiver ran down Bleak’s damp spine as Langdon’s eyes raked over her.

‘Don’t play with your food,’ Ines told him. ‘Use her mind,’ she added, eyeing the dagger twirling in his hands.

Langdon bowed his head.

‘Ring for me when the magic reaches the pressure point.’

Ines smiled at Bleak one last time before leaving the dungeon.

As soon as her skirts had trailed out of the chamber, Langdon advanced.

‘Where to start ...’

‘Please,’ was all Bleak could say.

But he lifted his dagger and dragged it through the front of her shirt, cutting away her outer layer of clothing. She tried to draw back from him and failed. Her limbs were trembling so badly that her body already ached.

‘Usually, they put on a brave front first ...’ he drawled.

And then, the pain began.



## CHAPTER 14

Fiore knew someone who knew someone. That was how they managed to get a rare blue raven in the air to Ellest. It wasn't a guarantee. It might already be too late. Panic had settled in Swinton's chest, and stayed there, so they had drunk. A lot.

Now, it took Swinton a good few minutes to realise that the pounding was not only in his head, but at the door to his chambers as well. He staggered to his feet, kicking over one of the empty jugs from last night. How had he got back to the palace?

Pulling down his shirtsleeves and trying to make himself *somewhat* presentable, Swinton threw the door open to find palace guards, and Kamath.

'Commander,' the squire said. 'Your presence is required urgently.'

'What is it? Is the princess alright?'

'Yes, Commander, this summons comes from King Roswall. You are to join him in the throne room, immediately.'

Swinton's stomach plummeted and he had to steady himself against the doorframe, queasy. Where was Fiore? The rest of his rooms were silent.

'Are you alright, Commander?'

'Fine,' Swinton replied. 'Wait for me outside, I need a few minutes to gather my things.'

'Very good, Commander.'

The squire and the palace guards did as he bid, and he closed the door with a click after them. Swinton ran his fingers through his hair, doing his best to exhale steadily. Rubbing his aching temples, he tried to think.

*What is this about? Has Roswall discovered the blue raven? Does he somehow know about my abilities? What of the plague? Is Dash safe?*

Swinton pulled on his boots, and laced his jerkin together across his chest. He found his battleaxes and strapped them in place over his back, and finally belted his sheathed sword at his hip. He was as ready as he would ever be.

He opened the door to Kamath and the guards. 'Let's go.'

In the halls outside his apartments, there were people everywhere. Many of them were carrying pails and buckets, and there was a faint chemical scent lingering in the air.

'What's going on here?' he asked Kamath.

'Firestorm,' the squire replied.

'What?'

'There's a firestorm coming. They're supplying fire repellant to those who need it.'

Swinton blanched. He'd heard of firestorms before, but had always assumed they happened out in the Janhallow Desert, not in the overpopulated capital.

'It's alright,' Kamath said, reading his expression. 'The fire repellant works very well. Most of the time, everyone stays indoors for a few hours and then goes about their business as usual. This city has been through many firestorms and it's still standing.'

'And the palace?'

'Is the safest place to be. The shiprock has been doused in the formula so many times that it probably doesn't need another coat for a decade. And as you know, much of the palace is beneath the ground.'

They continued to walk, with Swinton noting the casual nature of the preparations around them.

'How do they know when a firestorm is coming?'

'Scouts spot them brewing in the desert. We have people whose sole job it is to stand guard and alert us. Some can be contained, if they're small enough. But the one today is a fierce one.'

'What about the crops?'

'We cover them with special fire-retardant tarps.'

Swinton nodded. It sounded like things were well under control.

They reached the glittering throne room. Swinton's insides lurched when he saw that King Roswall, Prince Nazuri and Princess Olena were all

seated at a newly added oak table atop the dais, King Roswall at the head.

Swallowing, Swinton bowed low. 'My apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Majesty, Your Highnesses.'

He looked up to see King Roswall nod tersely, and Princess Olena's face full of questions.

King Roswall turned to the lingering courtiers and guards. 'Clear the room, if you please.'

Swinton remained rooted to the spot, uncomfortably warm as they waited for the nobles and soldiers to filter out. He watched Olena, who was rigid in her seat.

*She doesn't know what this is about either ...*

The doors closed, and only the senior Battalonian guards remained.

'We have had news from Ellest,' King Roswall began.

Swinton clasped his hands behind his back to stop them from shaking. *I'm too late*, he cursed silently, holding back the burning tears. *I'm always too late ...*

But the king turned to Princess Olena. 'My dear princess,' he said. 'We have received word from your father. I don't know how to say this gently, child. Your mother ... She has been killed.'

Whatever breath remained in Swinton was knocked out of his lungs.

Princess Olena's hand flew to her mouth, a soft gasp escaping her. Beneath the glimmering cosmetics, her skin had gone sickly pale.

Prince Nazuri murmured something in her ear, and placed a comforting hand on her arm. She pushed him away.

Her voice was small when she spoke. 'How?'

'Murdered,' King Roswall said, with little compassion. 'At the hands of Henrietta of Valia.'

'No!' The word flew from Swinton's mouth before he could think.

The gazes of both the prince and king fell to him.

'It comes as a great shock to us all. May Her Majesty rest well with Enovius,' said King Roswall.

'May she rest well with Enovius,' Swinton repeated.

Up on the dais, silent tears ran down Princess Olena's face, and Swinton had to stop himself from going to her and pulling her into an embrace.

*Gods, the poor child. Her mother dead, and no one but strangers surrounding her.*

‘Your Majesty, Your Highness,’ Swinton said boldly. ‘May I have your leave to escort Princess Olena back to her chambers?’

Swinton waited for the princess’ sharp retort about not needing an escort, but it didn’t come. She hadn’t even registered his words; her shoulders had caved in and her hands trembled in her lap. Shock. The princess was in shock.

Prince Nazuri nodded. ‘Yes, Commander. You have our leave. Princess Olena will need time to absorb this news.’ He helped her to her feet and led her down the steps of the dais like a newborn lamb.

She didn’t object as the prince looped her arm through Swinton’s.

They left the Battalionian royals, and started down the twisting passages of the palace halls. Princess Olena knew them better than Swinton did. They walked briskly, and in silence, until they reached the ornate doors of the royal guest chambers.

Princess Olena turned to him, her face set in a hardened expression, her tears dried in tracks through the powdered cosmetics.

‘Do you think she did it?’ the princess demanded.

Swinton’s heart shot to his throat. ‘Henrietta of Valia?’ he managed.

‘Yes. Do you think Henrietta of Valia killed my mother?’

The question hung between them. A test. An outstretched branch of trust, waiting to be taken.

Swinton cleared his throat. ‘If the official announcement from Heathton said so, Your Highness, it must be true.’

Disgust passed over the princess’ face.

‘I’m sorry, Your —’

‘Leave me.’ A command in a ruler’s voice. ‘I have no interest in your commiserations.’

Before Swinton could reply, the door slammed in his face.

HE STATIONED his best guards at her doors and instructed that every servant who entered would register their comings and goings on a piece of parchment held by Stefan.

The news of any plague had yet to reach Belbarrow, and Swinton silently prayed that his vision had been wrong, that after so many years of suppression, his visions were no longer accurate.

He spent much of the morning pacing up and down the corridors, hoping that the princess would emerge from her rooms. She did not. And every servant who tried to enter with food and drink was turned away.

Swinton realised he was in shock as well. Queen Vera was dead. *At the hands of Henrietta Valia ...* The claim sat uneasy in his gut. It was no secret that Henri had no love for the Ellestian crown and Swinton himself had witnessed Henri do horrific things. He'd been at the receiving end of her brutality, her violence. On any normal day, he would warrant that he didn't know what the Valian matriarch was capable of. But as he passed the palace hallways and toyed with the coin of Yacinda around his neck, he knew, deep within his bones he knew, that Henri would *never* kill an innocent woman.

He turned on his heel to walk back the way he had come when he collided with Prince Nazuri. Heart racing, he dropped into a deep bow.

'My apologies, Your Highness.'

Princess Olena's test racked his mind, but it wasn't just her trust he needed to gain. King Arden's orders were as clear as the sun in the Battalonian sky.

'Rise, Commander Swinton,' Prince Nazuri said.

He did.

'How is she?' the prince asked, nodding towards the heavily guarded doors.

'I don't know, Your Highness. She has let no one in.'

The prince nodded. 'Did my father divulge to you how it was done?'

'No, Your Highness.'

Prince Nazuri straightened his jacket and adjusted his cuffs. 'It was a poison.'

*Force him to see the light as we see it.*

'A woman's weapon,' Swinton heard himself say.

Prince Nazuri's eyes snapped to Swinton's. 'A coward's weapon. From the tales I have heard of the warrior Henrietta, poison doesn't seem her style. Even if I believed she'd chosen such a victim.'

'I only meant,' Swinton said, 'that if King Arden has accused the Valian of murder, there must be evidence, hard proof of her crimes.'

'Of course,' Prince Nazuri replied smoothly.

Swinton didn't know what to say. The prince was clearly testing him as well, but to what end? Swinton was trapped between two rulers, or was it

more now? The playing field of this deadly game was getting crowded. And at the heart of it all, was Dash. His innocent young son.

Prince Nazuri gestured to the doors. 'I see Princess Olena is well tended,' he said. 'Good day to you, Commander.'

Swinton bowed. 'Good day, Your Highness.'

Panic rose in Swinton's chest as he watched the prince walk away. Everything was a riddle, every question, a potential death trap. He'd rather face a thousand swords on the battlefield than the venomous fangs behind the words of every royal, Ellestians and Battalonians alike. He had to find Fiore.

IT WASN'T until Swinton was halfway to the Murphadias apartments that he realised the streets were deserted. The hot air smelled like chemicals and ash. In the centre of the city, Swinton saw it.

The firestorm.

Gods, how had he been so foolish? It was a swirling tower of flame, taller than the shiprock, casting shadows upon the rest of the city, encircling and devouring anything and everything in its path. It grew faster and surer.

Panic rose in Swinton's chest. It was only a few blocks away, and the heat that radiated from its churning mass made the air ripple.

Fi's apartments were a block in the firestorm's direction. Swinton began to run. Ignoring his instincts to sprint away from the danger, he raced towards it, holding a hand up to his face, trying to shield his eyes from the blistering heat of the storm. His feet pounded the earth and he gasped for air, his lungs burning. The buildings he flew past were a blur, as was the red-and-orange blaze before him. He skidded to a stop outside Fi's building, the iron doorhandle hissing against his skin when he tried to touch it. The firestorm was near, and the door was locked. He pounded the timber with his fists, as the flames licked closer and closer.

This was it. This was how he would die, swallowed by fire, without ever having known his son.

He lurched forward, the door opening inward, and a dark hand grasped his shirt. He was wrenched inside, the door slamming behind him, just as the firestorm hit.

'Are you out of your mind?' Fi yelled, panting.

Swinton couldn't speak. His throat burned, and his hand was throbbing where layers of skin blistered painfully. He tried to catch his breath. Outside, the fiery winds battered the building.

'Come on,' said Fi, putting an arm behind Swinton's back and leading him up the stairs to a second entrance.

With his chest still heaving, Swinton sat at the messy kitchen table, mugs and spilt mead still evident from their drinking the night before. Swinton looked up at Fiore, who was filling a pitcher with water.

'Where were you? This morning?'

'I had some things to sort out before the storm,' he said.

'What things?'

Fi set the pitcher and a glass down in front of Swinton. 'You should drink lots of water,' he said. 'I'll get some ointment for your hand.'

'My hand's fine. Where were you?'

'It's not fine, and if you don't get something on it soon, it'll get infected. That's your sword hand, if I'm not mistaken.'

Swinton looked down at his palm; the skin there was tight with swelling blisters. 'Fine.'

Fiore disappeared into the washroom and rummaged around in the drawers.

'What the hell were you thinking coming out in the firestorm?' he said, sitting back down and opening a small tin, offering it to Swinton. Swinton dipped his fingers into the strong-smelling paste, and gingerly spread it across his burns, feeling the heat being drawn immediately from them.

'I came looking for you.'

'You didn't think I'd be stupid enough to get caught out in that, did you?'

'No,' Swinton allowed. 'I forgot about it – a lot has happened this morning.'

'I know.' Fiore pushed a charred piece of parchment towards Swinton.

It was Henrietta Valia's face. Or a sketch of it, the likeness uncanny. The artist had captured the sharp angles of the warrior's cheekbones, the hardness of her gaze and even her heart-shaped hairline.

*WANTED ALIVE. For the regicide of Queen Vera of Ellest. REWARD: 200 gold marks.*

Fiore slid another piece of parchment to Swinton. The flyer encouraging Ashai to come forward.

‘You cannot tell me that this doesn’t concern you, old friend. Not after what you told me,’ Fi said.

‘My hands are tied.’

‘We *both* know Henri didn’t do this.’

‘Do we?’

‘Don’t be a fool, Dimitri. There is so much at stake —’

‘Do *not* talk to me about what’s *at stake!*’ Swinton stepped towards his friend. ‘My son, my gods-damned *son*, is over there, amidst all this. If I put one *toe* out of line —’

‘Brother,’ Fi said hoarsely. ‘I am on *your* side. You did not have to bear this burden alone.’

Swinton placed the lid back on the tin of salve. ‘I did.’

‘It was Eliza, wasn’t it?’ Fiore asked.

Swinton nodded. ‘I didn’t think you knew about her.’

‘Everyone knew about her, Dimi. Well, we knew you two were together for a time. You changed after her.’

Swinton closed his eyes.

‘You were so young,’ Fi murmured.

‘I know.’

‘What happened?’

Swinton took a deep breath, and found the words ready to tumble. ‘We were married, in secret. My father would never have approved. She was a commoner, no suitable match for the son of a knight. But she fell pregnant quickly,’ Swinton said, his voice husky. ‘We ... We were going to have a family.’

Swinton didn’t look up at Fi, even though he could feel his friend’s eyes on him. ‘The baby was almost fully grown inside her when she was killed.’

‘How?’

‘Group of malcontents, hoping to steal horses, saw something they liked more ... Tried to take her. She ... She fought, and they killed her.’

‘Were you there?’

‘You think if I was there this would have happened?’

Fi gave a small shrug. ‘You’re only one man, Dimitri.’

Swinton met Fi’s gaze. ‘I would have died protecting her.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’

‘I saw it, though,’ Swinton continued, as if in a trance. ‘I was away, carrying out orders for Arden. I thought it was my chance to be knighted –



to set up our family for life. It was the first vision I ever had.’ He loosed a breath. ‘Of her dying, and I couldn’t do a thing to stop it. I was leagues away, in Valia. I tried to convince myself it was a nightmare as I rode back to Willowdale. But I *knew*. I knew it was true. I could feel it in my bones that she was dead.’

‘But the child survived?’

Swinton swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded. ‘Her mother, the stable master’s wife, cut her belly open, and pulled the child from her womb.’

Swinton let the silence hang between them. He needed to feel it, he needed to *let himself* feel it. Now, the child that he’d spent his whole life trying to provide for, to protect from afar, was in the path of the plague.

‘His name is Dash, isn’t it?’ Fi asked.

‘Zachary, actually. But yes, most call him Dash.’

Fi did something then that Swinton did not expect: he laughed. ‘He looks *just* like you,’ he said. ‘And he’s always wreaking havoc all over the grounds, like we used to.’

Swinton felt the corner of his own mouth tug upwards. ‘You really think so? He looks like me?’

Fi grinned. ‘I can’t believe I didn’t notice it before; the same unruly mop of black hair, same eyes – and the same knack for getting into trouble. Gods, Dimitri, you’re a *father*.’

Swinton’s smile faded before it had a chance to fully form. He shook his head. ‘I was never a father to him, Fi.’

More silence. Swinton had never said the words aloud.

‘The stable master?’ Fi asked gently.

Swinton nodded. ‘Eliza’s parents – the Carlingtons – they took the boy at my request, moved to Heathton so I could be closer to them. I couldn’t look after him. I – I was not myself. I couldn’t do it, not without *her*. They raised him as their own – they weren’t that old themselves. Old enough for it to be a surprise, but not suspicious if they had another child. People thought they had the boy to replace Eliza. No one could replace her.’

‘I remember her,’ Fi said quietly. ‘She was a beautiful woman.’

Swinton blinked. She’d been so much more than that.

‘I give everything I earn to the Carlingtons,’ he said.

Fi was nodding. ‘Everyone always wonders why the Commander of the King’s Army can’t afford new boots. That’s why you’ve never denied the

rumours about whoring and gambling?’

‘Better that than the truth.’

‘Does anyone know? Does Sir Caleb know?’

‘My father? Gods, no.’

‘Anyone else besides the Carlingtons?’

Fi stood and brought a jug of mead to the table, dropping into his chair. He poured them a mugful each, and set the jug down on the tabletop.

‘The king,’ Swinton said, allowing Fi to lock eyes with him as he spoke.

‘King Arden?’

‘Yes.’

Fiore took a deep breath and spread his palms across the table. ‘How?’

‘I don’t know. But before we came here, he ... made it clear.’

‘Made what clear?’

‘That he knew, *everything*. About Eliza, about Zachary, about me being ... what I am.’

Fi’s body drew back sharply, and he ran his hands across his shaven head. ‘My old friend ...’

‘So you see, Fi ... My hands are tied.’

A strange humming noise filled the room, making Swinton jump. But Fi got up and went to an empty platter on the sideboard. In utter disbelief, Swinton watched as a scroll flickered from thin air, and came to rest on the porcelain.

‘Fiore!’

‘It’s alright.’

‘What in the name of all the gods —’

Fiore broke the seal on the letter and unravelled it. ‘It’s from my contact in Ellest.’

‘What contact? An Ashai? Fi, you shouldn’t —’

‘It is no more dangerous than sending a blue raven.’

‘Is this who you sent our message to?’

Fiore nodded as he scanned the parchment.

Suddenly, Swinton’s blood was rushing to his head. ‘What is it?’

Fiore dropped the scroll back onto the platter. He shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, old friend.’

‘What? Fi, tell me.’

Fiore’s next words hit Swinton like a blow to the chest.

‘The plague has struck Heathton.’

## CHAPTER 15

Like everyone else in Heathton, Dash wore black. The capital was in mourning for Queen Vera. The tolling of the temple bells rang for days, in slow and even strikes, echoing across the halted city.

Dash and Pa were busy preparing the steeds and mourning carriages for the funeral procession that would take place through the streets of Heathton the following dawn. Dash had never seen a royal funeral, and was in awe of the glossy black compartments that would hold King Arden and Prince Jaxon. As he polished the gold handles and embellishments, Dash thought of Olena, unable to attend her own mother's funeral. Unable to grieve with her own family and friends.

'Steady there, Dash,' Pa said from where he was waxing the tack. 'Don't want you scratching the king's carriages.'

Dash hadn't realised how hard he'd been rubbing the gold.

'Pa?' he said.

'Hmmm?'

'Do you think Olena knows about her mama yet?'

Pa sighed heavily. '*Princess* Olena, Dash. And yes. She would have received word by now.'

'Do you think ... Do you think she's alright?'

Pa's mouth set in a grim line. 'I don't know, son.'

Dash nodded. He didn't know either.

They worked into the evening. Dash brushed the horses until their coats and manes gleamed. His arms and back ached, and he began to drag his feet as he made his way around the stables. He didn't complain, though. It was better than being cooped up in the cottage. Better to be using his hands than

worrying about his friend. Pa ran through the order of tomorrow's events with the stablehands, his face lined with unease.

Dash continued his work, checking that each stall was full of fresh hay and water. He knew the horses had a big day ahead of them, and needed to be well rested and fed. He was just about done when he rounded the corner and came face to face with the pinched set of eyes of the castle cook.

*'There you are,'* she exclaimed.

*'I didn't take anything!'* He backed away. *'I swear it, I —'*

*'Calm yourself, lad.'* She gripped his arm in her meaty hand.

*'But ... I ...'*

*'I only wish to deliver something. From the princess.'* The cook produced a brown parcel from the folds of her apron. *'She said this was important.'* She pressed the package into Dash's hands.

*'You're her friend?'* Dash spluttered.

The cook raised her eyebrows. *'Who do you think convinced me not to give you a walloping every time you came barrelling through my kitchen?'*

Dash stared.

*'Close that gob of yours, will you? If she can be friends with a farm boy, she can be friends with a cook, no?'*

Dash gathered himself. *'Did she say anything?'* he asked. *'Is she okay?'*

*'She's trapped across the sea with a bunch of desert vipers. She's doing the best she can, as we all are. She said to give you the book. Nothing more.'*

Dash turned the parcel over in his hands. *'Thank you.'*

The cook gave a curt nod. *'If anyone asks, I came down here to belt you.'*

IT WASN'T until after nightfall that Dash and Pa left the royal stables, weary with the knowledge that they'd be returning well before sunrise. Mama had bowls of steaming vegetable soup waiting for them on the table, though she insisted on hugging each of them tightly before they were allowed to sit.

*'It's alright, Dore,'* Pa said to her, patting her on the back.

But Mama made a noise like she didn't believe him.

Stomach growling, Dash slid into his seat and spooned the soup into his mouth. It was delicious. Mama had spiced it with Battalonian herbs, and there was fresh bread to dunk as well.

‘Elbows off the table, master Dash,’ Mama chided, setting a mug of mead before Pa.

Pa took a long swig. ‘Thanks, Dore.’

‘You look tired,’ she said, reaching out and holding his chin, examining the dark circles under his eyes. ‘So does Dash.’

Pa sighed. ‘It’s been busy, with the funeral tomorrow and all.’

Mama nodded and turned to Dash. ‘I trust you’ve been good to your pa?’

Pa laughed. ‘Yes, he’s done well. In spite of the constant prattle of questions.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ Mama said.

Dash finished his soup and pushed back his bowl. ‘May I be excused?’ He was eager to look through the new book from Olena.

Pa drained the rest of his mead. ‘You’re off dish duty this once,’ he said. ‘You’ve been a great help this week. Very good with the horses ...’ He hesitated for a moment. ‘Just like your mother ...’

‘Like Mama?’ Dash asked. ‘But Mama doesn’t —’

Mama looked up from her plate. ‘Better thank your pa before he changes his mind.’

‘Thanks, Pa,’ Dash beamed, his chair scraping across the floor.

‘Dash ...’ Pa shot him a pointed look.

‘Oh! Thank you for dinner, Mama.’

Mama gave a small smile. ‘You’re welcome. Off you go. Don’t forget to wash before you go to bed. You have an early start tomorrow. There’s hot water waiting.’

Dash did as he was told, and went to the washroom. He didn’t *really* see the point in getting cleaned up before heading back out to the stables so soon, but he soaped the cloth and quickly scrubbed at his face, his neck and his underarms. When he was done, he crossed the hallway, keen to get to the brown paper package he’d shoved under his pillow. At the sound of Mama and Pa’s lowered voices, he paused.

‘Did Dimi ...?’

*Dimi? Who’s Dimi?*

‘No,’ Pa replied. ‘He said he wouldn’t. Said it’s too dangerous.’

Dash grimaced as the floor creaked beneath him.

‘What have I told you about eavesdropping, Zachary Carlington?’ Mama stood with her hands on her hips.

‘I wasn’t —’

‘And what have I told you about telling tall tales to your mother?’

‘I was just —’

‘To bed. *Now.*’

Dash looked at his feet. ‘Yes, Mama.’

She sighed heavily and shook her head, but a smile tugged at the side of her mouth. She pulled him into her warmth and kissed his cheek. ‘Goodnight, master Dash. Don’t leave the candle burning all night.’

With the door closed behind him, and a fresh nightshirt on, Dash settled into bed next to his stuffed bear, Bryson. He tore the brown wrappings away from Olena’s newest book. A musty smell wafted from the leather-bound tome as he pulled it onto his lap. Its spine was thick, and three lines of quaveer ran across the cover. Dash took the quaveer alphabet from his pocket and smoothed it out across his thigh. The book fell open, revealing the yellowed pages within, and an embroidered piece of cloth. Dash recognised Olena’s handiwork immediately; she could perfect anything she put her mind to. But it wasn’t the perfection that mattered. Olena had taught him that the real gift was in the detail that showed knowledge, *real* knowledge of the receiver. He picked up the cloth, smiling. She’d embroidered his favourite crest, two crossed battleaxes, the sigil of the noble household of Sir Caleb Swinton. Dash ran his thumbs across the stitching and placed it on the bed, turning to the pages Olena had marked for him. The quaveer was *dense* in this book. Lines upon lines of it on a single page. It was going to take him all night to decipher it. Eyes already tired, he sighed and brought his fingertips to where the perforated markings started at the top of the page. Slowly, he began to make sense of it.

*... HAVE BEEN the keepers of the teerah panthers for centuries, with the beasts guarding the castle stronghold, and the royal families inside. The pride and the mediating family of Oremere are connected by a bond of magic, passed down through the generations. Their bond acts as a tether between human and panther, surviving the distances of the seas and time. Although the bond has been known to fall dormant throughout history, it is never erased. The connection between mediator and teerah panther is the key to balancing the reign of the ruling families, and the reign of mist ...*

DASH'S EYELIDS WERE HEAVY, and his head lolled to his chest. He slid the book back under his bed and nestled into the quilt with Bryson under his arm. Tomorrow – he'd read the rest tomorrow.

THE MORNING WAS crisp and windy, enough to flush Dash's cheeks and make him wish he'd brought a cloak. He and Mama wove through the other commoners in the town square, and Dash craned his neck towards the centre, but there was no sign of the man who'd been tied to the flogging post. Mama wanted to pay her respects by the temple, which unfortunately was the most crowded place. Once they were in position, all they could do was wait.

The crowd chattered as the hour passed, and Mama got pulled into a conversation with the local baker. But Dash ... Dash was fidgeting. He kept thinking of how wrong it all was that Olena couldn't say goodbye to her own mama. He moved from foot to foot, and heard something rip beneath his boots. Crouching, he retrieved a torn poster. It was a drawing. Of that woman warrior, from Valia Forest. She had been sketched to look angry, ready to fight.

Mama snatched the poster from his hands. 'What are you doing with that?' she hissed, letting it fall back to the cobblestones.

'I was just looking.'

Around them, the wind howled. And suddenly, a dozen copies of the same poster whipped up into the air, caught in the gale, as though dancing a waltz. The crowd looked up, seemingly entranced by the Valian's face.

'Mama ...' Dash said, nudging her.

But Mama shot him a warning look. 'Not now.'

Nearby, the mourning horns were blown, and the black horses and carriages came into view, the sunlight glinting on the gold of the coffin. Some of the people threw flowers, others murmured their prayers to Enovius. As the royal procession passed, Dash tried to get a glimpse of Prince Jaxon within the carriage. He hadn't seen Olena's brother since her formal farewell in the castle courtyard. But the heavy curtains were drawn, and there was only darkness to be seen within. As the march of mourning

finally entered the temple of the death god, Dash saw something flutter from the corner of his eye. A swarm of white butterflies, gracefully dipping amidst the crowd.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Dash returned to the cottage with Mama. His whole body was heavy with exhaustion. From the garden, he could still see the plume of smoke from the temple. He wondered if that was the queen's soul, finding its way to the gods.

Dash didn't eat that night. He at last collapsed into bed, utterly drained. He didn't touch the quaveer books; he simply fell back into the pillow and closed his eyes. He dreamed of sandy plains and firestorms, of flames ripping through villages and spiralling across the desert. When he woke with a start in the early hours of the morning, he was drenched with sweat and shivering. The air was chilly on his damp skin, and he drew the covers up to his chin. He heard the front door click shut, and the crack of light shining through beneath his door told him that Mama had been waiting up for Pa. He listened.

'What happened?'

'A messenger from Belbarrow.'

'What? From *him*?'

There was the scrape of a chair and the soft *thunk* of a mug being placed on the tabletop.

'Yes. From him.'

'He said he wouldn't risk it.'

'Dorothy ...' Silence hung between them. Pa must have been showing her something.

'Emmett, this can't ... This can't happen.'

'We cannot stop it from happening. But we have to get out of here. We have to keep him safe.'

*What are they talking about? What's happ—* Dash made to push the covers back and swing his legs over the side of the bed. Pain tore through his lower half, and he cried out, losing his balance and falling to the floor.

His bedroom door burst open and Mama and Pa rushed in, the light from the kitchen blinding him.

'Dash, what's —'



But Mama fell silent as her eyes gazed upon his exposed legs. He looked down. Three wide, weeping sores covered his right thigh, raw and angry. Mama's hand went to her mouth, and Pa turned to her.

'We're too late,' he said, broken. 'The plague is already here.'

## CHAPTER 16

*B*leak didn't know what was real and what wasn't. Memories and visions swam before her eyes amidst the pain, Langdon's magic trapping her inside her own mind. Her undergarments were drenched in sweat, tear tracks ran down her face, and the torment in her head was a hot iron.

She remembered Ermias, the little prince she'd played with as a child. Running through the castle hallways together. Crying over scraped knees together. Being torn away from one another.

She remembered her parents, Gabriel and Gesa, in all their finery, taking to the ballroom floor as though it were their own personal stage. She remembered being dragged through the mist.

*Hurry, Alarise, hurry.*

There she was by the docks, playing hide-and-seek. She wove between the fishermen, Ma counting close behind her.

*Seven ... Eight ... Nin—*

And then a single bloodied finger pressed against her lips. *Shhhh ...*

Bleak was hauled through memory after memory, each burrowing deeper and deeper into the painful recesses of her mind.

*BREN WAS SMILING, strands of his fair hair falling into his eyes. 'Reckon we've earned ourselves a break?' he said.*

*'A break? It's barely daylight. You met Senior?'*

*Bren laughed and pulled a silver flask from inside his shirt. 'A quick toast, then?'*

*'Oh? To what?'*

*'To new friends?'*

*Bleak laughed. 'How about to old ones?'*

*'Won't say no to that.' He took a swig from the flask and handed it to Bleak.*

*She saluted him, and took a long gulp. Whatever it was, it burned her insides, but she also felt the warmth of it settle over her mind and calm her anxieties. She sipped again and reluctantly passed it back.*

*'Ya find what ya were looking for?' Bren asked, making his way to the mainsail.*

*Bleak paused. She'd never told Bren what she was looking for exactly; he didn't know of her ability, but he was no fool. He knew she was after something, badly.*

*'No,' she said finally. She readied herself to climb the rigging, while Bren did the same beside her.*

*He glanced at her. 'There's always next time, Half-Pint.'*

Hour after hour, day after day, the visions and memories poured into her mind. The pain was unimaginable, causing her mind to feel as though it would liquefy and leak from her eyes. She didn't care if it did. She just wanted it to end.

In states of semi-consciousness, she would hear snatches of conversation between Langdon and Ines.

*'Any more and she'll die,' said Langdon's quiet voice.*

*'Are you close?' Ines' silken voice countered.*

*'I can't feel the power at all, there is no pressure point I can find.'*

*'Then you're not trying hard enough.'*

Another memory pummelled into Bleak. Her heart soared as Senior came into view. Gods, she missed him.

*THEY CLIMBED the hills of Angove together, and Bleak paused to take in the great expanse of sapphire water, stretching all the way out to the horizon.*

*The wind whipped across its surface, creating cresting waves far out to sea and rocking the pleasure yachts moored in the harbour.*

*'Best view in Angove, this,' she said.*

*Senior glanced down at her. He opened his mouth and closed it again, before turning back to the water.*

*I'm glad, yer know. Glad I took ya in that day, he spoke to her mind. Glad you've come to call this place home, with me.*

*Her eyes burned with tears, but she blinked them back.*

*Senior had taken to doing that lately. When something was too much for him to say aloud, he would think it, knowing that sometimes, she could hear him.*

*'Come on,' she said. 'Before we freeze to death. Or Mrs Clayton kills us.'*

*Senior huffed a laugh and started after her.*

DOWN IN THE dungeons of Freyhill, time did not exist. The hours were measured in pain, and by the trickles of water Langdon poured into her parched mouth. Her body ached from shivering so much. Her undergarments were soiled with sweat and urine, and she could no longer feel her wrists or ankles, for the shackles had rubbed her skin raw. It didn't matter. Not anymore.

Langdon rarely spoke to her. Not aloud. Instead he used magic on her, again and again.

Day. Night. He was there. She could always hear him breathing.

BLEAK WOKE TO DARKNESS. It was all the same as every other time she'd found herself conscious again. The dungeon was the same. The pain was the same. Except ... She nearly cried out. She was holding something, gripping it so tightly, it was cutting into her hand.

Wondering if she was hallucinating, she pressed its sharp edges into her palm.

*A key?*

Dazed, Bleak craned her neck and looked to her right hand. Silver glinted there.

*A key.*

Taking a deep breath, Bleak did the only thing she could think of. She twisted her wrist, ignoring the burn of her raw skin, and got the key between her fingers. The questions of who had given the key to her and why were brushed aside with the delirium of possible escape. She didn't care if she died in the process. Anything was better than here. She twisted her wrist further, angling the key towards the lock in the shackles.

*Don't drop it. Don't drop it.* Those words became her new prayer as she fitted the key inside. She was about to break or dislocate her wrist.

*Just a little further ...*

The right, top half of her body swung free. She bit her tongue, holding back a cry of pain, as her left wrist took her whole weight. She still had the key. She still had it.

Emboldened now, she clutched at the other wrist shackle and freed her upper body completely. Heart racing, with unsteady hands, she made quick work of the ankle restraints. When she finally stood, her legs buckled. How long had it been? She leaned against the wall for support.

*Gods, how am I going to get out of here if I can't even stand up?* She took a moment to gather herself. She could do this. She was weak, but she could do this. She staggered towards the door, tears of frustration burning her eyes. She *had* to get out of here. Had to.

The door wasn't locked. Bleak peered out into the corridor, the bright torchlight forcing her hands up to shield her eyes. Pressing herself against the cold wall, she edged up a few stairs. It was a spiral staircase, and it made her already vulnerable head spin. But, seeing no one, she pressed on, her hands racked with tremors. She had no recollection of being brought here, and certainly hadn't been down here as a child. She pictured the floorplans on the walls at Sahara's camp. *Three floors of dungeons.* She had to go up. Step by step, she climbed. Gasping for breath, her undergarments grew wet with fresh sweat. She pushed on, her vision blurring.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she nearly tripped. A guard lay dead, his blood pooling onto the stone floor from his slit throat.

*Someone is helping me.* Bleak clutched desperately at the thought. She needed all the help she could get. She stumbled through a dimly lit passage, discovering another dead guard. She must be going the right way.

*Follow the bodies,* she told herself, her breathing ragged. She spotted a door ajar at the end of the corridor. She was nearly there. She practically

fell through the door, into the open courtyard of Freyhill.

Something exploded. Bleak's sensitive eyes were blinded by the light. Freyhill was under attack. One of the turrets crumbled in a blaze of fire and smoke. She didn't know how or who, but Bleak could only focus on the iron gates ahead. For the second time in her life, she would escape through them, she had to. She limped across the grounds, ignoring the clang of steel upon steel, and the shouts of guards around her.

'You,' a voice nearby snagged her memory. Langdon. 'You took too long,' he managed, shoving a sword through a rebel's heart. 'Your friends can't win this.'

Bleak stared. *Him? He was the one who —*

Langdon threw himself at her, and she skidded across the stones, dirt grazing her skin.

'I tried to give you your life,' he hissed. 'Now, I can only give you a swift death.'

Before she could say anything, Bleak felt a rough shove and the air beneath her — she was falling. She hit the earth with a solid thud, and saw stars spin.

Snarling filled her ears. Fifteen ragged, scarred beasts prowled towards her, white saliva foaming at their mouths as they advanced.

The bottom of the teerah pit. That's where she was. One swipe of a claw. That's all it would take.

The teerah panthers stalked towards her, death gleaming in their eyes. Bleak readied herself. This was it.

## CHAPTER 17

A thunderous roar echoed through the teerah pit, vibrating in Bleak's chest. The sound drowned out the chaos above and sent a jolt of icy fear through her. Yet, Bleak felt no fangs tear at her flesh, smelled no sour pant on her face. Holding her breath, she opened her eyes.

*Rion.* Standing with his silvery back to her, he roared again, his muscular body expanding as he drew breath, long white canines gnashing. He was bigger, stronger than before, than all of the others. Their yellow eyes darted from Rion to Bleak and ...

The fifteen teerah panthers backed up, pressing their stomachs to the ground in surrender to their alpha. Rion turned to Bleak, nudging his wet nose under her limp arm.

'Rion ...' she croaked, finding his fur between her fingers, hot tears stinging her eyes.

He growled softly, and nudged her again.

'I can't,' she said. She didn't have the strength to pull herself up onto his back.

Rion turned back to the pride and growled low. They padded forward, only this time, there was no violence in their eyes. Two beasts nudged themselves under her arms, others provided gentle cushioning, while Rion crawled beneath her, shuffling until she rested upon his back. They were helping her. She clutched his fur as he stood up on all fours, his powerful muscles shifting beneath her, lending her his strength. She knew his intentions as though they were a part of her, and she clung to him as he leaped from the pit, up into the madness above.

Thick smoke caught in Bleak's throat. Much of the castle's courtyard was ablaze. One of the turrets had collapsed, stone rubble spilling into the flowerbeds. A guard was crushed beneath, his blood flooding across the red blooms like a river.

All around, a force of rebels fought guards in a blur of steel and crimson capes. Dazed, Bleak spotted Sahara duelling Langdon. A fist of fear clenched around her heart. But Sahara met each of Langdon's blows strike for strike with her longsword, and then some. Geraad kept two masked warriors at bay with a spear, while Kyden and Jaida fought as a duo, whirling spiked maces in unison, smattering their enemies to a bloody pulp. A guard by Rion's side went down with a gasp of shock, an arrow protruding from his eye. Bleak's head snapped up to see Fletch raining arrows down on them. And Casimir ... Casimir had left a trail of dead, elderly people in his wake.

For a mere moment, the fighting paused as both parties took in the sight of Bleak, atop the giant teerah panther's back. Panicked, the combat burst to life once more, both sides throwing themselves behind their strikes with deadly force.

'Rion,' Bleak managed, tugging on the beast's ear and gesturing back to the teerah pit. 'We cannot leave them here.'

Bleak looked around, finding her energy and strength surge back as she decided on her task. At the eastern wall, a group of rebels had been entangled in a vast net that was now hanging from the stone wall.

'Over there,' Bleak directed Rion, and the panther thundered towards them at her bidding. With a few swipes of Rion's razor claws, the rebels were free and the net came cascading down the stones. Bleak slid down from Rion's back, the pain taking her breath away as she supported her own weight. Ignoring it, she picked up the loose net and broke into a staggering run back towards the pit. She had a bowline knotted in a matter of seconds, and secured the netting to a lamp post, before throwing the rest of it down into the pit. It was the best she could do. The rebels were losing ground, fast. More soldiers and guards began pouring from the great castle.

A figure stood between the doors, blocking the light from within. *Ines*. Black armour was strapped across her chest and waist, her skirts billowing in the night's wind.

'Did you think we would leave her?' Sahara shouted across the chaos.



Ines stepped forward, her eyes solely on Bleak. There was a darkness to her gaze that Bleak hadn't seen down in the dungeons. A hunger driven by malice and contempt.

A tremor shook the ground, causing the loose stones of damaged walls to cascade down. Bleak's knees went weak. She didn't want to know the extent of Ines' power. It was too terrible.

But it was not Ines' power that shook the earth. Behind Bleak, fifteen teerah panthers leaped from their torture pit, teeth gnashing and silver claws out. Rion was at her side, and Bleak found the strength to pull herself up.

'Sahara!' she called.

Sahara's eyes found her.

'We need to go!' Bleak yelled, eyeing the seemingly never-ending force of masked guards spilling from all around them.

Rion roared and swiped at a group of Ines' men, sending them sprawling, bloody and moaning, across the courtyard.

*He'd kill them all*, Bleak realised, *were it not for me and the others*.

To Bleak's shock, the other teerah panthers suddenly bore riders as well – Geraad, Kyden, Daleren, Casimir and the rest.

Rion made his way through the fighting to Sahara, who was still duelling Langdon. As the torturer sidestepped one of Sahara's well-placed blows, Rion's teeth closed around his arm.

Langdon cried out, his blood pulsing from where Rion's teeth punctured flesh. Rion flung him away with all his might, and the torturer went flying. There was a loud crack as his skull smacked against stone.

'Sahara,' Bleak panted, reaching down to offer her friend a hand. Sahara took it and hauled herself up behind Bleak on the panther's back. Bleak gasped as her broken body was knocked, and gritted her teeth as Sahara's arms wrapped tightly around her middle.

'Let's go,' Bleak said, throwing a final glance around at the devastation. Rion's body gave a massive lurch beneath them as he bounded into a powerful run.

THERE WAS NOTHING LIKE IT. The grassy plains passed them in a blur, and the cool wind hit Bleak's face and tangled her hair.

Dozens of foreign thoughts floated into her head, but they were muted. She could ignore them. The open air of Oremere was like a soothing salve

on her mind.

*Freedom.* This was what it was like.

They were not heading back down south towards Westerfort or the rebel headquarters. To go back would be to lead Ines and her forces straight to the heart of the rebel movement. There was no going back now. Instead, Rion led them north, in a whirlwind of speed and determination, not stumbling once in the dark night around them.

How far had her beast companion roamed, Bleak wondered, what had he mapped of these lands in his head? She had no answers, only that she trusted him with her life.

The pride ran until dawn, and though they were weak, injured and malnourished, the panthers did not stop until Rion bid them do so. They halted at the most northern point of Oremere, where salty sea water sprayed the protruding stretch of land, overlooking the perilous Northern Passage between Oremere and Qatrola. At the furthest, narrowest part of land, a great ship was docked.

Sahara climbed down from Rion, stepping back uneasily from the beast. 'That ship is ours,' she said.

'What?'

'Well, what I meant was – it *will* be ours,' Sahara added, unsheathing her sword. 'Ten years is a long time to be stuck on this gods-forsaken continent.'

Sahara, Geraad, Kyden, Daleren, Fletch and Jaida boarded the vessel, weapons at the ready.

Bleak waited on the wharf with Rion, listening to the shouts from above.

'Quite a pair you make,' said a soft voice beside her. Casimir. He stood to her right, studying her and the teerah panther, a thoughtful crease in his brow. 'I often wondered if I'd live to see them act in such a way again.' He spoke slowly, each word considered until the last moment when it rolled off his tongue.

Bleak had to stop herself from shifting uncomfortably under his stare.

'What do you mean?' she said.

Before he could answer, there was more shouting from the ship. This time, Bleak looked up to see crew members being forced overboard. Some of them chose the icy waters rather than face the waiting pride of teerah panthers.

‘Come on,’ Geraad shouted at them from the main deck. When Bleak turned back to Casimir, he was gone.

At last on board, Bleak tried not to look at the smears of blood across the deck, or the red dripping from the blades the rebels held. She didn’t have the stomach for gore right now.

‘You cannot be serious,’ Geraad groaned upon seeing the teerah panthers follow Bleak and Rion aboard, one of them curling up beside the entrance to the captain’s cabin.

‘They saved us,’ Bleak snapped. ‘We owe them a debt. If they want to join us, then they join us.’

‘You are not the leader of this troop,’ Geraad growled, rising up to his full height above her. ‘You do *not* get a say in decisions like these.’

‘Actually,’ Casimir’s quiet voice cut through Geraad’s anger like ice. ‘If I’m not mistaken, I think you’ll find that the girl here is the only one able to sail this ship. Which makes her our captain. Which means she *definitely* gets a say in these decisions. The *only* say, if need be.’

Beneath his scraggly beard, Geraad’s face flushed deeply.

Bleak simply stared. *How does he know I can sail?*

Sahara appeared from below deck and looked to shore. ‘We need to move, *now*.’ Her voice was strained. She turned to Casimir. ‘Where to?’

‘Are you not the head of this expedition?’ Casimir said.

For the first time since Bleak had met her, Sahara faltered. ‘We thought ... We thought you would know where to go.’

Casimir scanned the deck, his eyes locking onto Bleak’s. A jolt of raw power shot through her, and it was all she could do not to yelp. Heat rising to her cheeks, she busied herself with the burrs in Rion’s coat.

‘What do you think?’ he asked her.

She looked up. ‘What?’

‘Where should we go? You’re the captain.’

Bleak pictured the routes and currents she used to study with Senior. Remembered Sahara’s earlier words about seeking an ally. There was only one place they could go from here.

‘To Havenness,’ she said.

‘Havenness?’ Sahara asked.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s one of the most treacherous passages by sea,’ Geraad argued.

Casimir folded his arms over his chest. 'Then you best hope our captain's reputation precedes her ...'

A growl rumbled in Rion's throat, but Bleak silenced him with a gentle touch. There was nothing to be done except turn to face Sahara and the Ashai leader.

'It'll be rough,' she heard herself say. 'But I can do it. I can captain the ship.'

At the sound of her clipped words, the sixteen teerah panthers stood to attention, their eyes fixed solely on her. Goosebumps rushed across Bleak's skin, and around her there was a collective intake of breath from the rebels.

Rion took a step towards her, looking every bit the powerful legend rather than the broken animal she'd found at Westerfort. She shook her head – not now. She wouldn't lean on him just yet. She would captain this ship. She would get them to Havennesse.

'Sahara,' she addressed the Valian, her voice sounding different. 'Drop the mainsail. Get Geraad to lower the foresail. Have the ropes been cast off?'

With a nod, Sahara set off to the mainsail at a run. Bleak went to the helm, her shaking hands steadying as she gripped the wheel. She took a deep breath. She could do this. If there was one thing she'd learned from Senior, it was how to man a ship. A gust of icy wind blasted over them, and the sails billowed to life, forcing the ship forward. She'd never sailed the Northern Passage. Not many had. Indeed, crews did everything in their power to avoid this part of the seas. The tides and mist could turn at any moment, and swallow a ship whole.

They lurched forward again. The dark waters surged around the hull and she braced her legs to keep her balance. Bleak glanced over her shoulder, back to Oremere, the continent that no one knew existed, the continent that had once been her home, her *family's* home. Charging on horseback from the mist-covered horizon was an army of masked soldiers.

Bleak stabilised the wheel in her hands. They needed speed, and they needed it *now*.

'Sahara – the topsail!' she shouted, wrangling with the wheel as the ship began to gain momentum. On the shore, Ines' force was galloping towards them, the distance between them and the sea closing fast.

'The ship's not used to so much weight,' Geraad yelled against the wind, appearing from below deck, glaring at the teerah panthers.

‘I don’t give a damn what it’s used to,’ snapped Bleak, not taking her eyes from the churning waters before them. ‘Don’t just stand there, help Sahara with the ropes.’

‘We’re still within range.’

Bleak looked back again to see the soldiers closing in on the shore they’d just left behind. They were nocking their arrows.

‘Fletch!’ Sahara cried, drawing her own bow. She didn’t wait for the archer. She began to fire.

Fletch joined her moments later, her arrows splitting the sky.

But they were outnumbered.

‘Take cover,’ Bleak yelled. She pulled Casimir down to the ground with her as the first wave of enemy arrows rained down upon the ship. An arrow missed him by a mere inch.

‘I need to steer,’ she said through gritted teeth, unsure of what he could possibly do about it. Without her hands on the wheel, she could already feel them drifting – they needed to stay on course. There was no point in gaining speed if it sent them crashing to the rocks.

Casimir nodded once, and scrambled for the captain’s cabin.

More arrows shot down at them, embedding themselves into the deck with a series of loud *thunks*.

‘Shit,’ Bleak cursed as another arrow missed her foot by a hair’s breadth. She jumped as an arrow scraped down the side of her arm – a scratch, but too close to home.

*Gods, she thought. It has to be over soon.*

Casimir reappeared, a large, round shield on his arm. He ran to her.

‘Steer,’ he said, holding the shield up behind her, protecting her.

She didn’t object; she didn’t wait. She scrambled to her feet, her clammy hands finding the wheel again and setting them on course. They were finally gaining speed; the wind, the currents were working with them. There was a sharp gasp from behind her, but Bleak didn’t look back, not now. She set her gaze on the black waters before them, and felt herself become one with the ship, her stance adjusting again to the constant lurch into the waves. It wasn’t until the shield behind her clanged loudly as it dropped to the deck that she turned around. They were out of range. Casimir turned to face her, a tight smile on his haggard face. An arrow protruded from his pectoral. With a grimace, he snapped the fletching off, blood trickling down his already stained shirt.

‘Are you ...?’ Bleak began, reaching out instinctively to him.

‘Didn’t hit anything vital,’ he said quietly, brushing her off. He staggered back to the captain’s quarters to tend to his wound.

Sahara approached the helm, her eyes wide at the sight of the dozens of arrows sticking up from the deck. ‘You alright?’ she called out to Bleak.

Bleak nodded, unable to find the words for what she felt.

‘And Casimir?’

Bleak gestured to the captain’s cabin, and with a nod Sahara disappeared below deck to see to his treatment.

Left alone at the wheel, Bleak realised that her whole body was shaking, a trembling that had started at her core and worked outwards. Short, shallow gasps escaped her. There was only one thing that could help her now.

‘Geraad,’ she managed, and the rebel appeared at the bottom of the steps. ‘I need a drink.’

He gave her a searching look.

‘Something strong,’ she said, her voice steadying just at the thought of it.

Frowning, he obliged. He brought her a flask of amber liquid and left.

Bleak’s mouth watered as she uncorked the flask, the scent of liquor hitting her nostrils. She held it to her lips but didn’t drink.

As though sensing her discomfort, Rion prowled up onto the helm. The moon had risen high in the night sky, its reflection shimmering across the now calm waters.

Sharper than ever, Bleak’s memories flashed before her. She remembered being in Angove with Bren, looking out across at the glinting lights of the pleasure yachts and eating Mrs Clayton’s famous palma pie. The thought of food now turned Bleak’s stomach. But Bren ... Gods, she missed him. For a moment, she allowed herself to wonder what he was doing, if he was still working the fishing routes, or if without her, he’d gone back to labouring with his brothers. Or back to Tilly in Valia.

Rion huffed as he lay down on his stomach and crossed his massive paws in front of him. Bleak placed the cork back into the flask and stared out to sea.

HALF A DOZEN TIMES throughout the night, Sahara and Geraad tried to relieve her so she could rest. But Bleak only took fifteen minutes to wash and change out of her soiled undergarments and don the warm clothing Sahara handed her. Her hot flush of embarrassment didn't last long. They'd seen worse, no doubt. And she'd promised to get them to Havenness, so there was no room for shame here. In any case, she trusted no one at the wheel of the great ship. That was her argument to the rebel leaders, but alone, she knew the real reason. She couldn't face the confinement of the cabin, the darkness and the stuffy air. She would find no sleep there, and she didn't want to. She was afraid of what would greet her in her nightmares. As she steered the ship into the deep night, she sank into her thoughts. In the past, her unshakeable will to live had severed the lives of so many, an inherent selfishness. And what was she actually living for? Her whole body jolted as she was taken back to the dungeon in Freyhill, and Ines' cold touch on her clammy skin.

Bleak rushed to the side of the ship and vomited, bile burning up the back of her throat. Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, she returned to the wheel, steadying herself, and glanced at Rion.

'What?' she rasped, her odd eyes meeting his intense stare. But he didn't look away.

It was in the small hours of the morning that she saw golden scales flash below the surface.

*It can't be ...* she thought, leaning over the side of the ship, following the length of the creature, before it plunged into the dark depths of the sea.

'Sahara?' she called.

A few moments later, the Valian appeared, her black cropped hair mussed, and her face lined with creases from whatever she'd been sleeping on.

'Everything alright?' she said, her voice low.

'I ... I saw ...'

'Gods, do I even want to know?' she said, cracking a smile.

It was the first smile Bleak had seen in what felt like forever, and something fractured inside her.

Sahara's face fell. 'Bleak, what's wrong? I mean, besides the obvious,' she said, gesturing to the vast waters around them.

Bleak took a deep breath and gathered herself. 'Sea serpents,' she said evenly.

Sahara nodded, doing her best to wipe the concern from her face. 'I'd heard they swim these channels ...'

'I didn't realise they still existed.'

Sahara quirked an eyebrow and tilted her head in Rion's direction. 'Hasn't your furry friend taught you anything about extinct creatures?'

'Fair point.' Bleak looked back to the water, straining her eyes to catch another glimpse of gold. She saw nothing. 'Is there anything we can do?'

'Hope they don't attack,' said Sahara.

'Well, at least that's a simple solution.'

'I'm all about the simple solutions.'

'Because breaking into a stronghold and rescuing a captured Ashai is definitely simple.'

Sahara shrugged. 'I never said I was consistent.'

The Valian disappeared down below for a time, and returned carrying a steaming mug of stew and a roll of hard bread. She pressed the mug into Bleak's cold hand.

'I don't live by many rules anymore,' she said, meeting Bleak's look of surprise. 'But one of my few exceptions is: *when there's a hot meal, eat.*'

Bleak raised the mug to her lips and took a tentative sip. The well-spiced broth made its way through her body, warming her bones. Geraad, it seemed, had a knack for cooking.

'Even better with bread,' Sahara added, tossing the roll to Bleak.

Bleak dipped the bread into the stew, and looked to Sahara. 'Thank you,' she said. 'Go get some rest, Sahara.'

'I'll keep you company.'

'I'm fine.'

Sahara shrugged and leaned back on the mast. 'I'll keep you company all the same.'

Icy water sprayed up the side of the ship and lapped across the deck. The tide, it seemed, was turning.



## CHAPTER 18

The Wildenhaven war council chamber was small. Its creators had clearly been unaware that one day it would house the tall frames of the elite Valia kindred, in addition to its own generals. Henri smoothed the old map across the table, the one Bleak had stolen from Commander Swinton, and pinned down its curling edges with her katars. She couldn't believe she was here. That they were *all* here.

She leaned on her palms and gazed at the red x's on the map, feeling the eyes of the room on her. She ignored them. Instead, she focused on the nagging sensation in the pit of her stomach, and the flutter of power in her veins. There was something about this map ... something she was missing.

The double doors of the chamber groaned as they swung inward and Eydis, Nicolai and Jarel entered, a sea of grey-and-white furs, with Bear at their heels. Beneath their cloaks, Nicolai and Jarel wore full armour, longswords gleaming at their belts. Eydis, however, wore another of her daring gowns that revealed more of her tattoo than Henri had seen before. She glanced up at the queen's face.

'No armour and sword for you?' Henri said.

Eydis shrugged and took her place beside Henri. 'You and I both know my best weapon isn't a sword.'

Despite everything, Henri laughed. The looks of surprise from her kindred sent blood rushing to her cheeks.

She turned back to Eydis. 'What's your best weapon, then?'

Eydis tapped the side of her temple. 'We're not all born equal in strength and agility, but a mind can be as sharp as any blade, if you know how to wield it.'

‘Let’s hope your ideas pierce the enemy as well as my katars do, then.’

‘Let’s hope,’ Eydis replied, before drawing a deep breath and lifting her head to face the kindred.

‘Welcome to Wildenhaven, warriors of Valia. We are happy to see you again after all this time. You are much changed since you were here last.’

Henri stepped in. ‘Eydis, you remember my first-in-command, Athene?’

Eydis’ eyes flickered in the direction of the redhead. ‘You are less changed than the rest,’ she said coolly.

‘And Tilly, Marvel and Petra?’ Henri pushed on.

The Queen of Havennesse smiled when her eyes met Petra’s, and glanced back at Jarel, who was blushing furiously. ‘I remember this one well enough,’ she said.

‘My queen,’ Nicolai’s deep voice said. ‘If we’re done with introductions, might I suggest we move on to the tactical discussions?’

Eydis sighed and waved in his direction. ‘That’s Nicolai. General of my army, and resident fun-killer.’

There was a huff of laughter from the kindred, but Nicolai merely raised his brows expectantly and crossed his thick arms across his chest.

‘Fine, fine,’ said Eydis. ‘Henri, my friend, please begin.’

Henri smoothed her palms over the map again before looking up at her kindred. Her eyes lingered over Athene a second longer. She cleared her throat.

‘On the way to Heathton, our Angovian friend, Bleak, stole this map from Commander Swinton,’ she began. ‘Bleak gave it to me for safekeeping. See these little markings? The x’s? We were unable to determine what they mean.’

The group came closer to the table, and peered at the tattered parchment before them.

‘It’s old,’ Athene said, ‘that part of Valia ...’

‘I know. It doesn’t exist anymore,’ finished Henri. ‘I wanted to know if any of these places mean something to you. Eydis, have you foreseen anything to do with these coordinates?’

Eydis shifted closer to the map. ‘My knowledge of Ellest’s terrain and towns is limited. Even if I had seen something, I wouldn’t be able to pinpoint where it occurred.’

Henri nodded. ‘I thought as much.’

To her right, Tilly and Marvel pulled the map towards them, conferring in low voices.

‘What is it?’ Henri demanded.

Both pointed to the same position on the map: Hoddinott.

Tilly frowned. ‘Our last report stated that mist has taken over this area.’

‘Near Hoddinott?’ Henri said.

‘Yes. Just across the King’s River. The West Farmlands.’

Henri squinted at the tiny illustration of the town she, Bleak, Fiore and Swinton had left dusted with ash. She judged the distance between the town marker and the King’s River.

Henri jolted. *The jars ... The jars of mist King Arden had stored beneath the castle. What if ... Swinton was gone for hours in Hoddinott*, she recalled. *He could have done it. Easily.*

She tried to remember Swinton’s pack, if there’d been anything unusual about it. He’d been searched upon his entry into Valia territory, so he had to have hidden the jars and picked them up on the way back.

*We did the first leg of the journey separately*, Henri realised with a start. At the time, she’d thought this had been a deliberate move on *her* part, to visit the armoury, to start the trek on *her* terms.

*He knew. He knew I’d do that.* The bloody bastard had outmanoeuvred her.

‘Some have officially been declared mist-zones,’ Petra was saying. ‘We don’t know how, though. Usually, the mist spreads from an existing site, but these ... It’s as though this mist has been born of its own accord.’

‘What is it, Henri?’ Eydis said, peering into her face.

‘Jars ...’ Henri managed. ‘Arden ... Arden showed me a cellar beneath the castle, where he had hundreds of jars containing mist. Over ten years ago now, it was on his orders that Commander Swinton released the mist that created the Forest of Ghosts. I suspect these instances of mist throughout Ellest are of the same nature. When Bleak and I were summoned to the capital, we stopped at Hoddinott. Swinton disappeared for a number of hours. It makes sense that he rode out to the river’s edge, releasing the mist from there. It’s why they took the King’s Trail through the Hawthornes back to Heathton, rather than go by sea.’ She pointed to the x’s amidst the northern peaks of the Hawthornes. ‘That’s where we first found Bleak, right?’

Petra nodded. 'Yes, exactly there. Do you think it is only the commander carrying out these orders, or are there others?'

'The last I heard, the commander was due to set sail to Battalon. To escort Princess Olena to her betrothed. Captain Murphadias went with him.'

'Surely, the king has more than one lackey doing his dirty work?' It was Jarel who spoke this time, staring intently at Henri.

'I don't know,' she admitted.

Eydis pulled the map back towards her. 'I've no doubt Arden has many doing his dirty work. But he's also a suspicious man, and the mist works in unknown ways. I doubt he would risk involving more people than necessary. Not with this.'

'Have you seen anything, sister?' Jarel asked.

Eydis shook her head. 'Not of this ...'

'But of something?' he persisted.

Henri caught Eydis' glance her way. The look was disguised immediately with a loud sigh. 'We won't know for a time.'

'What? What did you see?'

'Quiet, Jarel.'

Henri remembered something. She scanned the chamber. 'Where is Mariette?' she said.

Eydis' eyes latched onto hers. 'She's visiting a breeder in the Kildaholm Alps.' The lie was a smooth one, but a lie nonetheless.

Henri opened her mouth to argue; however, she realised that a public quarrel was in neither of their best interests. She returned to the issue at hand.

'Why would Arden be releasing mist on his own continent? Surely, he doesn't mean to kill his own people?'

'Arden has never been a leader of the people, Henri. I think we can agree on that much. But as to why ... The mist marks Ashai, does it not?'

'Only some,' Henri said, gesturing at the black swirls of ink on Eydis' body.

'Yes, some. Though ...' Eydis frowned. 'It makes sense to target Ashai in this way.'

'How?'

'Well, he's targeting the weakest.'

'What? How do you know that? You're not weak and you were marked by the mist,' Henri said. 'Where are you going with this?'

‘The mist marks Ashai who do not originate from Oremere. Who do not know to use a talisman to protect themselves from the magic of others. Those people who do not have enough knowledge of magic to understand what they themselves are. The vulnerable.’

‘What would he want with a bunch of vulnerable Ashai?’ Athene interjected.

Eydis met Athene’s gaze with a cool stare. ‘The vulnerable are malleable.’

The image of a prison wagon in the cobblestone alleys of Heathton flashed in Henri’s mind. The dirty, bloodied hands gripping the bars and the red x painted on the side of the wagon.

‘The question now is: what can we do against a weapon like the mist?’ Nicolai’s voice rumbled from the corner.

‘Allehra fights it with fire,’ said Athene.

‘That is Allehra’s Ashai fire, not regular fire. And correct me if I’m wrong, but that doesn’t seem like a guaranteed effective defence, given the state of your Ghost Forest.’

‘Allehra has *always* protected the Valian people,’ Athene snapped.

‘No one is saying otherwise.’ Henri shot her a warning look. ‘There are no guarantees in war,’ she continued. ‘But Nicolai’s right. And Allehra’s in no state to convince us otherwise. We need to focus on one aspect of battle at a time. First,’ she turned to Eydis, ‘where is Ines likely to attack Havenness?’

‘From the south,’ the queen answered immediately. She gestured to Jarel, who unrolled a larger map of the realm and spread it on top of the old one.

Eydis continued. ‘The Kildaholm Alps protect us from the east, and the Forest of Wolves from the north. Ines would have to pass through the waters by Moredon Tower if she wished to breach Hamasaand Bay, so I suspect the south. Not Port Sandstrom, but perhaps from the south-east. She may mean to come from Qatrola, rather than Oremere.’

Henri nodded. ‘You have sentries set up?’

‘We may not be Valians, but we’re no fools,’ Jarel said.

‘Easy, Jarel. It was only a question.’

The queen’s brother bowed his head and stepped back in place beside Nicolai.

Marvel spoke up. ‘How many able bodies in your forces?’

‘Three thousand,’ Eydis replied. ‘Though I do warn you now, by your standards ...’

‘Skills?’

‘Swordsmen, archers and polearms, mainly.’ Eydis’ eyes flickered towards the window.

‘Polearms?’ Tilly asked.

‘Long Havenne war hammers,’ Henri told her. ‘Before Eydis’ reign, this continent was famous for them. How many horses do you have, Eydis?’

The wintry queen beckoned her lover forward. ‘Nicolai?’

‘Perhaps two thousand or so?’ he said. ‘Though, they are not trained for battle.’

‘If Ines has horses, they won’t be trained for the snowstorms and cold. So we are at an advantage there,’ Eydis pointed out. Henri noted her friend’s eyes darting to the window for a second time.

Bear barked at his master and Eydis jumped.

Fascinated, Henri watched as Eydis leaned down and stroked the dog’s head. ‘I know,’ she told him. ‘I’m here.’

‘What’s going on?’ Henri said. ‘What did you see?’

Eydis locked eyes with her. ‘It’s too soon to say.’

‘You know I’m not a fan of cryptic,’ Henri muttered, turning back to the maps. ‘How long do you think we have?’

‘Perhaps a week.’

‘Right,’ Henri said, crossing her arms over her chest. ‘My kindred and I will need to inspect your army. We will train with them. No doubt we’ll be able to teach them a thing or two. We need to be as unified as possible when Ines’ forces hit.’

‘Very well.’ Eydis nodded. ‘When do you start?’

Henri was already moving towards the doors. ‘Now.’

## CHAPTER 19

Swinton's hand trembled as he dipped his quill into the inkpot. His weekly report detailing Prince Nazuri's movements was due, but even after three training sessions he had nothing new to convey to King Arden. The prince was friendly but guarded, and now the tightness in Swinton's chest had so far prevented him from writing anything other than *Your Majesty*. He couldn't fathom how life could just go on as usual when the world was sliding out from beneath his feet. How everything could feel so normal, when everything was so wrong.

Swinton had always believed he'd been connected to Dash – Zachary. Although he was the boy's father by blood only, although he'd only ever known the child from a distance, he'd always felt Dash's existence tethered to his own, a constant flicker of life, of *more than*.

When Zachary had been a baby, he'd contracted a rare strain of Qatrolian whooping cough, and his young life had hung between this realm and the next. Back then, Swinton swore he felt the flicker of life weaken, like a candle struggling to stay alight in a gale. But as Zachary grew strong once more, so did the thread that linked them.

Now, Swinton felt nothing. The raven he and Fi had sent warning the Carlingtons must have been too late. The thought took the breath from his lungs and froze the blood pumping into his heart.

Swinton's hand crept to the coin of Yacinda resting against his sternum. He rolled it between his forefinger and thumb, feeling each subtle groove, more worn every day from his constant fiddling.

*What if ...* He looked down at the talisman. The coin stifled his increasingly powerful magic. His abilities had shown him Eliza's death

before her blood had seeped into the hay, they had shown him the plague sweeping through Ellest's capital ... He had to know.

Hands still shaking, he lifted the necklace over his head.

Magic flooded his veins, making him sway in his seat with the impact.

*HE WAS YOUNGER. Perhaps seventeen or eighteen, the weight of a training sword familiar in his hand. A young Valian dressed in traditional forest-green leathers circled him. She looked familiar ... Tendrils of fiery red hair framed her face, her eyes daring him to challenge her.*

*He lunged clumsily.*

*'Use your surroundings,' she said, knocking aside the blow. 'There's more at your disposal than the blade in your hand.' She kicked the loose hay up into his face, and in a whirl, had him disarmed with her blade to his throat.*

*Athene, he realised, surrendering. The right-hand woman of Henrietta Valia.*

*She helped him up and waited for him to prepare himself. Frowning, he switched sword hands and adjusted his stance.*

*Her attack was precise, and the strength behind each swing of her sword, formidable. Swinton scrambled to block the blows, wincing as each one found their mark, unless Athene intended otherwise. He'd never felt so out of control, so defenceless.*

*'Again,' she said.*

SWINTON WAS HURLED from the vision. He was curled up on the floor, panting, sweat dripping down his temples.

*What in the realm ...* He clutched his chest.

His visions had never shown him the past. But ... He struggled to catch his breath. Sparring with Athene ... He'd never done that. He'd never trained with the Valians. His teenage years had been spent alongside Fi, training with the Ellestian army, following the orders of King Arden.

Something was wrong with his magic. Something was wrong with him.

He needed to see Dash. Instead, he'd been shown a past he'd never had. He sat up, resting his back against the wall. Scraping his fingers through his



long hair, he clutched it in fistfuls, as though he'd tear it from the roots. A cry escaped him, a primitive sound, wrenched from his soul. The deepest grief filled his bones. He'd failed *Eliza*. He'd failed *them*. Panic and desperation gripped his heart, a firestorm he couldn't contain.

*Our son*, he thought. *I failed our son*.

SOMEONE WAS SHAKING HIM, a firm hand on his shoulder. Bleary-eyed, Swinton squinted at the figure hauling him to his feet.

'Dimi,' Fi said softly, helping him into a chair. 'You should have sent for me, old friend.'

Swinton's throat was dry. Fiore pressed a cup of water into his hands, and Swinton drank deeply.

'My magic,' he rasped. 'It's broken ...'

'Is that possible?' Fi refilled the cup.

'It must be.'

Fi shook his head in disbelief. 'How?'

'I don't know ... I ... I was trying to see ... to see if we were too late. I think ... my connection to him is gone. The grief ... It's mutated my power.'

'Dimitri, you don't know if Dash —'

'Don't say his name.'

'There's still hope,' Fi pressed.

Swinton took a deep breath. 'How do you know?'

'I haven't heard otherwise.'

'And why would you hear, Fi? How do you have all these sources?'

'You know I had a life before I came to Ellest.'

'That's all I know,' Swinton snapped. 'That you had a life. I don't know what life. I don't know who you were.'

Fiore sighed. 'Now is not the time, old friend.'

'Well, what is it time for, Fi? You never tell —'

'It's time for me to leave.'

Swinton blinked. 'Fine. I'll see you at the council meeting, then.'

'No, Dimitri. It's time for me to leave Battalon.'

'What?'

'I'm bound for Havennesse. For Wildenhaven.'

'Fiore, you're stationed in Belbarrow. Your duty is here.'

‘I have no duty here.’

‘Yes, *you do*. To the princess. To the crown.’

‘A man who murders his own wife is no king of mine.’

Swinton’s eyes went wide. ‘You cannot say such things,’ he hissed. ‘Not here, not *anywhere*.’

‘You are right to be paranoid, old friend. There are eyes and ears everywhere.’

Swinton spotted the thick fur cloak by the door, resting on top of an overstuffed pack. ‘You’re telling me no one has seen you lug that pack around?’

‘I’ll be long gone soon enough.’

‘You’ll be branded a deserter.’

Fi shrugged. ‘Such is life, old friend. Branded one thing to the next until we are no more.’

‘Fi ...’

‘Come with me,’ Fiore said.

‘I cannot. My place is by the princess’ side, especially now.’

‘Why do you choose to be so blind, Dimitri? When you have the gift of foresight?’

‘What is the point in foresight, when you can do nothing to change it?’

‘Who says you can’t change it?’

Swinton swallowed. ‘*Eliza. Dash*. I saw their deaths coming. I was helpless. And it doesn’t matter. My magic is useless now.’

‘You don’t know that.’

Swinton glanced at the pack by the door again. ‘You’re really going?’

Fi nodded. ‘Give me two hours.’

‘What?’

‘A two-hour head start. Then report me missing from my watch.’

Swinton’s chest constricted. ‘Is that enough time?’

‘Should be. Ship leaves in forty minutes.’

Swinton found himself nodding.

‘Use my apartments as your own, if you need to get away from here,’ Fiore said.

‘Thank you.’

‘Dimitri,’ Fi paused at the door. ‘Someday soon, you are going to have to accept who and what you are. And when you do, I hope that we find each other again. I would like to know that man, to fight alongside him.’

‘I’ve been fighting my whole life,’ Swinton said, exhaustion gripping his bones. ‘I don’t want to fight anymore.’

‘But you will.’ Fiore picked up his pack and cloak. ‘Until next time, brother.’

SWINTON TOYED with the coin of Yacinda as the council members began to enter the chamber. He sat at the enormous oak table, adorned with black lanterns and crystal goblets at each place. He nodded to the noblemen and generals whose faces were familiar, though their names escaped him. There hadn’t been a formal address since his initial arrival at the palace, and even that had been brief. He knew that this time would be different.

Stefan shuffled into the chamber and slid into the seat beside Swinton.

‘Where’s Fiore?’ he whispered.

Swinton shrugged. ‘Late, as usual,’ he quipped, fighting to keep his tone flippant.

Moments later, a herald entered. ‘King Roswall of Battalon,’ he announced.

The room stood and bowed low as the king strode in, his expression grave.

‘Be seated, good men,’ he said, taking his place at the head of the table. He cleared his throat. ‘You have been summoned here today to be briefed on the impending conflict.’

Swinton’s stomach dropped to his feet. *It’s come to this already?*

‘As you know, Henrietta of the Valia kindred stands accused of the murder of Her Majesty, Queen Vera of Ellest. As of this morning, Ellest and Battalon have allied, and are at war with the Valians.’

There was an audible intake of breath from around the room.

‘Furthermore,’ King Roswall continued, ‘it has been decreed that any persons of the Ashai race *must* come forward and declare themselves. A register has already been put in place, but this is now compulsory. Punishable by death. By mist.’

‘Your Majesty,’ said a voice from the back. ‘If I may ... It seems a little ... extreme. One bad Ashai, and an entire race —’

‘It is not just one.’ The king glowered. He nodded to the porter beside him, who began to hand out sheets of parchment. Swinton froze when he saw the drawings.

Bloated bodies washed up on the shore. Each bearing the same terrified expression, eyes and mouths wide open. He'd seen those expressions before ... Swinton looked closer and suppressed a gasp. Siv Lennox. Captain Charlyn. The faces of the guards King Arden had assigned to *Arden's Fortune*. To transport ...

'This is the work of another Ashai,' King Roswall said. 'A prisoner of the crown, known as Bleak. Fifteen Ellestian guards dead at her hands. Their minds turned to bloody mush.' He held up a sketch. It was by the same artist who'd drawn Henri's face on the posters that littered Belbarrow. They had captured Bleak's odd eyes perfectly. She stared out from the parchment as though she could see them all. As though she was looking right at Swinton.

He felt sick.

'There are reports that she did the same thing in a town called Hoddinott, not far from Ellest's capital. Killed an entire tavern full of men, and tried to cover her tracks by burning down the establishment.'

Murmuring broke out across the table and Swinton felt Stefan restless beside him, trying to get his attention. The young guard had met Bleak, had been part of the guard who had escorted her from Angove to the Hawthorne Ranges, until the Valian kindred had intercepted them. Swinton shot Stefan a warning look.

'Ready your forces and make your preparations. You will have your orders by morning,' the king said.

Sensing that the meeting was about to adjourn, Swinton stood. He *had* to do this, here and now. Any other way would raise suspicions.

'Your Majesty,' he said. 'I have some further concerns to share.'

King Roswall stared at him. 'Go on.'

'Captain Fiore Murphadias has abandoned his post.'

The room burst into outrage. All around Swinton, men were arguing and gesticulating wildly. Accusations were thrown. Fingers were pointed.

Swinton had always known that Fi was well liked and respected, but perhaps he hadn't understood how deeply his desertion would be felt across the Ellestian and Battalonian forces. How a stone dropped in an ocean could cause a tidal wave.

'That's enough,' the king's voice silenced the chaos. 'I would hear Commander Swinton, if you please.'

Every pair of eyes latched onto him, and Swinton's shirt grew damp with sweat. He took a deep breath and looked to the king. 'He had orders to check the perimeter watchtowers,' he began. 'This morning, before he was due to depart, he came to my chambers. He brought a pack, which wasn't unusual given his orders. However, he also had a palma fur cloak. I thought nothing of it at the time, though I should have. Just now I've received word,' he gave Stefan a meaningful glance, 'that Murphadias boarded a ship to Havenness. He has taken all his belongings. He doesn't mean to return to Belbarrow, or to his duties here.'

The council chamber was quiet, waiting.

King Roswall clenched his fists. 'A warrant will be made for his arrest. Henceforth, Fiore Murphadias is a traitor to the crowns. A traitor of the realm. Upon capture, he will face certain death.'

The shock wave rippled through the council.

'Dismissed,' the king said.

No one approached Swinton as the crowd of men dispersed. Stefan had vanished with them and Swinton was glad for it. He wasn't sure what he'd say to the young guard, how to balance the truth with the lies.

'Commander,' King Roswall called. 'A word.'

Swinton halted at the door, waiting for the stragglers to leave.

'Close the door,' the king said.

Swinton did as he was told.

'Have a seat.'

Swinton took the chair to King Roswall's left.

The king studied him. 'Word from Heathton is your captain helped the Valian escape.'

'I find that hard to believe, Sire.'

'Even now, in light of his desertion?'

'Even now, Your Majesty.'

King Roswall leaned back in his chair. 'Often it's those closest to us who surprise us the most.'

'Indeed, Majesty.'

'I trust we need not question your allegiance, Commander?'

'No, Your Majesty, my loyalty is to the crowns. Captain Murphadias' defection and his alleged conspiring with the Valians are treason.'

'True. However, does your ignorance of his dishonourable intentions not speak volumes of your capabilities? This instance occurred under your

watch.'

Swinton kept himself still. He'd known this question was coming. He couldn't blame the king for asking it. 'Your Majesty, I have served King Arden for over twenty years. I have lived and breathed through his code of honour, and I will die by it. My loyalty is to His Majesty, to you and to this realm. I have never claimed to be perfect, and I may have been fooled once by a pretender, but I will not be fooled again. You can count on that.'

King Roswall reached for the crystal decanter before him and sloshed amber liquid into two glasses. He pushed one towards Swinton. 'Times are dangerous now, Commander. We need men we can trust. Especially guarding the future queen and king of Battalon. Princess Olena is in the deepest haze of her grief. She is vulnerable. You will gather your guards and inform them of the situation.'

'Of course.'

'Tonight, your presence will be required at the formal dinner.' King Roswall took up his glass and motioned for Swinton to follow suit.

'To war,' Swinton said, keeping his voice even.

'To victory,' replied the king.

## CHAPTER 20

S waddled in blankets, Dash trembled against Pa as he was carried through the dark streets of Heathton. The plague was here, and the whole city knew it. The alleyways were chaos and the shops were boarded up, some with giant red x's painted over their doors.

'Hold on, son. It's going to be alright,' Pa muttered into Dash's hair, weaving through the crowds at a run.

The sores on Dash's legs burned. He could feel them weeping, the hem of his nightshirt sticking to the pus. He winced as he was jostled against Pa's chest, but stayed quiet. Pa was panicked enough without him adding to the burden.

'Excuse me,' Pa said to a nearby man. 'Excuse me. I'm looking for Healer Ethelda.'

'Ethelda? You ain't the only one,' the man said.

'Please. My son ... He —'

'Alright, alright. You know where Madame Joelle Marie's is?'

Pa hesitated.

The man rolled his eyes. 'Head south from there, it's the third lane on the left. There's a sign.'

Pa surged past him. 'Thank you. Thank you,' he breathed, sprinting onwards.

Dash felt sick from all the twists and turns, sweat beading at his hairline. His teeth began to chatter and Pa pulled the blankets tighter around him.

'Not far now,' Pa said. 'Not far now, son.'

The shops, taverns and pleasure halls of Heathton flashed past in a blur. Dash could still hear the sound of the mourning bells ringing, could smell the incense from the temple wafting through the air.

Pa swore.

Dash lifted his head. Outside a door that read *Healer Ethelda* were dozens of people. Some had their faces pressed to the windows, peering into the dark shop within. Others were sitting on the kerb, sobbing into their hands. A large man pounded on the door with a thick fist.

‘Open up. We need help!’ he yelled.

Dash saw a little girl standing beside him, her arms covered in the same weeping sores Dash had. Her bottom lip trembled as she watched her father grow more and more distressed.

‘How long have you been here?’ Pa asked a quiet woman standing on the outskirts of the mob.

Her eyes were rimmed red. ‘Since yesterday.’

‘And she hasn’t come out at all?’

The woman shook her head. ‘She’s refusing to help ... I thought ... I thought healers were supposed to be merciful.’

Glass shattered. Pa jumped, shielding Dash with his own body.

Someone had thrown a rock at the healer’s window, sending shards flying into the crowd. Dash saw an elderly lady with a cut on her cheek. And a boy with strange black markings down his neck. The mob was surging forward, pushing and shoving, crazed. Pa struggled to keep his footing, slipping on the damp cobblestones as people charged at the healer’s door. He fell. Dash felt the wind beneath him.

Someone caught Pa’s elbow and pulled him out of the throng.

‘She’s not there,’ a stranger murmured, a gold tooth flashing. ‘She left the continent weeks ago.’ He pulled Dash and Pa away from the riot.

‘You ...’ Dash tried to form the words. He recognised the man, from out the front of the fabric shop. But he couldn’t speak. Exhaustion was dragging him under.

‘Meet me at your cottage in an hour,’ the stranger said.

‘What?’ Pa hissed. ‘Who are you?’

‘A friend. Of your friend.’

Pa didn’t move. ‘No riddles. Your *name*.’

The man sighed. ‘They call me the Tailor of Heathton.’

‘You ...? I’ve heard of you —’



‘*There’s no time,*’ the man growled. ‘An hour. Your cottage.’

THERE WAS ice in Dash’s bones and tremors racked his body. Everything hurt, but he couldn’t cry, couldn’t speak. He could only lie in his bed back in the cottage, the sheets soaked with sweat, and *feel it*, feel every wave of pain, each more unbearable than the last. Death and its fever had a grip on him, and even in his dazed and barely conscious mind, he knew it. Sometimes he heard voices around him, deep and concerned. Sometimes, the pain changed from one form to another – sharp and burning to dull and throbbing, but it was all pain, and he couldn’t stand it any longer.

‘Please.’ A woman’s voice – *Mama’s*? A hot hand on his arm.

He couldn’t open his eyes, his lids wouldn’t even flutter, they were too heavy.

‘Do everything you can,’ she said. ‘Please ...’ Her voice was strained.

‘That’s why he’s here, Dorothy. The Tailor was sent —’ *Papa*?

‘Best not said aloud, Emmett. Even here,’ said the man’s voice, a quiet rasp. ‘And the less you know the better. You understand the consequences of my taking him?’

*Taking him?* Did they mean Dash? Where was he going? Why weren’t Mama and Papa coming? The onslaught of questions sent his mind and his body into another fit, and agony wrapped its suffocating arms around him once more.

*HE WAS SOMEWHERE ELSE. Somewhere far away from Ellest. The night was dark, and icy wind stung his face. A ship. He was on a ship. Rain hammered the deck, and lightning cracked close, too close, as though the gods wanted to cleave the sea in two. Dash’s heart stopped. The girl, the girl, the one with the odd eyes, from the vision he’d had a lifetime ago ... She was there. She looked wild, her hair plastered to her bruised face, her shirt stained dark with blood. She shouted to her crew.*

*‘The sails, the sails, you damn fools,’ she cried, ‘bring them in!’*

*The ship plunged into the raging swell and Dash flung himself at the nearest rail, clinging on for his life. Dash froze.*

*For out of the shadows, stalked a beast he’d never seen ...*

*Thunder clapped and – he was gone.*

THE PAIN WAS BACK, lancing through his entire being. He needed to latch onto something, anything that would stop him from slipping away from this realm. Because he was – he was slipping. The agony was exhausting, and Dash was forgetting to hold on, forgetting himself, knowing only the pain that tore through his body.

Firm hands lifted him, and rough, waxed material was rubbed against his skin. Whoever held him smelled of the city: soot and mead and horse manure. There was crying in the distance.

‘How will we know ...?’ That was Mama’s voice.

‘You won’t,’ the stranger replied. ‘I cannot risk contact while travelling. You must trust me. Trust his father.’

‘I do.’

‘You know your duty here?’

‘The prince. Watch Prince Jaxon.’ Mama’s voice was strained; she said the words as though she’d been repeating them to herself.

A ripple of pain shuddered through Dash, and Mama’s hot hands found his. Her lips brushed his brow.

‘You’ll always be my son,’ she said, releasing him.

‘We can delay no longer.’ The man’s grip on Dash tightened.

‘Then go.’

A sensation that *wasn’t* pain violently clutched Dash’s chest. He and the stranger were wrenched through the air. Sharp, cold wind barrelled into him as some kind of force jerked him forward. Dash still couldn’t open his eyes. And so he leaned into the stranger’s weathered coat and musty scent, and hoped whatever was happening would be over soon.

## CHAPTER 21

In the golden light of dawn, the sight of Havennesse took Bleak's breath away. Colossal glaciers and barren ice shelves stretched as far as the eye could see. The mountains were so vast, so high, that their jagged peaks disappeared beyond the billow of clouds. The sheer magnitude of them was terrifying, each summit more perilous and desolate than the last.

Fresh snow fell as the ship lurched into the deserted white marina. Wet flakes caught in Bleak's hair and eyelashes, and she held out her hands, palms turned upwards.

'This is snow?'

Sahara grinned. 'Sure is. No shortage of it in Havennesse. You've never seen snow?'

Bleak shook her head and rubbed the tiny crystals of ice between her fingers. For a moment, she couldn't feel the burning cold on her exposed cheeks and ears, just the sheer awe of the place.

'Come,' Sahara said. 'By the time the beauty of it wears off, you'll be frostbitten. Let's go.'

They heaved what little supplies they had onto their backs, and Bleak realised with a start that despite her aching body, she had eased her pack on with an odd, comforting sense of familiarity. The wharf groaned as Rion and his pack leaped down from the ship, their paws disappearing deep into the snow.

'Where now?' Geraad asked, turning to Casimir.

The Ashai still didn't look pleased at his unofficial appointment as group leader, but he looped his thumbs under the straps of his pack, wincing

at the strain on his bandaged injury.

‘There’s a village,’ he said, with a glance at Bleak. ‘It’s not far from here. If we don’t stop, we can be there by mid-morning.’

They trekked single file through the knee-deep snow. Bleak’s already aching body struggled with the effort, her breaths coming in great huffs, forming clouds before her face. No one spoke, the thin air sapping them of their energy and the will to converse. Even Jaida and Kyden were quiet.

Movement flickered at the foothills of the mountains. Casimir threw up his fist, signalling for them to halt. The group waited, holding their breath. But it was Rion who moved first, emitting a low growl and bolting forward. The rest of the panthers lunged after him, their powerful legs a blur of silvery black. The beasts moved with striking agility, racing towards what Bleak realised was a small herd of deer.

‘Kildaholm caribou,’ Casimir said. ‘Let’s just hope the teerahs don’t bring down the bloody mountain.’

‘What?’

Casimir turned back to Bleak. ‘The Kildaholm Alps are infamous for their snowslides. One teerah panther could trigger one, let alone a pride of this size.’

Sahara let out a low whistle. ‘We best get a move on, then.’

When the group reached the foot of the mountains, the bloodied carcasses of Kildaholm caribou were clutched between the claws of Rion’s pack. Bleak watched as Rion tore steaming strips of flesh from the deer’s bones, his tail swishing in the snow. Mesmerised, Bleak approached.

‘I wouldn’t,’ Sahara began, reaching for her.

Rion’s growl vibrated through the snow, and Bleak jumped back.

‘You know how they say don’t put your hand near a starving dog’s food?’ Casimir said. ‘I think the same applies here.’

But Rion made for the trees, and returned, an unspoilt caribou between his jaws. He laid it in the snow at Bleak’s feet. The group was silent behind her as Rion returned to his own deer.

A hand clapped Bleak on the shoulder. ‘Guess he’s telling you to eat more,’ Sahara quipped.

Kyden and Jaida tied the carcass to a branch and lifted it between them.

From beside Sahara, Geraad watched them. ‘Thank the gods for your beasts, girl,’ he allowed, his usual surly tone absent. ‘We could all use a decent meal in our bellies tonight.’

‘Was that *gratitude*, Geraad?’ Sahara jibed.

‘Don’t get used to it,’ he bit back, but something akin to a smile shone in his eyes.

Casimir led them up the slope of the mountain, the snow only getting deeper. The majority of the panthers stayed at the base, while Rion prowled silently beside Bleak, his muzzle red with caribou blood. Gnarled, dark trees and sharp rock horns crept up alongside them, making the landscape all the more rugged.

Bleak slipped and fell with a cry into the hard-packed snow.

Casimir’s leather-gloved hand wrenched her back up; her face was stinging.

‘Not far now,’ he said.

His amber gaze sent a flush of heat to her cheeks, and she mumbled her thanks as she brushed the snow from her front.

Finally, the incline in the terrain reached a plateau, and Casimir brought them to the mouth of a cave.

‘What’s this?’ Sahara asked, lighting a torch and taking a few steps inside. ‘You said you were taking us to a village.’

‘I will,’ said the Ashai leader. ‘But we need rest and food first. And a fire, without attracting unwanted attention.’

‘Unwanted attention? What do you know that we don’t?’ The edge in Sahara’s voice reminded Bleak so much of Henri. A tone that Sahara herself rarely used, but was steeled with the same authority as her twin’s often was.

‘When I was a prisoner, I heard things. Rumours that suggested not all the villages here in Havenness are loyal to Queen Eydis.’

‘And you’re telling us this *now*?’

‘It would have changed nothing. We need to get to Wildenhaven, and we will. We just need to be cautious in doing so, which is why I brought us here.’

‘To a cave.’

‘To a cave, *while* I scout the nearby village. I don’t think it is wise to make our presence known, regardless of the villagers’ intentions.’

Sahara’s arms were crossed over her chest, her feet apart and her eyes narrowed. ‘Anything else you want to tell us?’

To Bleak’s horror, Casimir glanced her way. It did not go unnoticed. But Casimir simply shrugged. ‘I’ll let you know.’

CASIMIR AND GERAAD went to scout the village, leaving Bleak, Sahara and the others to skin and carve the caribou.

‘Do you trust him?’ Bleak asked Sahara quietly as they speared the meat with sticks to turn over the fire.

Sahara’s brow furrowed as she rotated her slab of meat over the flames. ‘Yes, I trust him. He’s had to look after himself for a long time. It’s he who doesn’t trust us, *yet*.’

Bleak nodded.

‘This feels strange to ask,’ Sahara said in a low voice. ‘But is there something between you two?’

Bleak nearly dropped her meat in the fire. ‘No. Why do you ask?’

The crease in Sahara’s brow deepened. ‘Well ... he was the one who fought to come back for you at Freyhill. Geraad – you know what he’s like, he didn’t want to risk it again. But when Casimir heard about the odd-eyed Ashai and her teerah panther, well, he said he wouldn’t come with us if we left you. Said that you were important to our cause.’

Bleak listened with a growing sense of dread.

‘Geraad has been strange about it ever since. There’s something he’s not telling. And you ... You and Casimir ... I don’t believe you owe me anything, Bleak, but if you do want to talk, I’ll listen, always.’

Hot tears stung Bleak’s eyes. Blinking them back, she turned to Sahara. ‘Thank you.’

The cave did wonders for insulating the little heat they had, and Bleak found that she was able to rest without her shivering keeping her awake. Rion stayed close, his presence putting her at ease.

She didn’t know how long she’d slept for, but Sahara woke her later with a gentle shake.

‘Casimir’s back,’ the Valian said, motioning for Bleak to return to the rebels sitting by the fire.

Bleak stretched and rejoined the group, wishing she still had her rope to practise her knots as tensions grew. But it was lost now. She’d have to fashion another. She sat down and gratefully accepted the flagon of water offered by Fletch.

‘Something is amiss at the village,’ Casimir told them. ‘I don’t know what it is, but the villagers, they’re not behaving normally. There’s some kind of celebration going on, but it’s ... It’s not right. I don’t want us to be

seen by them. But they have supplies. Supplies we need if we're to reach Wildenhaven within the next few days.'

'What do you propose?' Geraad asked.

'A diversion. Two of us go to the southern side of the village, draw their attention away from their stores, while the rest of us take as much as we can carry: food, cloaks, boots, water. The best way to travel to Wildenhaven is by dog sled, but I don't see us being able to steal dogs. They're notoriously loyal to their masters.'

'What if we stole the sleds?' Bleak heard herself say.

Casimir locked eyes with her and waited.

'The panthers ... They're bigger and faster than any dog. What if they could pull the sleds?'

'The panthers are wild, untrained beasts.'

'You saw what Rion did for me. Did for us. And the rest of his pack carried us from Freyhill.'

'In their desperation to escape.'

'Perhaps it was more than that.'

Something in Casimir's eyes sparked then, and her words hung between them.

Geraad cleared his throat. 'The panthers are elsewhere now, anyway – this isn't important. We need to —'

'Isn't important? Having their help could make all the difference for us. It means we could carry supplies, it means we're less likely to die of exposure, it means we'd get to Wildenhaven faster,' Bleak snapped.

*There you are,* Sahara directed her thoughts at Bleak. *Been wondering where you've been hiding that fire.*

Bleak had to stop herself from jumping at the sudden intrusion. Senior used to do the same thing, all those years ago.

Sahara's face betrayed nothing. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest once more. 'If Bleak says she can get the panthers to cooperate, she can. We need all the help we can get.'

Casimir glanced between the two women. 'Very well.'

It was decided. At nightfall, Bleak and Sahara followed Rion to the pocket of woods the pride had claimed as their own. Bleak had no idea what to expect. She didn't know if Rion could understand her or not, if he knew what they were about to ask of him and his companions. Rion greeted the others with a low growl and their ears pricked to attention. The two women

waited on the outskirts of the woods, Bleak silently praying that she hadn't made a huge mistake. Both women were pacing to keep warm when Rion returned to them, three other panthers in his wake.

'Thank you, friend,' Bleak said quietly.

Casimir and Daleren were to lead the distraction and so Bleak, Sahara, Jaida and the panthers followed the Ashai leader's directions and headed to the north end of the village. Kyden, Fletch and Geraad positioned themselves as lookouts in the treetops.

The heavy snowfall and increasing darkness provided cover as they crept around the outskirts of the village, but not before Bleak heard the voices.

*Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.* It was the chanting of a dozen people or more. Both aloud and inside their minds. The rhythm of it hypnotic.

*Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.*

A breath of fear sent a shiver up Bleak's spine. 'Faster, Sahara,' she urged.

From their position on the ridge, they spotted a blazing campfire, its black smoke churning up into the frosty air. Villagers were crowded around it, some brandishing red-hot pokers. Bleak squinted, her stomach lurching in horror. They were branding each other, their cries of pain drowned out by the incessant chanting.

*Gods, what madness lies here?* Bleak thought as she stuck close to Rion, following Sahara down through the undergrowth towards the stores. She stopped in her tracks, colour in the snow catching her eye.

'Sahara,' she hissed.

The Valian whirled around, following Bleak's pointed finger, to where dots of crimson blemished the snow. It wasn't blood. The same red blooms with black centres that flowered in Freyhill and Westerfort now grew in a thin trail along the tree line, opening before their very eyes.

'Do you know what they mean?' Sahara asked quietly.

Bleak shook her head. 'Nothing good.'

'Agreed. Let's go. *Quickly.*'

Bleak's stomach lurched as they moved through the snow. If there were Havennesse sled dogs about, surely they'd smell the strangers in their midst? Sahara seemed to have the same concern. She picked up a stone and launched it as hard as she could in the opposite direction to where they were. Sure enough, three large dogs came bolting out of a hidden pen.



‘Is that it, do you think?’ Bleak asked in a whisper.

‘I hope so,’ Sahara said, edging towards the clearing.

The two women shot out from the woods and raced towards the barn Casimir had indicated.

‘How are there no guards?’ Bleak hissed as they pressed their backs up against the large sliding doors. ‘Last time ...’

‘Last time you didn’t have four teerah panthers guarding your back,’ Sahara offered.

Wincing at the loud groan of the massive doors sliding across their tracks, Sahara ducked into the barn, with Bleak not far behind her. The moonlight streamed through, illuminating two solid sleds, and sacks of rice and grain.

‘So far, so good,’ Sahara said, wrenching the dusty harnesses from the ground and sizing up Rion. She turned to Bleak. ‘What do you think?’

Bleak’s heart was in her throat. She took the harness from Sahara and examined it, making sure there were no hidden cruelties in the contraption. She’d seen enough of man’s treatment of animals to know that many preferred to master with pain rather than kindness. She saw no such devices here, and tentatively held it out to Rion, the gesture a question in itself. Rion stepped forward and sniffed it.

The sack of rice thudded as Sahara stacked it atop one of the sleds, alongside a pile of thick, woollen blankets. ‘Sorry, Bleak, time’s up. We can’t linger.’

As if he understood, Rion lowered himself, allowing Bleak to strap the harness around his chest.

‘Shit,’ she said. ‘Too small. Fuck, why didn’t I think —’

‘Bleak —’

‘Rope. Is there rope?’

There was. Sahara handed her a length of it and Bleak found solace in the knots she worked around Rion and the others. There was rhythm to her madness as she threaded the length between her fingers and looped it around the sled.

A shout sounded from outside, spurring them into action. Bleak and Sahara jumped onto the back of each sled and the teerah panthers needed no further instruction. The sleds lurched forward. A group of villagers was sprinting towards them from the south face of the camp, some still brandishing glowing pokers.

Sahara swore over the hiss of the snow beneath the sled's runner.

'We can outrun them,' Bleak yelled as the sleds shot into the cover of the woods.

In the near distance, dogs barked, and Bleak glanced back to see a pack of three in hot pursuit, their legs a blur as they pummelled through the fresh snow. Bleak clung to the sled for dear life; the whole structure was tipping from side to side as the panthers wove in between the looming trees. The icy wind roared in Bleak's ears as they sped through the woods. There was no time to think, no time to panic, all she could do was hold on, and trust in Rion's sight and agility. The barks of the dogs became fainter; the panthers had gained ground.

'We'll circle back to the cave and get the others,' Sahara said, pulling up alongside Bleak.

Bleak merely nodded and focused on the crisp, white path ahead.

Casimir and the rebels were waiting at the entrance to the cave, looking a tad more dishevelled than they had a few hours earlier. Geraad was sporting a blooming black eye, an eyebrow raised in apprehension at the sight of the roped panthers. Sahara handed out more blankets to everyone.

'These will have to do until we reach Wildenhaven. There wasn't time to look for waxed boots and coats.'

Casimir nodded. 'It didn't go to plan.'

'I gathered.' Sahara nodded to Geraad's black eye.

They said no more as they layered up with more blankets and packed their supplies onto the sleds.

'Bleak and I will take the lead,' Casimir said, stepping onto Bleak's sled.

She shifted uneasily beside him, biting her tongue to stop herself from objecting. It made sense. Rion was the pride leader, and she was Rion's tie to the group. Casimir apparently knew where they were headed. Thankfully, Fletch stepped onto the sled with them as well.

'Best if I stay with this lot, right, Bleak?' Sahara said, motioning to the teerah panthers whose lead she held.

'Probably,' Bleak admitted. She knew next to nothing about teerah panthers, but she imagined keeping their handlers to a minimum would be sensible. The rest of the pride would follow behind. 'Where to?' she said, turning to Casimir.

'North,' he replied.

THE JOURNEY NORTH was punctuated by blistering gales that sent snow-filled winds whipping across the mountains, and the sight of crystal-covered forests, silver icicles hanging from dark, barren branches. As the teerah panthers powered through the snow, Bleak marvelled at the foreign surroundings, so vastly different from the warm sea breezes and sandy marinas she was used to.

They sledged through a deep gully, between several immense mountains, their jagged peaks no longer visible from the ground. Bleak's heart pounded, remembering Casimir's words about snowslides, but soon, the view surpassed all notions of fear, and simply took her breath away. The utter desolation was beautiful. Fiercer and more perilous than the sea, the expanse of glaring white stretched on, never-ending.

*I wish Bren could see this,* Bleak thought, forgetting the burn of cold against her skin for a moment. She and Bren had seen many things together out on the open water, but this ... This was something else. Not everyone in the realm had the chance to see something like this, and in that moment, she desperately wanted Bren by her side. Maybe, just maybe, if they survived what was to come, she'd bring him here. Somehow.

Casimir's hand on her wrist jolted her from her thoughts. He motioned for them to stop. Brow furrowed, Bleak tugged on the rope of the harness ever so gently, and Casimir held up his hand for the others behind them to do the same.

'What is it?' she said, her hot breath turning to clouds.

'See for yourself.'

Bleak followed Casimir's gaze out onto the plains of white before them. In the near distance, the surface of the ground changed. A sheet of glass covered the gully: a frozen river.

'Gods,' Bleak breathed. 'Can we cross it?'

Casimir tucked his hands under his arms and looked from Bleak to Sahara, who had greeted them with a shrug of confusion. 'I don't like to, not with this many of us, and the rest of the pride behind us.'

Bleak looked to the treacherous ascents of the mountains either side of the gully. 'We can't possibly ...'

'No,' Casimir agreed. 'We can't.'

‘Well, I prefer not to stand idle out in the open like this,’ Sahara cut in, glancing around, ever the Valian.

‘We need to rest in any case. The panthers are tiring,’ Bleak said, noting Rion’s lolling tongue.

Sahara nodded. ‘We’ll rest at the foothills over there. But we need to make quick decisions, or we’ll freeze. This climate is unforgiving.’

Bleak’s limbs were heavier than before, and once they stopped moving, the fatigue hit her in a rolling wave, making her eyelids heavy, her breathing more laboured. The others were similarly affected, and they moved with a sluggishness that hadn’t been there before.

‘It’s the cold,’ Sahara told her as they released Rion and his companions. ‘It saps the energy from you, little by little.’

‘Then we can’t stay long.’

‘Not long, no. But we need to find a safe passage for us before we continue. Casimir and I will scout the foothills. You stay here with the others. Huddle together.’ Sahara hoisted her blanket tighter around her shoulders and set off at a jog with Casimir.

They did as Sahara bid, forming a tight circle around one of the sleds and huddling together for warmth. Bleak realised she’d stopped shivering, and wondered if it was a bad sign. Geraad’s face had a grey tinge and his breathing was slow and shallow.

*Gods, what if we die out here?* Bleak thought. *No one will ever find us*  
...

The sound of a dog’s bark echoed between the mountains. Bleak jumped. The others around her were suddenly alert as well. Another bark. Bleak scanned the snow, seeing nothing, but Rion was on his haunches, hackles raised, ready to strike.

The crunch of snow beneath a sled’s runner, and then – a spray of white across them all. Bleak recovered, and held up her hand to stop Rion from pouncing. The rebels drew their weapons.

‘So it’s true,’ said a muffled feminine voice. A girl covered from head to toe in thick palma furs jumped down from her sled. The large dogs at the lead stood as still as statues, watching their master approach the group. The girl untucked the scarf around the lower half of her face, her eyes going wide at the sight of Rion.

‘Bleak!’ cried Sahara’s voice. The Valian and Casimir were running towards them, sliding down the steep slopes of the foothills.

Sahara skidded to a halt, sword drawn, forcing herself between Bleak and the stranger.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded.

The girl took another step towards them. ‘I’m Mariette,’ she said. ‘Queen Eydis sent me.’

‘Eydis?’ Sahara breathed, her mouth hanging open.

Mariette nodded. ‘A few more hours out here and you’re dead. So I suggest you come with me.’

## CHAPTER 22

Up in the stands of the Havennesse training arena, Henri braced herself against the icy winds. Below, Queen Eydis' soldiers went through drill after drill, and Henri realised with increasing dread that their skills were far from Valian standards.

'We can only hope that King Arden and Ines' forces are just as mediocre,' Athene said beside her, grimacing as she too surveyed the winter warriors in action.

Henri clenched her jaw. She was never one to pin her chances on hope.

Tilly looked up from the piece of wood she was carving. 'Nicolai's decent.'

She was right. The queen's lover carried himself well on the field.

'Feels like a lifetime ago that was us,' Petra said.

'That was never us.' Athene laughed.

'No,' Petra agreed. 'But you know what I mean.'

Henri did. Despite the physical exhaustion, the injuries and the seemingly brutal nature of Valian training, they were simpler times back then. They had had *fun*. Henri sighed heavily. She missed Valia, her city among the treetops. She missed the whisper of magic from her ancestors, the thrum of their power pulsing through the living bridges. But it would do no good to ponder lost loves now.

'We should quit stalling,' she said.

Her kindred murmured their begrudging agreement and they descended to the floor of the arena to split up. The Havennesse soldiers hesitated as the Valians began to weave through their groups. Living legends walked among them, and they did nothing to hide their awe or their whispers.

*‘That’s Henrietta Valia ...’*

Henri pretended not to hear.

‘Stop gawking. Back to it,’ Nicolai bellowed from the other side of the grounds.

The soldiers jumped back into action, and Henri felt a surge of relief as the attention was diverted away from her. She surveyed the groups again. There weren’t many women, she noted. Though this was common in the armies outside of Valia. On most continents, women were deemed the lesser sex, weaker and more vulnerable – a liability on the battlefield, on war councils and in leadership. Thankfully, Eydis did things differently. Every Havennessen native received formal military training until the age of twenty-one, then, it was up to them if they joined the royal forces or not, man or woman. And no one was ever put in the front lines against their will.

Henri approached a trio of soldiers, two teenage boys and a girl. Their style of fighting was different from the rest. Scrappier, less disciplined. They reminded her of Bleak and her bar fighting. They hesitated as they noticed Henri’s gaze lingering on them.

‘Is there something we can improve on, my lady?’ the girl ventured, bowing her head in respect.

One of the boys beside her elbowed her in the ribs, flushing pink.

Henri studied her. A soldier who was willing to learn was often a great asset. ‘Your grip’s wrong,’ Henri said.

‘What?’

‘Hand me that training sword.’

The girl did.

Henri palmed the wooden sword; it had been a long time since she’d fought with anything other than her katars. ‘Your hands need to be closer together.’ She showed the girl. ‘It gives you more freedom of movement with the blade.’

The girl nodded eagerly, taking back the sword. ‘Like this?’

‘Better. Though with your build, a longsword is probably not the best choice. Try a broadsword.’

‘I will. Are you going to be fighting with us, my lady?’

‘I am. So are my kindred.’

Relief shone in the girl’s eyes.

Henri made to move on, but then stopped. ‘Why are you fighting?’ she asked, glancing between the girl and her companions.

‘Our mother and father,’ she said. ‘They fell under *her* spell. They went mad, along with everyone in our village. They tried to brand us, and our baby brother. So we ran away.’

‘That’s very brave.’

‘We’re scared.’

‘Bravery is doing something *despite* being scared.’

The girl gave a small smile and palmed the sword as Henri had done.

‘Pick one of your brothers. I want to see you spar.’

‘Henri!’ someone called from the far side of the field, jogging towards her. Athene’s daughter.

‘Henri,’ she said again as she approached, clutching a piece of parchment.

‘What is it, Luka?’

‘A message from Valia.’

*Allehra*. Henri took the outstretched letter, glancing down at the unbroken Valian seal. She couldn’t read this here.

‘Tell Athene and the others to continue instructing.’

‘Of course.’

‘You stay in my place. They need all the help they can get.’

‘I’d be honoured.’

Henri gave a curt nod and strode out of the arena.

IN THE PRIVACY and warmth of Eydis’ study, Henri paced before the fire. She clutched the unopened letter in her hands, willing herself to break the seal. Willing herself to find the strength to read whatever news it held.

When she and Sahara were little, they used to play a game when they were scared. Like when Sahara had to jump from a high ledge, or when Henri had to spar with an older, more experienced Valian. And most of all, when *Allehra* was angry with them.

*Simuliah*? One would ask the other. An ancient word from the long-forgotten Valian tongue.

*Etiam*. *Simuliah*. Yes. Together.

She was on her own now. Henri ran her fingers across the forest-green wax seal, a single Valian tree stamped into it. Holding her breath, she sliced the letter open with her katar and unfolded the parchment. A stranger’s wide, looping handwriting greeted her.



*Your Majesty,*

*My name is Lyndis, Head of the Groundling Healers. Her Majesty, Mother Matriarch Allehra, bid me write to you.*

*By now, word will have reached you regarding your mother's condition. I am saddened to say, it has not improved. Her Majesty has many burns to her body caused by Ashai fire. These do not heal in the same way as regular burns. We need magic.*

*Her Majesty is weak, in and out of consciousness. In her more lucid hours, she talks of you. Forgive the forward nature of this next part, but I promised the Mother Matriarch I would relay her words to you:*

*Name an heir. Do so before I die. There must always be an heir. It is the Valian Way.*

HENRI'S HEART caught in her throat. *An heir.* She sank into one of Eydis' armchairs. She had always known this day would come. But not now. Allehra ... Allehra was still so *young* by Valian standards. She had been younger than Henri was now when she'd had Sahara and Henri. Back then, she'd been fierce and unflinching. Harder on her daughters than any instructor. Henri pictured Allehra as she had been when she left Valia, the silver streaks in her midnight-black hair, the graceful way she moved. Her mother, swallowed by her own fire.

*Until we meet again.* The words rang clear in Henri's mind, along with the note of sadness that laced them.

The door burst open.

'Henri,' Eydis barked. 'Your kindred are riling up my soldiers to no end.'

Henri tucked the parchment into her leathers. 'Docile soldiers don't win battles,' she said. 'They need to know *why* they're fighting. They need to feel *passion*. Especially when they are as ... inexperienced ... as yours.'

But Eydis hadn't missed her move to hide the letter.

'What is it?' she asked.

Henri met her friend's eyes. 'Allehra. She's not improving.'

Eydis sat down in the other chair and waited.

‘She ... She wants me to name an heir.’

Eydis’ face flooded with understanding. ‘I see.’

‘I don’t know what to do ...’

‘Did you have someone in mind?’

‘The natural choice has always been Luka ...’

‘Athene’s daughter?’

Henri nodded.

‘But ...?’

‘But I don’t know. It doesn’t ... feel right. And you cannot unname an heir once it’s done.’

Eydis reached across and gripped Henri’s forearm. ‘This is not a decision to be made hastily, my friend. You have time.’

‘You’ve seen it?’

Eydis fell quiet.

‘Eydis, if you’ve seen it, I need to know.’

She was interrupted by the long, loud blast of a battle horn outside.

‘What in the ...?’

It sounded again.

Nicolai appeared at the doors, gasping for breath, hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘Intruders,’ he panted. ‘From the south. Ten minutes out. Maybe less.’

Eydis was already on her feet. ‘To the gatehouse.’

## CHAPTER 23

A battle horn blasted, and Bleak winced at the horrid sound. Loud, insistent and ominous. She had no idea what awaited them in the capital of the ice continent, but battle horns weren't a promising start. Prowling beside her, Rion growled at the unwelcome noise, his maw set in a fang-bearing snarl. The rest of his pride stalked behind them, unsettled, their ears pricked and hackles raised.

Bleak hadn't thought she could get any colder, but as Mariette led them through an ice tunnel into the heart of Wildenhaven, Bleak knew she'd been wrong. The bitter chill settled in her lungs, so that breathing felt like it would strip the flesh from her insides. Casimir trudged beside her in silence, arms wrapped tightly around himself, his gaze focused on the slippery path before them.

The horn blasted again and Mariette swore under her breath. 'Damn fools,' she muttered.

'I thought you said Eydis knew we were coming?' Sahara said.

'She foresaw your arrival, yes. But the queen rarely shares her visions with the entire household.'

Bleak noticed Casimir hanging on every word. She looked away as he turned towards her gaze.

Ignoring the sound of the horn and shouts from within, they reached a formidable gatehouse. It matched the three towers looming beyond: built with great slabs of thick, grey stone, coated with crystal icicles as sharp as daggers.

The soft tap of arrows being nocked and the smooth creak of bows being drawn sounded from above. Bleak didn't have to glance up to know

that archers were in position.

Rion growled.

‘Who goes there?’ boomed a deep voice atop the wall.

There was hesitation within their group. The roles of leadership had been blurred long ago. Casimir pointedly stayed at the back, and finally, it was Sahara who stepped forward. Bleak noted the tremor in the Valian’s hand as she tucked her cropped hair behind her ear.

‘Sahara of the Valian kindred,’ she called back. ‘Daughter of Mother Matriarch Allehra, sister of Her Majesty, Henrietta of Valia. And Bleak, of Angove.’

The buzzing of thoughts from the other side smashed into Bleak like a ship upon jagged rocks. She staggered under the weight of them, fighting the disbelief, the questions, the internal arguments of others. A firm hand gripped her elbow and held her upright. Grateful, she leaned into the support, but gasped as a bolt of raw power barrelled into her. *Casimir*.

‘What is that?’ she said under her breath, not daring to look at him.

‘A connection,’ he replied softly. ‘One was forged between you, Ermias and me when we were younger.’

‘How do you —’

‘Sahara of Valia is dead,’ the gatekeeper yelled over the wind.

‘And yet she stands before you,’ Mariette snapped, her dogs growing restless. ‘Let us through. Queen Eydis expects us.’

They were met with silence. Sahara turned to Mariette, who busied herself releasing the canines from their harnesses.

‘What of the ... other beasts?’ The voice faltered at the sight of Rion and the panthers.

Bleak pulled away from Casimir and moved towards her pride. ‘They stay with me,’ she said.

Mariette shot her an incredulous look, but Sahara shrugged. ‘The panthers remain with us. They will do no harm.’

There was silence again as the gatekeeper conferred with his superiors.

Bleak focused on Rion, trying not to get lost in the mind whispers.

‘For pity’s sake, Ronan,’ Mariette shouted. ‘Would you have our guests die of exposure? Open the damn gate.’

The rattle of chains sounded, and there was a loud groan as the gates swung inward.

Bleak heard the intake of breath from around her. At the foot of the middle tower, a complete guard and a pack of enormous dogs surrounded a woman who could only be the Queen of Havenness. Billowing white furs were draped around her shoulders, her high cheekbones tipped with pink, and her thick caramel hair braided and piled atop her head.

Bleak's eyes slid to the figure who stood gaping next to Queen Eydis.

Henrietta of Valia, clad in her forest-green leathers, katars strapped at her thighs, stepped forward.

'Sahara?' she breathed, her gaze solely on her twin.

Two pairs of green-flecked graphite eyes met.

'Hello, Henri.'

No one spoke as the sisters closed the gap between them. The crunch of fresh snow beneath their boots was the only sound as they took each slow, tentative step.

Henri stared at her sister, as though she didn't believe who was before her very eyes. Her gaze flickered from Sahara's filthy pants and tunic, to the crimson cape that fluttered at her back.

Bleak watched as the Valian queen fought with herself, hands twitching at her sides. Then, Henri's face hardened, and Bleak felt the thrum of power pulse outward, sending snow spraying over the outsiders.

Henri lunged at Sahara.

Not for an embrace. But for her sister's throat.

Sahara stepped aside, sending Henri staggering into the snow. Dusting herself off, Henri lunged again. The rest of the realm had clearly faded away. Her eyes were ablaze with hurt and rage.

Behind the sisters, Eydis' guards lurched forward, but the queen raised her hand, halting them.

Bleak had never seen Henri look so ... out of control. She could feel the intensity of the Valian's magic singing, and Bleak's own magic pulsed in response. From the look on Casimir's face, he was experiencing the same thing.

The scrape of steel sounded, and Bleak sucked in a breath as Henri drew her katars, the polished blades gleaming in the sun's glare. Bleak could have sworn she heard a soft laugh escape Sahara as she unsheathed the sword from her back.

The first impact of steel echoed between the three towers and reverberated through the snow.

Henri advanced, katars gleaming. She struck, and Sahara blocked. She lunged again and her twin parried, striking back with equal force, equal strength. The sisters became a blur as they pivoted through the snow, their dance violent and chaotic.

Blood spattered across the crisp white snow. Sahara's.

Henri swung again, and again, pausing only to send her fist flying at Sahara's face. Sahara spat red and wiped her split lip with the back of her hand.

'That all you've got?' she said, taking up her stance and grinning with bloodied teeth.

Henri clenched her jaw and charged, katars slicing through the icy air, hurtling towards Sahara. Sahara blocked each strike, and then whirled, her boot connecting with her sister's chest. Henri was slammed into the snow.

Sahara pinned her down, sword at her twin's throat.

Bleak gaped, heart thudding against her sternum. Henri was the best warrior she'd ever seen. And Sahara ...

Sahara was better.

Henri stared up at her sister, eyes wide, as though realising the same thing.

'But ... you can't fight ...'

'*Wouldn't*,' said Sahara. 'I *wouldn't* fight. There's a difference, Henri. You always knew that.'

Sahara withdrew her blade from where it pressed against Henri's throat and stepped back, offering her hand.

Bleak watched on, forgetting the burn of the cold, as Henrietta of Valia considered her sister's outstretched hand, and took it.

## CHAPTER 24

Henri grasped the stranger's hand and allowed it to pull her up. The stranger who looked exactly like Sahara. The same rebellious cropped hair swinging at her jaw, the grey eyes that held a touch more green than Henri's own.

Henri stared in disbelief.

A sad smile played on the stranger's lips. 'Not happy to see me, little sister?'

The irises that mirrored Henri's shone, daring Henri to challenge her again.

Henri released the gloved hand, suddenly aware of the others around them: Eydis, Jarel, Nicolai, Mariette, half of the queen's household, Henri's own kindred ... And behind Sahara – *her*.

Bleak, the Angovian orphan, the mist dweller, the girl who had supposedly been dragged off to Moredon Tower, stood with her face flushed from the cold.

Henri made to step towards her, but a low growl sounded from nearby. The cold air whistled between her teeth as she laid eyes on what could only be a teerah panther. The beast's silvery-black coat was littered with scars, its hot breath fogging before its long fangs.

Bleak dismissed the beast with a wave, and approached Henri, her boots crunching over the blood-spattered snow. The girl's odd eyes met hers.

'How?' Henri managed.

Bleak pushed the hair back from her forehead with a sigh. 'It's a long story.'

'I hope so.'

A gentle hand touched Henri's shoulder. 'Come, my friend,' Eydis said. 'Let's allow our guests to warm up inside. Their tale can wait until their teeth stop chattering, surely?'

Henri glanced around at the strange company still waiting in the courtyard, their lips blue and torsos trembling. She gave a stiff nod and turned back to the tower.

'Is there room enough in your hall for the panthers?' Bleak called after them.

Henri's brow shot up in surprise.

Eydis considered Bleak, her gaze falling on the protective hand the girl had rested on the largest panther's side. To Henri's surprise, Eydis bowed her head, and with her furs billowing, disappeared into the hall, her entourage close behind her.

Athene gawked at Henri from the steps, then at Henri's lookalike, who stared back. The stranger's face was etched with a familiar expression: dislike. Henri jolted. Her sister had never liked Athene.

'What are we waiting for?' Bleak said dryly from beside her. 'It's gods-damned freezing out here.'

Henri felt a surge of gratitude for the second of normalcy offered.

'Didn't expect to see you again, Angovian,' she said.

'Nor I you, Valian. Every woman for herself, right?'

'Something like that ...'

The massive panther beside Bleak snarled softly and Henri couldn't hide her jump.

Bleak looked amused. 'I know,' she said to the beast. 'Let's go.'

Henri made to follow them, but a gloved hand gripped her arm.

'Henri.' The woman's eyes were bright, her cropped dark hair swinging loose at her chin. 'Henri, please.'

Bleak paused on the steps, as though unsure whether or not she should leave the pair alone. She glanced not at Henri, but to the other, waiting. The stranger gave Bleak a nod, and with a shrug, the Angovian left them.

Henri looked from the gloved hand on her forearm to the face that mirrored her own. She so desperately wanted it to be true.

Her magic hummed. It pulsed outward, exploring. As her power lingered on the hand that held her, it flickered, as though suddenly sensing the woman's forgotten but familiar energy.

'Is it ... Is it really you?'



The woman squeezed her arm. 'It is. But I wouldn't blame you if you didn't believe me.'

'I ...' It was the first time in a long while that Henri was lost for words. Fear gripped her chest so tightly she thought it might burst, but something else rippled within her as well ... *Hope*.

'Come, Henri. I will tell you everything when we have time alone. But for now, our duties await us.'

Henri found herself nodding, not wanting ... not wanting *Sahara* to release her arm. The touch was steady, reassuring. But a moment later, it was gone.

Inside the hall was a sight to behold. Bleak and four panthers were to one side, taking up almost a third of the space. The beasts lounged lazily on their stomachs, clearly content to be out of the bitter cold, while the rest of their pride had stalked away to the nearby woods. Bleak sat on the floor, with her back resting against the largest panther. The Wildenhaven household gave them a wide berth, but the Angovian looked happy enough to stay with the beasts. As Henri went to her elite kindred standing alert at the foot of the dais, she took in the rest of the newcomers. A smallish group. Most bore expressions of bewilderment, as though they couldn't quite believe they'd made it here. And then there was someone else, a tall, thin man who was both part of their entourage, and not. He stood just a fraction further away from the rest, enough for Henri to know that he was *other*. His gaze swept the hall with intensity, eventually meeting hers. She stared back. She didn't know him, but her magic ... Her magic did.

'It has been a long time since Wildenhaven has had this many visitors,' Queen Eydis said from her throne, her eyes taking in her crowded hall. 'I welcome you all. I know some of you have travelled a great distance, and are in much need of rest.'

Henri noted the additional guards at the doors.

'But we are at war. And we need to know whom we can trust. I want only the close guard of each party to remain. Henri – your elites may stay. Jarel, Nicolai, Mariette, you're to stay as well. The rest of you, leave us. There are matters to discuss.'

Murmurs broke out as a number of people left the hall, but Eydis raised her hand. Those remaining fell silent.

'Sahara.'

Henri jerked at the name. She hadn't heard her sister addressed in over a decade. Her name was spoken aloud so rarely that Henri had almost forgotten what it sounded like.

Athene, who now stood beside Henri, searched her face, concerned. Henri shook her head slightly, and returned her attention to Eydis.

'Sahara,' Eydis said again. 'You have risen from the dead, it seems. I'm sure I'm not the only one who wishes to know how you've come to stand here in my halls after all this time ... I suggest everyone gets comfortable. I want the long version of this tale,' Eydis said, returning to her throne, with Bear curled up at her feet.

Everyone was staring at Sahara. She looked weary as she moved to the front of the hall.

Henri looked down to find her hands trembling. This was her *sister*. Her sister who had always hated formalities, hated being the centre of attention, someone who had said she wasn't born to lead ... Yet now she stood before them all, chin raised high.

Henri exhaled a shaky breath, and she felt Athene's hand slide into hers. She looked at their entwined fingers. She should pull away. She wasn't ready for questions about them, for their relationship to become public knowledge. But she didn't. She *needed* Athene, needed her touch, her support. She was *finally* going to hear Sahara's story, and she wasn't sure she could handle it without her friend, her lover, by her side. So she squeezed Athene's hand, and held it tight.

She saw Sahara note their touch, before she turned to the crowd.

'My name is Sahara of Valia, first-born daughter of Mother Matriarch Allehra of Valia, and twin sister to Her Majesty, Matriarch and Queen, Henrietta of Valia.'

Henri held her breath as her sister listed their titles, and for the first time in her adult life, wished her mother was here to see it.

'Ten years ago,' Sahara continued, 'I walked into the mist that borders the southern beaches of Felder's Bay and the south-eastern forests of Valia.'

Soft gasps of shock sounded around the room. No one had ever known the truth behind Sahara Valia's death. Rumours of illness, of disappearance had swarmed like a firestorm across the realm, but this ... To hear the words from her own mouth ...

'It was my intention to take my own life.' Sahara's voice echoed, but she did not falter. 'I didn't believe I belonged with my people. I didn't

believe I belonged anywhere. I didn't want to do Valia a disservice by becoming an unfit ruler, and so I did the only honourable thing I could think of. I gave them a better ruler. The best.' She looked at Henri.

She turned back to Eydis. 'There was something about the mist that called to me. And it did so long before I stood at its mouth. I was plagued by a name. It was in my dreams, I found it constantly at the tip of my tongue. I carved it into the ancient trees, onto stones ...'

Henri's stomach lurched. *Oremere*. She remembered Sahara's constant scratching at any surface, carving what she had then thought was a lover's name into the bark.

'Oremere,' Sahara said aloud, bringing Henri back from her reverie. 'The land – the continent – that lies beyond the mist.'

Henri glanced over at Bleak. The Angovian wasn't paying any attention. She had heard it before, it seemed. Instead, the girl was sitting slumped against her panther, legs stretched out before her, crossed at the ankle. She was transfixed on the length of rope in her hands as she looped a knot, unravelled it and looped it again.

'I stumbled through the mist for what felt like hours, sometimes days ... I was waiting for the pain to begin, I was waiting to die. But I didn't. And I began to realise that I wasn't going to. The whispers of "Oremere" had stopped, and by some baser instinct, I knew that was what this place was. I was filled with panic and regret at what I had done. I needed to go back, back to Valia to tell my family, my people. But the mist has a mind of its own. Once I was inside, I was trapped. I couldn't find my way back to Valia. For a year I wandered alone, questioning if what I saw and heard was real, or if the mist was driving me to madness. The outskirts of the mist are thick and heavy, you can barely see, but deeper into the land, they recede, revealing lands, ruined fortresses, empty villages, empty paddocks. There were animals running free among it all, crops overgrown and flourishing.'

The hall was completely silent. The weight of Sahara's words hung heavy around them all. Oremere was real. And what was more, it wasn't a wasteland.

'You wandered for a year? Alone?' Eydis prompted, hands gripping the arms of her throne, Bear stirring at her feet.

Sahara nodded. 'I lived off the land. We Valians are taught to survive from a very young age. A few months into my journey, I discovered a ruined fortress called Westerfort. Mainly rubble and abandoned watch

towers, covered in thousands of peculiar red flowers. But there was no one there, and I set up camp there in an old cellar. I filled my days with charting the land. Were I to find my way out, I wanted as much information to show my people as possible. Every day there were sounds coming from the north-east. I discovered later that these were the roars of the teerah panthers.’ She nodded towards Bleak and the beasts.

Bleak visibly stiffened at the mention, and laid a comforting hand on the largest panther’s paw. Not for the first time, Henri wondered what in the realm had come to pass that had connected the Angovian to the legendary cats, and what the strange girl had done to have them tamed to her command.

‘I followed the sound,’ Sahara was saying. ‘Finally, I came upon something – a sea of flowers, the same red blooms from Westerfort. And beyond it, a city, sprawling behind thick stone walls and a moat. The capital of Oremere, Freyhill.’

Henri didn’t miss Bleak’s flinch from across the room, nor did she miss the strange man from Sahara’s clan cross the hall and slide down beside the Angovian, ignoring the soft snarl of the panther. Bleak didn’t look at him, and he said nothing; he only drew his knees up to his chest, resting his arms atop, and waited for Sahara to continue.

‘There is a self-proclaimed queen beyond the mist. Ines. And Freyhill is her stronghold. She has an army of masked guards, and until recently, she had a pit filled with vicious teerah panthers —’

‘You have numbers? You have maps?’ Eydis interjected.

‘We do, Your Majesty.’ Sahara bowed her head. ‘Geraad and Kyden were part of a group that ran an underground organisation, just south of Westerfort. We call it the hub. They took me there, fed me, clothed me, and told me everything that they had learned. I joined their cause. Over the years we scouted the lands, we gathered information. We visited the surviving colonies and pockets of society that remained underground in Oremere, in hiding from Ines. And we heard rumours ...’

Dozens of questions loomed between the hall and Henri’s sister.

‘How does Bleak come into it?’ Henri found her voice, gesturing to the Angovian who sat immersed in her knots, not even looking up at the mention of her name.

‘Bleak?’ Sahara called, and damn her, the girl looked up. ‘Do you want to tell your own tale?’

Bleak turned from Sahara to the crowd, and then back to Sahara. She shook her head and returned to her rope.

‘Very well ...’ Sahara went on to explain how Bleak had washed up on the shores and ended up in their company. ‘At rebel headquarters, we told her what we’d discovered about Ines, and the prisoner she had locked away. A very valuable prisoner. Someone who could potentially change the tide of things to come ... Does the name *Casimir* mean anything to you?’

‘Casimir is dead,’ Eydis said sharply.

‘You’ve been misinformed,’ said a deep voice. The man who sat beside Bleak now stood and walked towards the dais. ‘I am Casimir. And like your Valian friend here, you can see for yourself: I’m not dead.’

The scrape of steel sounded. Jarel, Nicolai and Eydis’ guards drew their swords and surrounded the unarmed man. The man showed no signs of surprise; even at swordpoint, he was calm.

‘Who are you?’ Eydis demanded.

‘You know who I am, Your Majesty. You have seen it. The Valian matriarch over there,’ he gestured vaguely to Henri, ‘can feel it. I am Casimir.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘But you do.’

At Eydis’ feet, Bear began to growl, his hackles raised.

‘Eydis,’ Sahara intervened. ‘If I may?’

Queen Eydis nodded stiffly.

‘He is who he says he is. He was Ines’ prisoner. Held captive for many years. He has his own story to tell ... But I ask that you lower your weapons. He has been through enough.’

‘I don’t need your pity,’ Casimir said quietly.

‘Nor will you have it,’ Sahara snapped. ‘But you are part of my clan, for now. I vouch for you, and I will have you treated with respect.’

Henri gaped. She had never heard her sister sound like that – like a leader, like someone who was used to being followed, being respected and feared. Athene squeezed her hand again. This time, Henri’s fingers lay limp in hers.

Queen Eydis nodded once to Nicolai, and he and the guards withdrew their weapons. The scrape of swords being sheathed sounded, but Jarel hesitated, glaring at Casimir with distrust.

‘Jarel,’ Nicolai said. ‘Stand down.’

‘But we —’

‘Jarel. I won’t say it again.’

Jarel seemed to remember himself, and reluctantly withdrew his sword.

Casimir remained still, his hands clasped calmly before him. ‘They rescued me,’ he said, motioning towards Sahara and Geraad. ‘We would not have made it out alive, were it not for Bleak and her beasts. We are here because of her, and her panthers.’

Something swelled deep within Henri’s chest, something she didn’t feel very often: gratitude. She took a deep breath and thanked Rheyah that she had saved Bleak in the Hawthorne Ranges all those months ago. Bleak, the drunken Angovian orphan, the girl Allehra had called *mist dweller*, had brought her sister back to her.

Eydis stood. ‘We have heard enough for now,’ she said, her voice projecting to the far corners of the hall. ‘Food will be brought presently, while the servants make up rooms for you all.’

Then, Eydis sashayed down the steps of the dais and stopped before Bleak.

‘I do not know who you are yet, child,’ she said to the odd-eyed girl. ‘But thanks are in order. A large room will be made up for you and the beasts. I imagine you do not want to be separated.’ She glanced down at Bear, who wagged his tail beside her. ‘I have a similar attachment to my own. I’ve already sent word to the castle butcher to send up some meat for them.’

‘Thank you,’ Bleak replied.

‘Henri, Sahara,’ Eydis called. ‘I suspect you two will need to talk in private. Follow me.’

Athene gripped Henri’s hand, but Henri left her. No matter what had come to pass between her and Athene, she needed to speak with her sister alone.

Eydis left them in one of her private studies without another word. Henri moved closer to the fire, unsure of the whirlpool of emotions that now churned in her gut. There were so many unsaid things between them, so much anger, and ten years of grief, raw and unwavering still. She gazed at the flames, not turning when she heard Sahara’s footsteps close the gap between them. How had this happened? How could she move past it? She exhaled a shaky breath, feeling as though something was blocking the air to her lungs.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sahara said.

The words hung between them, and the silence that followed only added fuel to Henri’s rage.

Her strike was a reflex, the back of her hand colliding with the side of Sahara’s face. Sahara staggered.

‘You’re sorry?’ Henri spat, advancing. ‘You’re *sorry*?! How dare you. How dare you come back, a decade later, and utter those words to me. *How dare you.*’

‘Henri, I know you’re upset —’

Tears of fury burned Henri’s eyes, but she didn’t stop. ‘Ten years, Sahara. For *ten fucking years* you left me *alone*. Forced me into a position I never wanted.’

‘And you think I wanted it? You think I asked to be born first? That I wanted to rule a territory steeped in traditions I didn’t agree with?’

‘I don’t care,’ Henri ground out. ‘That was the hand you were dealt by the gods, and you cheated it.’

‘*Cheated* it?’ Sahara’s voice rose to match Henri’s. ‘You think I chose an *easier* option, is that it?’

Henri couldn’t believe what she was hearing. ‘Do you know what it was like for me? Do you know what it *did to me*? Do you have any idea —’

‘Of course I do,’ Sahara snapped. ‘You think I don’t know what it’s like to be alone? Do you think it was easier for me, without you by my side?’

‘You had a choice.’

‘I did. And I couldn’t take it back. I know we cannot undo ten years of grief, ten years of loneliness in one night. We will never be as we were. But we can be *better*, Henri. No secrets, no lies. *We can be more.*’

There was a red welt on Sahara’s face where Henri had struck her; however, her sister’s eyes were bright with passion, with hope.

‘Ten years, Sahara ...’ Henri murmured. ‘Ten gods-damned *fucking* years.’ The pain broke through the hard surface. She didn’t blink back her tears. She let them spill, falling heavy from her lashes, running in tracks down her cheeks.

And for the first time in over a decade, when Henri wept, Sahara was there to hold her.

## CHAPTER 25

*K*ing Arden was in Swinton's apartments. The Ellestian monarch glowered, his knuckles paling as he gripped the hilt of the jewelled dagger at his belt.

'Were my orders not clear enough?' he said through gritted teeth. 'Are you not capable of this one, simple task for your king?'

'Your Majes—'

'Enough! Were the consequences of inaction not made plain enough for you, Commander?'

Swinton had never seen King Arden like this, in a spiralling rage. Arden usually kept a tight leash on his emotions, choosing to shock and humiliate those who'd wronged him at a time that was most advantageous to him. Every action, every word, part of a larger strategy towards a larger goal. But now ... The king was flushed and struggled to keep his voice below a shout.

'He's like you,' he pressed. 'She *will* take him. And you'll never get him back when she does.' The king gave a hiss of pain and rubbed his temples vigorously. 'Get to the prince, Commander. The little bastard is playing both sides. We need to know where his true allegiance lies. Or your son —'

Swinton woke with a start, the tangled sheets around him damp with sweat. He looked down, gasping for air, to find himself clutching Yacinda's coin, his fingernails biting into his clammy palms.

The soft glow of sunrise streamed into his chambers.

*A dream*, he told himself. *Only a dream*. But the hammering in his chest and uneasy twisting in his gut told him otherwise. He turned the coin over in his fingers, remembering what Henri had told him months ago.



*The coin grows weak ... Its ability to shield you has started to falter, especially when your emotions run high ...*

Impossible. Swinton had doused the talisman in fresh Valian herbs before he left for Battalon. The coin was a stronger ward than ever before.

Still reeling from his dream, Swinton kicked the sheets from his legs and got out of bed. Although he had the morning off to catch up on correspondence, there was no way he'd get back to sleep now. Instead he paced, until the full light of morning gradually filled his room.

He'd received no word from the Carlingtons, and with his magic in such a bad state, Dash's fate was in the dark. Fear had a permanent grip on Swinton's heart now, the unknown as infinitely painful as any truth could be.

A mop of dark hair and a mischievous grin flashed in his mind. A blur as his son sprinted through the castle hallways, much to the displeasure of the Ellestian nobles. Swinton had always kept his distance and played his part well, but Dash was never far from his thoughts, *never*. But now ... Gods, now he was everywhere. Swinton felt the whirlpool of sorrow within him yawn, growing bigger and faster, threatening to drag him under —

A concise knock sounded at the door.

'Come in,' Swinton managed.

Kamath stepped tentatively into his rooms, a tray of food balanced on one palm. 'Commander, your breakfast.'

Swinton sighed. 'Thank you.'

'Can I do anything else for you, sir?' The squire crossed the room and placed the tray on the desk by the wall.

Swinton had long since given up correcting people that he was not, and likely never would be a 'sir'.

'Yes,' he said, ignoring Kamath's look of surprise. 'I need you to have the core Ellestian guard meet me in the gardens at noon. All of them.'

'It will be done.'

'Has the princess left her chambers yet?'

'Not to my knowledge, Commander.'

Swinton nodded. 'That will be all, then, Kamath.'

'Very good, sir.' The door clicked closed behind him.

Swinton sat at his desk, the plate of food before him utterly unappealing. With a sigh, he rested his head in his hands.

He had to brief the Ellestian guards about the council meeting, and Fi

...

*Gods, what am I going to say? Which of them can I trust?* The look of betrayal on Stefan's face yesterday had been only the beginning. Everything had a consequence and Fi's leaving would have many. Swinton's men would question why his closest friend, and their captain, had suddenly turned traitor. They would feel conflicting loyalty about divulging anything they knew, with the death sentence looming over their idealistic friend. The Battalonian soldiers would be instantly suspicious that the only Ellestian soldier they respected had vanished. There would be no trust between Swinton and any of the men, Ellestian or Battalonian, he realised. It was a terrible position to be in at the start of a war.

*War.* The word alone made his stomach churn. Not just war, but *victory*, as King Roswall had said. The Valian territory took up nearly a third of Ellest. They would war with their own people? With the might of two continents?

It wasn't a war. It was an extermination.

King Arden had tried to rid himself of the Valians once before, nearly ten years ago. The mission Swinton had endured flashed before him, his conscience still screaming at the memory. The Forest of Ghosts. That was what they called it now. The once sacred place, where on the king's orders, he'd released the mist. Where he'd saved the king from his own mistakes. An act of loyalty that could not be celebrated. The mission that was to land him a knighthood, but never did. Henri would know by now. The thought didn't sit well with him, and he knew why. The Valian matriarch knew him for what he was – not just an Ashai; that wasn't important. She knew him to be a coward, a traitor, not just to his king, but to his kind, and worst of all, to himself.

He'd been living half-truths and lies for the better part of his entire life now. And look where it had got him. He sank further into his chair. What did the war even matter, what did *anything* matter, now that Dash was gone? He pushed the tray away from him, the food untouched. Instead, he spread his palms across a fresh sheet of parchment, and glanced at his pot of ink. His fingers itched to take up his quill and hear the scratch of the nib against the parchment. But *whom* would he write to? *What* would he write? What words could express the loss of a child? The regret of not having had the courage to know him in the first place?

A KEY BEING turned in the lock of his door startled Swinton awake.

‘My apologies, Commander,’ said a familiar voice. ‘I only came to collect your tray.’

Swinton turned to see Therese standing tentatively in the doorway.

‘It’s fine,’ he said roughly, pushing stray hair from his eyes. ‘I’m afraid I dozed off ...’

‘You must have a lot on your mind, sir,’ she said, approaching the desk.

As she bent down to take his untouched tray, the scent of jasmine hit him. Subtle, sweet notes filled his nose and he forgot himself for a moment.

‘You didn’t eat anything, Commander,’ Therese was saying.

He looked up at her, realising they’d never been this close. From here, he could see the array of freckles dusting her pale skin, and the soft flyaways that had escaped her braided bun.

‘No,’ he managed. ‘I wasn’t hungry.’

‘Should I have something sent up later?’

He shook his head, standing, his eyes locking onto hers. ‘That won’t be necessary, thank you.’

She immediately dropped her gaze, and he wished she wouldn’t. *Look at me*, he wanted to yell. But they were merely more words he’d never say aloud.

Therese picked up the tray and made to leave, and Swinton forced himself to look back to the documents on the desk. As the door creaked open again, there was a loud clatter and a hushed cry. He whirled around to find Therese on her knees, scraping together spilt food and the broken plate. Crossing the room in a few short steps, he knelt beside her.

‘Commander, I’m so sorry.’

‘It was an accident, Therese,’ he said, piling the broken shards of ceramic back onto the tray. Red stained them. He looked at Therese’s hands. A long gash on her right palm seeped blood.

‘You’re hurt.’ Without thinking, he reached across and took her hand in his. Her skin was rough and raw, no doubt from all the laundry work she did. ‘We should clean this,’ he said.

‘It’s alright,’ she insisted, but her blood dripped onto the floor.

Swinton gently pulled her to her feet and led her into the bathing chamber. He filled the basin with fresh water from one of the pails and

carefully lowered her hand into it. Therese winced. Pink stained her cheeks when he glanced up at her, but she said nothing.

Swinton treated the cut with the same efficiency he used to treat his own injuries, dabbing it with alcohol. Therese didn't make a sound, only bit her lip and screwed her eyes shut against the pain.

'Sorry,' Swinton said quietly, as he patted the wound dry with a fresh towel. He found a clean strip of linen in one of the drawers, and used it as a bandage. He worked in silence, all the while incredibly aware of the warmth of her body near his, and that delicate scent of jasmine.

'Thank you,' she said, her gaze dropping to his mouth.

Without thinking, still holding her hand, he closed the gap between them with a single step, and leaned in. Her cheeks flushed pink as she lifted her face to his, her chest rising and falling fast. Swinton breathed her in, her full lips were so close to his —

'My apologies for the mess,' she stammered, gesturing to the other room. 'I'll clean it up.'

'Leave it,' he said, swallowing hard. 'I have to see the princess. I'll do it upon my return.'

He left her, before he said or did something more stupid. Hers was one of the few familiar faces left, he told himself. That was all. He was exhausted and lonely, and her presence reminded him of a simpler time, of normality. He shook his head as he left his chambers. Whatever had just awoken inside him would *not* see the light of day.

Swinton insisted on using the stairs to reach Princess Olena's rooms, rather than being confined in the strange pulley-system contraption that lowered men through a narrow shaft. Kamath handed him a handkerchief before they reached the doors, and Swinton used it to dab the sweat from his brow. He wore his battleaxes strapped heavy across his back. Declaration of war, the death of monarchs, all warranted formalities, no matter what the temperature. He pocketed the now damp piece of material; no doubt he'd have need of it again on the way back.

When he reached the royal suite, he was met with hesitancy from Stefan and the other guards. The princess hadn't made an appearance since the news of her mother's death had broken. Food had gone in and come back out untouched. The guards had been forbidden to enter, with only two lady's maids having actually set eyes on the princess recently.

‘It’s been too long,’ Swinton ground out. ‘I don’t care if she doesn’t want to see anyone. She’s in *our* care. She’s *our* responsibility. Break the gods-damned door down if you have to.’

The guards stared at him, jaws slack. Swinton’s dark hair fell over his eyes and he pushed it back, wondering if he looked as unhinged as he felt. He’d never lost his cool in front of his men, not like this.

An elegant figure appeared at his shoulder, and the guards dropped into low bows.

Prince Nazuri’s face was unreadable.

Swinton made quick work of his bow. ‘Your Highness, my apologies. I —’

‘Don’t bother, Commander,’ the prince said softly. ‘As the gods would have it, I happen to agree with you.’ He turned back to the guards. ‘What are you waiting for? The commander gave you an order.’

Swinton hid his surprise and stepped back to make room for Stefan, who had arrived with a large maul. Stefan swung the heavy weapon back and brought it crashing down into the timber, sending splinters of wood scattering. Swinton impatiently crossed his arms over his chest as Stefan swung again. He was just about to step in when Prince Nazuri snatched the maul himself, and swung the final blows to the door with the strength and precision of any skilled Battalonian warrior. The door caved in completely with a loud crack, and the prince thrust the maul back at Stefan and strode through.

Swinton started after him. As he stepped through the shattered door, the smell of powerful, sweet incense hit his nostrils. He spotted the altar, where small stone figures of the goddess Rheyah and the god Enovius stood in a small bowl of soil, the incense still burning around them. The princess was a Battalonian now, and she was expected to mourn with Battalonian customs. This altar was Ellestian. Swinton tried to position himself in front of the altar, but Prince Nazuri hadn’t noticed. Already, he had walked into the next room. It was dominated by an enormous mosaic-tiled feature wall. Reflective gold tiles stretched all the way up to the high ceiling, creating a large artwork of ... Ines. The likeness to the statue at the heart of the maze was uncanny. Swinton’s stomach churned.

‘There she is.’ The prince made for the balcony.

Swinton spotted the flutter of black fabric, and his heart leaped. *What’s she doing out there?*

‘Olena,’ said Prince Nazuri, her name sounding oddly familiar on his lips.

Swinton followed. They found the princess standing calmly on the balcony, with her hands resting on the railing, her face tilted up to the sun and her eyes closed. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat.

‘Zuri,’ she said, not opening her eyes. ‘I told you I was fine. Do I not have one scrap of privacy left? Was breaking down the door truly necessary?’

Swinton took a step back. Princess Olena ... reprimanding the Prince of Battalon? And *Zuri*? To Swinton’s further shock, he saw a smile tug at the corner of Prince Nazuri’s mouth.

‘I’m sorry,’ the prince said. ‘I was worried.’

‘Your Highness,’ Swinton found himself saying. ‘It was my doing. I had the door broken in. We were concerned for your wellbeing. I couldn’t live with myself if —’

‘Then you are both to blame,’ the princess said. At last she opened her eyes and turned to them. ‘As you can see, I am as well as can be expected. Zuri, since you sought my company so desperately, perhaps you’d accompany me to the gardens?’

‘A wise choice,’ Nazuri said, unfazed by her tone. ‘Your skin is not yet used to the blaze of the Battalonian sun.’

‘I love being outdoors,’ Olena countered, allowing the prince to take her arm. ‘My mother did as well. A shame we spend our days trapped behind walls like prisoners.’

A lump caught in Swinton’s throat as the prince led Princess Olena from the balcony.

*The poor child*, he thought, starting after them.

‘Commander?’ the princess called from the hallway.

‘Your Highness?’

‘I expect a replacement door within the hour.’

SWINTON NEEDED TO GET OUT. Needed to gather his thoughts, needed space to breathe away from the bustle of the shiprock palace. He decided to visit Xander in the outer city stables before he briefed his guards at noon.

He walked through the narrow alleys of the city, his leather jerkin in his hand and his cotton shirt unlaced. Out here, formalities didn’t matter. He

was too hot to care, as was everyone else. Sweat ran from his hairline down his neck and chest, and he dabbed at it absent-mindedly with the kerchief Kamath had given him.

In the taverns he passed, the Belbarrow natives were well into their drinking. Happy drunks clapped each other on the back and threw dice from wooden cups. Unlike the taverns he frequented in Ellest, there was no tension here; no one was poised for violence or aggression.

Now more familiar with the twists and turns of Belbarrow, Swinton easily found the route to the stables, and reached the outskirts of the capital quickly enough. He had opted to board Xander here rather than the inner-city stables simply because the air was fresher. He hated the idea of his horse being cooped up, of being walked around the beaten-down corral near the shiprock.

He breathed in the smell of fresh hay as he entered the stables and found Xander in his stall.

‘Hello, comrade,’ Swinton said softly. Xander whinnied, immediately approaching his master and nuzzling his neck. ‘I’ve missed you, too.’

Swinton slipped a bridle over Xander’s face and led him from the stables.

‘He’s already been taken around the field, Commander,’ a stablehand called after them.

Swinton waved him away. He needed the fresh air as much as Xander did. They went to the farthest unoccupied field, beginning a steady pace around the perimeter. The heat out here was different, bearable, with a cool breeze from the Bay of Gifts below soothing his flushed skin. In the fields surrounding them, stablehands exercised other mounts with care, making Swinton glad for his choice of board.

‘Psst.’

Swinton whirled around.

A teenage boy leaned against the fence. ‘Commander?’ The boy’s voice hadn’t deepened yet, but he was a Battalonian, no doubt about it. He hadn’t broken a sweat.

Swinton brought Xander to a stop. ‘Yes?’

‘I have something for you.’

‘Oh?’

The boy plucked a letter from inside his shirt and held it out.

Swinton approached him and took the parchment. 'The seal's broken,' he said.

'Yes.'

In fact, the letter looked like it had passed through the hands of not one, but *several* people before reaching Swinton. He took it from the boy. Close up, he recognised the seal imprint. He'd only seen the pattern before in Fi's room on a wall hanging – a single flame, sister to the one tattooed on Fi's forearm.

*Fi, what in the realm possessed you to contact me?* Swinton shook his head.

'Who are you?' he demanded.

'A friend.'

'A friend to whom?'

'A friend of your friend, Commander. Which makes us friends, no?'

Swinton didn't respond, but simply turned the parchment over in his hands.

'Does this need a reply?' he asked instead.

'No. My friend said you would know what to do.'

Swinton picked up his discarded jerkin and stood. 'Then safe travels.'

'Wait, sir.' The boy jumped in his path. 'My friend wished to know, are you well?'

Swinton stared at the boy. *Where in the realm did Fi find you?* The boy was a common street urchin who was willing to step in front of the commander of King Arden's army to get a response to a frivolous question? Mad. Fi and his messenger were mad.

'I am well,' Swinton finally replied evenly.

'Very good, Commander. I will tell him so.'

'Wait,' Swinton called after the boy. 'Your friend, he is well?'

'Quite well, sir.'

Swinton nodded, relief flooding through him. 'Be on your way, then, lad.'

Alone again, Swinton rested his forehead against Xander's. Answers. He finally held the answers in his hand, and now, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know them.

Xander nudged him in the chest.

'You're alright, comrade.' He took a deep breath and readied himself to read Fi's letter. Only, he realised, it wasn't Fi's letter alone ...



*My Darling Jax,*

*If you're reading this, then I'm afraid my suspicions were correct. I am likely dying, or perhaps I am already dead. For that I am sorry.*

*For weeks now, I have worried for your father. He has not been himself. For the longest time, I thought it was me – that I was unwell. He had me believe that it was, until now. I am so sorry I didn't see this sooner, Jax.*

*Your father has been poisoning my food, little by little, day by day, week by week. Maybe even month by month. I only discovered it when one of my servants broke a plate, and we saw the remaining powder that hadn't dissolved. I'm afraid my discovery was in vain, as the poison has already taken hold.*

*Your father is planning something horrendous. I do not know the details, and selfishly, a part of me is glad for that. But I do know that he must be stopped before he brings the whole kingdom to ruin.*

*Jaxon, my son, take this letter to someone you trust. And you must trust them absolutely, for misplaced trust could cost you your life. If you trust no one, look to your sister. She always had more sight in that regard than the rest of us combined.*

*Stay safe, stay true.*

*Love always,*

*Mama*

SWINTON RUBBED his eyes and read the letter again.

*This can't be ... In Queen Vera's hand.*

He turned to Fi's enclosed note.

*Dimitri,*

*Remember I said you'd have to accept who and what you are? That moment is here. This letter has the power to change the tides of a war. Make sure it finds the right hands, old friend.*

*Your brother*

*P.S. As I write this, the boy still lives.*

SWINTON SWORE, startling Xander.

*Alive? Zachary is still alive? For how much longer? Did he escape the plague? Damn Fiore and his cryptic note.*

Muttering his apologies to Xander, he led his horse back to the stables and made for the shiprock.

*'He said you'd know what to do ...'* Fi's street urchin had said.

It was clear what *Fi* thought Swinton should do. But *Fi* was a dreamer. As much as they tried, as much as they prayed, life didn't work the way they wanted.

Swinton rushed back to his chambers. There wasn't much time before he had to meet his men. He read Queen Vera's letter again and again, pacing the length of his study. He read *Fi*'s note thrice over. He recalled his dream from that very morning. Dream or not, it didn't matter. All that mattered ...

*The boy still lives ...* So long as Zachary was alive, there was something to lose. Arden had made that clear. And Swinton couldn't, *wouldn't* lose him. He went to the lamp on his desk. Hand shaking, he held the queen's letter to the flame, and watched as her words, her proof, caught ablaze.

## CHAPTER 26

The pain always stopped for a while, before it got worse. The eye in a storm of agony. Dash was in a state of such temporary reprieve, and before he even opened his eyes, he knew he was somewhere far away from home. The air was drier, hotter. It settled over his skin, leaching away any moisture his body had left. He could smell smoke. But not the comforting, homely smoke of a stove fire. Here, wherever that was, it was more intense, as though there were a thousand fires burning outside. There was a subtle chemical tang to the scent that made his eyes water as he opened them. The room had an orange glow to it, and in an armchair in the corner, slept a stranger. A man, his sharp jaw shadowed with dark stubble, his long lashes resting on the tops of high cheekbones. His shirt and pants were threadbare, his chestnut hair unkempt and his exposed, dirty feet stretched out before him. No, not a stranger ... It was the man who had spoken to Pa outside the healer's. The same gold-toothed man who'd bumped into Dash at the fabric shop.

Dash's throat was raw and dry. *Where is Mama?*

As though sensing Dash's panic, the man stirred. He opened one eye.

'You're awake.' His voice was smooth. He yawned widely and cracked his neck. 'Was wondering when you'd come back to us.'

Dash tried to speak, but all that came out was a weak, strangled sound.

'Don't talk just yet, little brother.' The man stood and went to a side table, and he handed Dash a cup of water. 'Don't go drinking that too fast. Won't agree with you,' he said.

As the liquid hit Dash's dry tongue and sore throat, he felt the instant urge to chug the whole cup. But he did as he was told, and took only a small

mouthful. He looked around the room.

There was no sign of Mama – no cloak or string bag, none of her usual jars of tea and ointment that always made an appearance when someone was ill.

‘We’re in the Janhallow Desert,’ the stranger said, following Dash’s wide eyes around the room. ‘Got a firestorm raging outside in case you hadn’t noticed.’

Dash near choked on the water.

‘Where is Mama?’ he finally managed.

‘Back in Heathton. The captain and I brought you here. But this is just a pitstop. It’s not over yet.’

*Captain? Not over?* Dash’s breaths became short and shallow, making him clutch at the front of his nightshirt. It was too hot, too tight.

‘Easy, little brother ...’ the man said, kneeling down beside him and resting a heavy hand on his shoulder. ‘Your mama wanted this. We’re trying to save you, for her.’

‘Mama ...’ Dash’s voice broke, and hot tears stung his eyes. It was too much.

‘I know,’ the man said softly. ‘It’s not been easy, has it? How about I catch you up a bit, and we’ll see if you can hold down some broth? You’ll need your strength.’

Without hesitation, he wiped the tears from Dash’s cheeks with his own shirt, his touch surprisingly gentle. When Dash’s breathing had steadied, the man got up and busied himself over at the side table.

‘They call me the Tailor,’ he said, back still to Dash. ‘Or just “Tailor” if the “the” gets too cumbersome. I live in Heathton, like you. Though, I daresay I do a fair bit more travelling.’

He returned to Dash’s bedside with a steaming bowl of broth. But Dash’s arms were weak. He could hardly move to take it.

‘Don’t fuss yourself, little brother. Here,’ Tailor said, positioning the bowl under Dash’s chin and placing a spoonful at his mouth.

Dash slurped gratefully. He didn’t know who ‘the Tailor’ was, but right now, he didn’t care. The broth was good, *really* good.

‘How —’ Pain tore at Dash’s throat and his eyes watered.

‘Did we get here?’ Tailor finished for him.

Dash nodded weakly.

‘I imagine you won’t recall a ship. And you’d be right. We didn’t come by sea ...’ Tailor’s brow furrowed as he struggled to find the right words. ‘I’m what they call a “traveller”, a kind of Ashai that can travel from place to place within moments.’

Dash wasn’t sure he was hearing Tailor properly. An Ashai? Admitting it openly?

*Does he know ... Does he know I have magic? Should I tell him?* But all at once, Dash’s eyelids were heavy. Fatigue tugged at him as the warm broth settled in his stomach.

‘Perhaps it’s a tale for another time, then?’ Tailor said quietly.

There was a knock at the door as Dash fought to keep his eyes open. He thought he saw the bulky shape of Captain Murphadias stride into the room, before exhaustion pulled him under.

The pain was back, and it racked Dash’s body with newfound abandon. He tried to scream, but he was a mute prisoner, trapped inside his own skin. His whole body seized uncontrollably, and the hot, wet warmth of urine soaked his nightshirt.

‘— think you can get both of us there, old friend?’ A faraway voice said.

Dash latched onto it. Anything to stop him thinking of the pain.

‘Yes. That’s why we came here first. I couldn’t have got us the whole way from Heathton, but it’s a shorter distance now. I can make it. How did you go with the letter?’ Tailor said in his familiar smooth tones.

‘I couldn’t get too close to Belbarrow,’ the other man said. ‘They’ve got a bounty on my head. The guards have orders to kill on sight. But I placed it in the hands of a trusted source. If it makes it to the commander in time, we’ll stop a war.’

‘Or start a different one ...’

There was a sigh. ‘Or start a different one.’

The men fell silent and a fresh wave of pain washed over Dash with such violence that he bit through his bottom lip. His mouth filled with a coppery taste, and warm blood trickled down his chin.

A thick, cool hand gripped his arm. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up, little brother,’ said Tailor.

A pair of strong arms lifted him from the wet bed. ‘Ethelda sent something for the pain ...’

HUNDREDS OF DOTS floated before Dash's face. Black dots, arranged in all sorts of patterns, on a white background. He could feel no pain; instead he was mesmerised because he *knew* what these patterns meant, deep down ... But they seemed so far away. He watched the dots change, somehow soothed by their simplicity, and yet ...

*Books for people like me – for people who can't see, Olena had said. Written in an old language called quaveer.*

Quaveer! That was it, that was what the dots were. He had been studying Olena's books, along with the alphabet she'd written him when he ...

Voices murmured around him. The same deep voices from before. The man who called himself the Tailor, and Captain Murphadias. Dash opened his eyes to a blistering brightness.

'Morning, little brother,' Tailor said, taking a pipe from his lips to smile at Dash, his gold tooth glinting.

The smile broke something inside of Dash. He couldn't move his arms or legs. He was so far from home. Despair grew tight around Dash's chest, and the familiar sting of tears filled his sore eyes.

'Am I going to die?' his voice cracked.

Captain Murphadias stepped into view. 'Not if we can help it, old friend,' he pulled the blanket up to Dash's chin. 'Not if we can help it.'

Dash didn't believe him.

*PRINCESS OLENA SAT HUNCHED over a dark oak desk. Dash could hear the scratch of the nib into the parchment. He moved closer, watching as she tucked her gold hair behind her ear with a frustrated tut. She was using a ruler to keep her puncture marks straight as she wrote in quaveer, slowly and deliberately. He peered over her shoulder. The patterns were as he'd dreamed them. He squinted at the dots, organised in neat individual cells.*

*Olena cried silently, and then, in a moment of anger, she shoved the parchment away, knocking over a nearby bottle of ink. Black rushed from the confines of the glass jar, seeping into her piece of parchment and dripping from the edge of the desk onto the floor.*

*'Olena?' said an unfamiliar voice.*

*Dash turned to see a young man dressed in finery standing in the doorway. He had to be Prince Nazuri.*

Olena stood and faced the prince, a streak of ink smeared on her cheek. The young man's face softened, and he went to her, taking Olena into his arms.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, his voice rough with emotion. 'I would not wish this upon anyone.'

'I cannot believe she's gone. That I didn't get to say goodbye. That I cannot be there with my brother —' A choked sob escaped her.

The prince held her tighter, allowing her tears to streak his pristine tunic.

Dash stepped back, shock consuming him. This was not how he'd imagined the prince to be. How he'd imagined Olena to be ...

Glass smashed behind him, making him jump.

The prince and princess whirled around, and the prince stared directly at him. No. Not at him. Somehow, Dash had knocked the inkpot from the desk. They gawked at the shattered bottle.

'How did that ...?' Olena began.

The prince frowned. 'I don't know ...'

The pair waited, as though they could feel Dash's presence. As though they knew something wasn't right.

Dash's heart hammered wildly, and he held his breath. What would happen if they discovered him? Could they discover him? Olena was now the future Queen of Battalon.

The prince turned back to Olena, finally looking at ease. He cupped her face, and wiped the streak of ink from her cheek. Dash's stomach squirmed.

'What have you been doing?' the prince said, his voice warm with affection.

'Writing a letter,' Olena said with a sigh.

'To whom?'

'To my friend in Ellest,' she said.

'The stable master's son?'

Dash jolted at the mention. The Prince of Battalon knew of him? Olena had spoken of him?

'I'm afraid I've made a mess of it,' Olena said.

The prince took her arm and led her back to the desk. 'Let's see if we can salvage it.'

DASH WAS SUDDENLY WRENCHED BACK into the present by the shock of bitter cold. He couldn't open his eyes. He couldn't move his limbs, trapped as he was within his own body. And the cold ... It was a cold that ran so deep, so icy, it burned.

He was being carried. He could hear a crunch beneath a pair of boots, and he pretended that the thud of the heart pressed against him was Pa's, and the second pair of footsteps he could hear belonged to Mama. He would see them again soon.

'Hang in there, little brother,' Tailor murmured, pulling Dash closer to his chest. 'Not much further to Wildenhaven now ...'



## CHAPTER 27

In the days that followed the rebels' arrival at Wildenhaven, the tension drove Bleak half mad. She sat in on yet another war council meeting, rubbing her aching temples as the room buzzed with the agitations and fears of twenty people. Her magic was strained, weighing her down like an anchor bound for the seabed. The threat of Ines and her forces had become a stark reality to all of them.

'We have no proof that she's taken hold of Qatrola,' Jaida said, gesturing to the map sprawled before them. 'Any reports we've received have been hearsay.'

'We *do* have proof,' Nicolai countered, his eyes dark.

'How do you —'

'*Nicolai* is our proof,' Eydis interjected. 'He was there. But he does not answer to you. You know what you need to.'

'What say you, Casimir?' Geraad asked.

The Ashai remained on the outskirts of the debates, until he was dragged in like this, the questioning utterly insensitive towards whatever he'd been through at the conqueror's hands. An ember of anger started to glow in Bleak.

'She has Qatrola,' he said quietly, forming every word with care. 'A general called Farlah holds it for her. The cousin of Langdon, whom some of you had the pleasure of meeting at Freyhill.'

Bleak's breathing hitched at the name. *Langdon*. The man who'd held her captive. The bastard who'd dragged her through every painful memory, every sorrow she'd ever felt. Her eyes caught a decanter of wine being passed down the table, the rich, red liquid sloshing inside the crystal. The

rest of the meeting muted as it got closer and closer, the thought of Langdon seeming much further away than before. She could smell the sweet, fruity aroma of it. Just as her fingers were about to close around the decanter, a leather-clad arm reached between her and Fletch, long fingers wrapping around the stem.

Without a word, Henri took away the wine.

No one noticed the Valian's movements, except Casimir. Bleak couldn't stop the crimson blush of shame that crept up her neck and across her cheeks.

'What of Qatrola's numbers, then?' Eydis asked.

'My information is likely outdated now,' Nicolai said, a note of accusation in his voice.

Queen Eydis glared. 'I will *never* send you back there. Stop holding it against me.'

Uncomfortable silence fell like a blanket across the table, forcing Bleak to forget her own embarrassment. She'd noticed a few times now that Eydis and her lover did not make a secret of their disagreements.

It was Casimir who spoke. 'Assume that the entirety of Qatrola's forces answer to Ines now. She had the regent eating out of her palm years ago ...'

'Very well,' Eydis said, gesturing at Jarel, who marked it down on the map. 'Is there anything you can tell us that might help us win, Casimir? She outnumbered us, and with the support from Heathton and Qatrola, we need an edge.'

The Ashai leader met her gaze. 'Anything that we could have used is no longer possible.'

The weight of his words fell heavily on them all.

Geraad leaned forward in his chair and surveyed the room. 'There is another matter we need to discuss.'

Bleak's stomach flipped as his eyes came to rest on her. *He knows.*

'Casimir,' he said, turning to the Ashai. 'Do you intend to take back the Oremian throne?'

The movements in the council chamber stilled.

Casimir coolly studied the rebel. 'It depends.'

'On?'

'If you remember, Geraad, Oremere was not ruled in the same way as the other continents. I was one part of a reigning force.'

‘The other parts of that particular system are gone,’ Geraad pressed, though Bleak could have sworn his eyes darted in her direction once more.

‘Like I said.’ Casimir placed his palms flat on the table. ‘It depends.’

Henri cleared her throat. ‘Let’s break for the afternoon,’ she said, crossing her arms over her chest. ‘Your army’s not going to train itself, Eydis. And we could all use some fresh air.’

Eydis gave a curt nod and gathered her skirts. She left without saying another word, with Nicolai hurrying after her.

‘You didn’t tell me,’ Sahara said from beside Bleak, ‘that you had a problem.’

So people *had* noticed.

Bleak was suddenly sapped of energy. ‘I’ve got lots of problems.’

Sahara stood, resting a hand on Bleak’s shoulder. ‘I meant what I said on the way here. If you do want to talk, I’ll listen,’ she said, before following Henri out.

Bleak didn’t return to her rooms. Instead, she layered up with borrowed palma furs and wandered outside the towers with Rion and the pride. After being locked up in Freyhill, she just couldn’t stay in one place for too long. She had to get out, breathe in the clean, cold air. And it seemed she wasn’t the only one.

Casimir paced the perimeter, hands tucked under his arms, hood pulled tight around his face against the cold.

Bleak made up her mind. She approached him.

‘Thank you,’ she said, falling in step beside him. ‘For your discretion.’

His eyes slid to hers. ‘You’re welcome, Alarise,’ he said. ‘Though, I fear your secret won’t be yours for much longer. Geraad knows. The odd eyes, the teerah panthers ... He was a young man when our reign fell, not an infant. He remembers well enough.’

‘Well, I don’t.’

‘I thought that might be the case.’

They walked in silence. A thousand questions burned through Bleak’s mind, working her terror, her yearning for the truth, into a frenzy.

‘What did you mean before? When you said, “anything that we could have used is no longer possible”?’

Casimir’s expression was grim. ‘There was an object, forged long ago, something I created in case ... In case my suspicions proved accurate.’

‘A weapon? To use against *her*?’

‘Of sorts.’

‘We have to get it.’

‘There’s no use,’ Casimir said sharply. ‘It needs a member from each Oremian ruling family to come together and wield it. An Ashdown, a Thornton and a Goldwell. All three.’

‘What? Why? Can’t we —’

‘It doesn’t matter. Ermias and the rest of the Goldwells are dead. It can’t save us now.’

Bleak went quiet beside him. Their chance to find an advantage, an edge, as Eydis had put it, had slipped away as fast as it had arrived.

‘What is it that you want, Alarise?’ Casimir said her name slowly, deliberately, so that each syllable sank into her.

Tears unexpectedly stung her eyes. Cursing herself, she blinked them back.

‘I ... I want to know who I am. Who my family was. I want to know what happened at Freyhill all that time ago.’

Casimir stared ahead.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘You’re the only one who was there. The only one who can help me.’

The Ashai leader, or prince, she supposed, looked from her odd eyes to the pride of beasts who stalked through the snow behind them.

‘What do you remember?’ he asked.

‘Running,’ she told him, picturing the iron gates, blood dripping from their spikes. ‘The mist crept into our home, under the doors, through the gaps in the windows. My parents somehow got us to Heathton. But they were taken. I managed to escape, and was taken in by —’

‘Jeramyah Bleaker.’

Bleak stopped in her tracks. ‘How do you know about Senior?’

‘Ines knew. And for a time, I knew what she knew. What do you remember from before you left Freyhill?’

‘Not much. It’s all fragmented. And even those memories ... How do I know what’s real? She ... She was in my head. For days, Casimir.’

‘Show me.’

‘What?’

‘Show me what you remember. You’re a mind whisperer, Alarise. Show me, mind to mind.’

‘I don’t know how.’

‘It’s an instinct.’ Casimir gripped Bleak’s arm, turning her to face him.

‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ she managed, fear curling in her stomach.

‘You won’t.’

‘You don’t know that.’

But Casimir peeled off his gloves and offered his hands.

Gritting her teeth, Bleak removed her own gloves. ‘If this goes badly ...’

‘I’ll take full responsibility.’

‘Good.’ She took his hands in hers.

Casimir was right. It *was* an instinct. She felt the snow shift beneath her feet, and suddenly, she was somewhere else, another plane of existence, with Casimir by her side. Her memories played out before them, slowly, as though they had all the time in the world. She showed him young children running through the halls, Prince Ermias and herself. She showed him Lady Gesa and Lord Gabriel Thornton dressed in all their finery, dancing elegantly in the great hall.

She showed him ...

*‘You and Ermias can no longer be friends,’ her father said gently.*

*‘Why not?’ she managed between sobs.*

*Mama squeezed her shoulder. ‘For the good of Oremere, Alarise. For a peaceful reign to come.’*

Bleak felt her magic tug in a different direction. Forward. To much more recent times. Freyhill dungeons. It smelled damp, and a coppery tang filled the air. Her mouth went dry as Ines appeared before them. Beside her, Casimir went rigid. But this was a memory; she couldn’t see them watching on. Instead, she paced before a prisoner, *Bleak*, chained and bloodied in torn undergarments.

*‘The Goldwells and the Ashdowns were so concerned about the possible budding romance between two children that they didn’t see what was right in front of them. Me. And Prince Casimir Ashdown.’*

Bleak wrenched them from the memory. Both she and Casimir stood gasping for air in the snow.

‘Is it true?’ she rasped. ‘Were you ... with her?’

Casimir took a moment to gather himself. ‘Yes,’ he said finally. ‘I was. Before everything happened, before the mist took over ... And sometimes, afterwards as well.’

Bleak stared.

‘I was in love with her,’ he said, tucking his hands back under his arms. ‘How could I not have been? A beautiful priestess showing a young prince special attention ... She made me feel less alone, gave me someone to share my dreams with. It wasn’t allowed, of course, which only made it all the more desirable ...’

*‘Prohibition is the seed of revolution,’* Bleak muttered.

Casimir glanced at her. ‘Ines’ motto of sorts ... I had been with her for a year when she told me of her power – that she was what we call a “collector”. One of the rarer Ashai, like my own power, like yours. She has the ability to take and host other Ashai’s magic. In the years we were together, I think she realised how rare her gift was. What it could be used for. She’s still the only collector I’ve ever met. What I didn’t realise at the time was that she’d been feeding on the power of other Ashai, and on mine. That during her travels to the temples around the realm, she’d been quietly building a following. A born-again queen of the realm, who could take and give magic as she saw fit. And she’d been using me, to learn of the weak alliances throughout Oremere and the other continents. My father was trying to educate me, groom me for when it was my time to take the throne. And I gave her all that information, as my partner, my future wife. I had no idea ... When I realised what she was doing, it was too late. So I too started travelling, all around Oremere, all around the Upper Realm, trying to spread word of her ...’

‘How did it come to pass?’ Bleak interrupted. ‘The realm, and Oremere as we know it now?’

Casimir’s eyes glazed over. ‘The mist had been in place for centuries, a shield of sorts. To create a safe haven for the Ashai folk in Oremere. The rulers of the other continents agreed to keep our secret, preferring the Ashai to remain segregated from their communities. But Ines ... When she succeeded the Lady of the Oremian Priestesses before her, she was given her own temple. It became a laboratory, a headquarters for her operations to go unchecked. Where she experimented with her magic and the mist. She weaponised it. Slowly, she recruited an army, brought in soldiers from Qatrola, turned the Oremian guards against the royal families. She was a master, Alarise. Beautiful, cunning, ruthless. She planted so many seeds of mistrust and conspiracy, wove so many stories that eventually, the Ashdowns and the Goldwells turned against each other. Only your parents saw it. Tried to convince the kings and queens that the threat wasn’t each

other, it was *her*. And the order of the Oremian Priestesses. But it was too late. Ines overthrew the palace in one night. Had Langdon and Farlah murder them in their beds, even poor little Ermias. Your parents took you and fled. The memory you have of those gates? The blood dripping? The heads of those in the royal household had been spiked there, before Daleren and his brothers took them down.

‘She released her altered form of mist that night. It churned through Oremere, and was released by her lackeys around the realm. It sought Ashai power worthy of its master. Now, it seeks the rulers of Oremere.’

‘Is that how she caught you?’

Casimir shook his head. ‘No. I was in Ellest trying to find allies when Freyhill fell. My downfall wasn’t until the plague – a disease to flush out the Ashai folk, another of her creations. She found me, half-dead in an abandoned tavern in Heathton.’

‘And then?’ Bleak pressed.

‘And then I was hers,’ he said, his skin paling. ‘There was nothing ... nothing I could do. She ...’

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ Bleak managed. She knew all too well how deeply those wounds ran.

‘But I do,’ Casimir said. ‘By day, she tortured my mind. Showing me what she’d done to my parents, to the Goldwells. What she was doing to my people, to the land. She showed me how she hunted our kind, how the wheels were already in motion for her reign. She showed me you, begging for help from healers, trying to stifle your abilities. And by night ... By night she loved me, as she had done before. Twisting my grip on reality, weaving my love for her with my hatred of her, so I could feel nothing for myself but loathing and disgust.’

Bleak exhaled a shaky breath. ‘What did she want from you?’

‘She wanted to know where the rebels were hiding. Wanted to know who they were. She wanted to know about you. To get her hands on the heir of the mediating family. It would have meant great things for her – control over a pride of teerah panthers, access to a mind whisperer’s abilities.’

Bleak glanced back at Rion and the others. ‘What about the panthers?’

‘They have always answered to the mediating family.’

A gong sounded, startling Bleak, and a porter came scurrying towards them.

‘Your presence is required in the queen’s study,’ he said.

‘Whose?’ Casimir asked.  
‘Both of you. This way, if you please.’  
Looking sceptical, Casimir shrugged and made to follow the boy.  
‘This tale isn’t over,’ Bleak said.  
‘Far from it,’ Casimir replied.  
They walked into Queen Eydis’ study to heated voices.  
‘There’s *no way* we should be throwing a party,’ Sahara said, outraged.  
‘We’re about to go to bloody war.’  
‘All the more reason to celebrate life, my friend,’ Eydis retorted, a smile in her voice.  
They ignored Bleak and Casimir standing in the doorway.  
‘Henri, tell her this is insane,’ Sahara implored her sister.  
‘It *is* insane. But I’m inclined to agree with Eydis,’ said the warrior queen, to Bleak’s surprise.  
‘What?’ Sahara’s tone of incredulity echoed Bleak’s own feelings.  
‘We need to show Eydis’ army what we’re fighting for. We need to celebrate the wins – getting you back,’ Henri argued. ‘Getting Casimir back.’  
Casimir scoffed. ‘I don’t need a celebration. I need some damn peace.’  
But Bleak and Casimir had been summoned as a mere formality. They weren’t to have a say in these decisions.  
Bleak had never been to a dance, let alone a ball. The closest thing Angove had to either was the drunken mess of movement that ensued when the Eerey Brothers played their fiddles. Bleak rubbed the bridge of her nose, recalling the few times she and Bren had managed to sneak away from his older brothers to enjoy the revelry. A lifetime ago.

LATER THAT NIGHT, curiosity got the better of Bleak. Music trickled down the halls and into her rooms, and finally, she couldn’t stand it any longer. With Rion silently padding alongside her, Bleak made her way down the torchlit corridor to the main hall. The melodies became louder, the notes of fiddles and flutes laced together, luring her to the festivities taking place behind the closed doors. The guards either side of the entrance stiffened at the sight of Rion. He was still something of a novelty here. But Bleak simply nodded to the guards, and after a moment’s hesitation, they opened the doors.



A world of colour greeted Bleak. The hall was packed with Havennesse natives, dressed in the most opulent gowns and tunics. The dancing had begun already, and glimmering sheer fabrics swished across the polished floor as partners were whirled and dipped to the lively melody. No one stood upon the dais. Queen Eydis was at the heart of the room dancing with Nicolai, and the Valians sat at a table across the room, drinking and eating, laughing loudly with each other, the royal twins at the helm.

‘Bleak!’ a familiar voice cried, and a stocky body crashed into hers.

Bleak drew back to peer at the beaming face of Athene’s daughter, Luka.

‘I didn’t think we’d ever see you again!’ the redhead exclaimed, clapping Bleak heartily on the back.

Beside her, Rion growled quietly, but Luka paid him no heed.

‘I didn’t think I’d see you again either,’ Bleak managed.

‘Come, let’s eat.’ Luka tugged her towards the Valian table.

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Pfft. Don’t be a fool. You look half-starved. You’re eating.’

Bleak craned her neck, searching the room for Casimir. She wanted to finish their conversation. He was nowhere in sight, so she let Luka drag her over to the others. Henri spotted them, and suddenly, they were all shuffling down the benches to make room. Bleak found herself pushed into the seat beside Sahara, opposite Henri.

The warrior queen locked eyes with her. ‘Good of you to join us,’ she said, reaching for a plate.

Luka squeezed in beside Bleak. ‘You’re looking a little more like a Valian these days.’ She nodded to the scars littering Bleak’s arms.

‘Who said I want to be a Valian?’

‘Everyone wants to be a Valian,’ Luka said with a grin.

Sahara laughed at this, and Henri, who was piling her plate high with food, glanced up at her sister, concern etched on her face.

‘Relax,’ Sahara told her. ‘I wasn’t disagreeing.’

‘Just as well,’ Henri replied, brow quirked. ‘Ten years is a long enough break from being what you are.’

Henri looked to Bleak, and held out the plate she’d been filling. ‘Take it,’ she said. ‘You need to eat.’

Bleak gaped. The Valian queen was serving *her*? Shock rippled down the table as well. Sahara took the plate from Henri and placed it in front of

Bleak.

‘My sister’s right. You look like a damn ghost.’

And that was that. With the entire Valian kindred watching her expectantly, Bleak had no choice but to pick up her knife and fork. They didn’t return to their meals until she’d had her first bite. The food tasted like metal to her ruined tastebuds, but she ate anyway, listening to the Valians discuss the war to come.

‘We need a better idea of her numbers,’ Athene was saying.

‘I already gave you a good idea of her numbers,’ Sahara said coolly.

‘It’s not precise enough.’

‘This is war. There’s nothing precise about it.’

Bleak looked between the matriarch’s first-in-command and her sister. The tension was palpable, like a rope pulled taut between them. Bleak’s power flickered beneath her skin, telling her to dig deeper. She ignored it. Strains within Henri’s kindred were none of her concern. She spotted Rion stalking the perimeter of the hall, restless, and wondered what was making him uneasy. The rest of his pride came and went as they pleased, roaming the frozen forests and mountain ranges of Havennesse. Rion, however, refused to leave her.

Bleak tore her eyes away from him and watched the queen and her guests sashay around the hall. Eydis was stunning. She wore a sheer, bell-sleeved gown that revealed the stark ink tattooed across much of her skin. She and Nicolai danced with complete and utter abandon, enchanting the rest of the dancers to do the same.

‘Do Valians ever dance?’ Bleak asked Luka.

‘Sure,’ Luka mumbled between mouthfuls. ‘Can’t say it’s that graceful. But Rheyah’s Feast always ends in dancing.’

Petra refilled their goblets and pushed one towards Bleak.

Bleak bit the inside of her cheek. ‘I can’t ...’ she said, sliding it back.

‘It’s water,’ Henri said, taking up her own goblet. ‘They’re all just water.’

Bleak didn’t know what to say, as Henri clinked her goblet against hers.

‘We’re all stronger in numbers,’ Petra offered with her salute.

Suddenly, the blast of a battle horn sounded from outside, and the Valians were instantly on their feet.

The music ceased, and Queen Eydis turned to Sahara. ‘Are you expecting more of your people?’

‘No. We’re it.’

The men and women who’d been dancing stood awkwardly in the centre of the hall, shifting nervously as Rion stalked between them towards the iron doors.

‘Sahara, Henri – with me, if you please,’ said Eydis, donning the thick furs Mariette now held out for her.

The rest of the Valians made to follow, but Henri shook her head. An icy gust of wind forced its way into the halls as the doors were opened, and Queen Eydis, her guard and Henri and Sahara disappeared outside.

The music did not start up again. Everyone waited, faces fear-stricken.

Minutes passed, and Bleak could feel Luka shifting anxiously beside her. Likewise, Athene was craning her neck in the direction of the now closed doors.

‘Who could it be?’ Luka said in a whisper.

‘Maybe King Arden. Come to join the party ...’

Luka did not look amused. ‘If that bastard ever shows his face to the Valian people, he won’t last two seconds.’ There was venom in her friend’s usually light tone. Henri must have filled them in on what had occurred in Heathton, and the Valians were thirsty for Ellestian royal blood.

Rion’s ears pricked, and the doors swung open again.

A tall stranger staggered inside, holding the limp body of a young boy in his arms. ‘Casimir,’ the man’s voice boomed. ‘I need Casimir.’

And then a familiar voice. ‘Where is he? We need him, *now*.’

Bleak scrambled to her feet. Behind the stranger holding the boy was Fiore – the Captain of the King’s Army.

*What in the —*

Casimir emerged from the crowd. ‘I am Casimir.’

‘We need your help,’ Fiore said, stepping forward, his hands outstretched in desperation. ‘The boy needs your help.’

Queen Eydis and the others swept in from behind the newcomers.

‘This way,’ Eydis said, motioning for them to follow. ‘Casimir, you too.’

There was no way Bleak was going to stay put. She dislodged herself from the bench and ran after them. With Rion behind her, no one objected to her presence. She followed them up a spiralling staircase, and into someone’s bedchamber. The stranger, who looked oddly familiar, laid the

lifeless body down on the mattress, and swept up a sweaty fringe from the young brow. The boy's eyes fluttered.

Bleak stared. The first thing she realised was that she *knew* the boy. His dark hair and burnt-umber eyes made him undeniably the boy she'd run into at Heathton Castle. The second thing she realised, as Casimir peeled back the blankets wrapping the boy's fragile frame, was that he had the plague.

## CHAPTER 28

‘*You* brought a boy who has *the plague* here? *Here?*’ Henri rounded on Fiore, hands already at her katars. She didn’t care how damn far he’d travelled. She didn’t care that he’d obviously left the service of King Arden. What she cared about was that he was putting her kindred, and her sister, in danger.

‘I had no choice – there was no —’

‘Have you lost your mind?’

‘Henri, it’s safe,’ Eydis said, mopping the boy’s brow with a damp cloth. ‘He’s no longer infectious.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘I have seen it.’

Henri took a deep breath, fury still roaring in her ears.

Fiore turned to Casimir. ‘You have to help him.’

‘I’m not a healer,’ Casimir said. But Casimir was looking at the other man, and Henri realised with a start that she recognised him. *The Tailor*. The Tailor of Heathton. The man whose bizarrely well-timed advice had been critical in her escape from King Arden.

‘What?’ Fi spluttered. ‘But ... the rumours ... You have to be a healer.’

‘Those rumours weren’t accurate. They were *rumours*.’

‘But you *have* healed people.’

‘It’s not healing as we know it,’ Tailor said. ‘He ages them, making them more able to fight off the illness.’

‘What? That’s not what you told me,’ Fiore snapped.

‘I told you what you needed to hear to get the boy here. That’s all.’ Tailor turned back to Casimir. ‘You’re his only hope.’

Casimir was still staring. ‘You ...’

Henri watched the men intently. They knew each other, that much was clear. But how? She wasn’t the only one hanging on every word. Bleak was fixated on them, the teerah panther, too ...

‘Gentlemen,’ Eydis interrupted. ‘The boy.’

Casimir’s eyes snapped to her. ‘He will lose years off his life.’

‘His father would want to do whatever it takes,’ Fiore said slowly.

The boy was so small and helpless on the bed, hanging on to his life by a thread. *Who is he?* Henri wondered. *What child could cause such divide and chaos?*

Casimir shifted from foot to foot. ‘All I can do is age him so his body and mind are older, stronger, better equipped to fight the disease. The rest would be up to him ...’

Henri didn’t like where this was going. The boy was clearly not meant for this realm. He wasn’t meant to live. But they were not in Valia. They would not be living by the Valian Way today. She spotted Bleak watching on from the corner of the room, her face deathly pale and her hand clutching a fistful of Rion’s fur. The Angovian looked as though she might faint. Henri frowned. The sight of the boy wasn’t particularly gruesome; the physical symptoms of the plague had more or less passed, which meant it was the most dangerous time for him – the final stage – before the illness swept in, completely addling the body and the mind before inevitable death.

Fiore’s hand went to his sword and he looked pointedly at Casimir. ‘I don’t enjoy putting people under duress, but I’ve heard I’m quite good at it.’

‘Do you even know whom you’re threatening?’ Geraad’s voice cut in as he pushed to the front. ‘Be careful how you speak to Prince Casimir.’

However, it was Eydis who cut in. ‘Draw a weapon in my home and it’s the last weapon you’ll draw,’ she said icily. ‘And you,’ she added, turning to Casimir. ‘Help the boy, for the gods’ sake. He’s a *child*. You cannot allow him to die.’

‘You would have me save him?’

‘Yes. And quickly.’

‘He will never be the same.’

‘None of us are ever the same after death touches us.’

Casimir nodded slowly and moved to the boy’s bedside. ‘What’s his name?’ he asked Fiore.

‘Dash.’

Casimir took the boy’s small hand in his. ‘Very well,’ he said.

Henri felt as though she should look away, as though they should clear the room. What was about to happen here was a violation. The boy hadn’t asked for this. Hadn’t consented to this. And who knew what it would mean for him ... But Henri felt the sudden pulse of Casimir’s power, strong and insistent, and she couldn’t tear her eyes away.

Slowly, the boy’s features began to change – his cheekbones sharpened, his jaw became more defined, and the shadow of a dark beard spread across his chin. Beneath the sheets, his frame broadened, lean muscle wrapping around each lengthening limb. His nightshirt strained across his shoulders, and ripped loudly. Fiore reached across to pull the blanket up to protect his modesty.

‘Casimir ...’ Tailor said.

But Casimir was in a deep trance.

‘Casimir.’ Tailor’s voice was sharp this time. ‘That’s enough.’

The Ashai’s eyes flew open, and he released Dash’s hand.

Dash was no longer a boy of ten.

Henri stared in disbelief. The lean young man who was now stretched out on the bed was perhaps seventeen or eighteen ... Certainly not a child. Her eyes narrowed as she took in his features. He looked *familiar*.

‘The rest is up to him,’ Casimir said quietly, getting to his feet. ‘I’ve done all I can.’

Fiore was gaping at Dash’s unconscious body, but Tailor pushed him gently towards the door. ‘Go and get something to eat and drink, I’ll watch the boy. He’s grown used to me.’

To Henri’s surprise, it was Bleak who took Fiore by the crook of his arm and led him from the room.

Henri locked eyes with Tailor. He had some explaining to do. ‘We will speak soon,’ she told him.

‘I expect we will,’ he replied, turning back to Dash.

Eydis motioned for her to follow, and the two women left the boy to fight the rest of his battle.

They caught up with Fiore and Bleak, who were heading back to the hall where the music had resumed.

‘I am glad to see you again,’ Fiore was saying to Bleak. ‘I didn’t think I would.’

‘It was unlikely, to say the least,’ Bleak said.

They entered the hall, their voices now competing with the sound of the harps and fiddles.

‘Now I’ve seen you, I wanted to say I’m sorry,’ Fiore told her.

‘Sorry? For what?’

‘Sorry about your ... About Bren.’

Henri’s stomach plunged. Gods, she’d been so wrapped up in the impending war and Sahara’s return that she hadn’t told Bleak about Bren.

‘Bren? What about Bren?’ Bleak’s voice was suddenly sharp.

Fiore’s eyes shot back to Henri. ‘I tried to tell you ... I thought you would know ...’

‘What. About. Bren,’ Bleak ground out.

Henri stepped forward. This was her responsibility. She owed Bleak the truth. ‘He was taken,’ she said. ‘He was taken to Moredon Tower.’

‘What?’ Bleak spluttered. She gripped Fiore’s arm. ‘He can’t have been. You said —’

‘I lied, *aloud*. But with my mind ... With my mind I tried to tell you. But Dimi – Swinton – he projected the power of his talisman onto me, shielding my mind from yours.’

Bleak gripped the back of a nearby chair, her knuckles bone-white, her breaths coming in short, shallow gasps.

Henri braced herself as the Angovian whirled around to confront her. ‘How could you? How could you not tell me? He’s been rotting there, while we’ve been here? Throwing balls and celebrating? I can’t ... I have to find him.’

The hall went quiet.

‘Find him? The boy is dead,’ Fiore said, a gentle hand falling to Bleak’s shoulder. ‘I’m sorry. There was nothing I could do.’

Henri grappled with her guilt as Bleak shoved away Fi’s hand. ‘I’m going.’

‘The boy is *dead*, Bleak,’ Fiore said, eyes wide.

‘He’s *not*. He can’t be.’

‘None who enter Moredon Tower as prisoners venture out again. *He’s dead*.’ Fiore reached out to her once more, but she stepped out of his grasp.

Henri watched Bleak straighten herself, her face set in grim determination.



‘I’ve been at the mercy of ... those people,’ the Angovian said, meeting Henri’s gaze. ‘I will not leave Bren’s fate in their hands. He would go to the ends of the realm for me. He has already. I must do the same for him.’

Desperation lining her face, she looked across the room to the queen. ‘Tell Eydis I’ll need a horse.’

‘You’ll need more than a horse,’ Henri said. ‘You’ll need a ship.’

‘I have a ship.’

‘One that you can sail alone?’

‘I’ll make it work. It’s every woman for herself, remember?’

Henri glanced over at her sister, who was talking quietly with Casimir in the corner of the room. ‘That was the agreement.’

Bleak nodded, and made for the doors.

‘A stupid agreement,’ Henri called after her.

Bleak stopped in her tracks, and Henri approached her.

‘It’s not the Valian Way,’ she said. ‘We are strongest when we are united.’

Bleak stared at her.

‘My kindred and I will accompany you. You brought my sister back to me, Bleak. Let me help bring Bren back to you.’

IT WAS the early hours of the morning when Henri summoned her sister to her chambers.

Somewhat glassy-eyed, Sahara entered the lounge. ‘What is it?’ her twin said the moment the door closed.

‘I want to know what you think. About the mission to Moredon Tower.’ The note of command was stripped from Henri’s tone now. The question – a doubt – hung between them.

‘You’re the matriarch, the Queen of Valia, Henri. You don’t need my input. My approval.’

Henri swallowed. ‘Am I, though?’

‘What?’

‘The Matriarch of Valia.’

‘Of course you are.’

‘You’re back ...’

They hadn’t discussed it. Hadn’t mentioned the uncertainty that now simmered amidst the kindred. Hadn’t talked about the questions Sahara’s

return had raised. And they hadn't broached the subject of the old cracks in their elite that had started to resurface already.

'That changes nothing. I gave up my title long ago.'

Henri locked eyes with her sister. 'Do you want it?' she said. 'I'll only ask it once.'

Sahara gazed at her, as though seeing her, *truly* seeing Henri for the first time. Henri watched the thoughts, the calculations, the questions cross her twin's face, and not for the first time, she wished she'd been gifted with Bleak's abilities instead of her own. She waited, doing her best not to clench the back of the chair beside her.

'I don't want it,' Sahara replied evenly. 'I am not the ruler of the kindred. I never was. I lead the mist dwellers now, those who would have me, and no more.'

Henri's stomach dropped to her feet. 'You won't return to Valia Forest when this is all over?' She tried to keep the hurt, the vulnerable tremor from her voice. But Sahara knew her better than she knew herself.

'I don't know what I'll do,' she said gently. 'Who knows what these battles will bring? But if I do return to Valia, Henri, it will be with you as my queen.'

Tears stung Henri's eyes, and she struggled to blink them back. Sahara squeezed her shoulder, and Henri didn't let the tears fall, not this time.

'There is something else.'

'There always is ...'

'Allehra.'

'What about her?'

'She was injured. In the recent attempt to destroy the Forest of Ghosts. Her life ... It hangs between this realm and the next. She waits for Enovius.'

Sahara's face fell. 'How ...?'

'Fire. Her own fire. The groundling healer Lyndis wrote to me. Allehra has commanded that I name an heir.'

Sahara's face paled. 'Gods ...'

'I'm sorry, Sahara. I wish there was better news for you to come back to.'

'I was gone a long time.'

'You were.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

Henri went to her sister. 'Write to her. Tell her you still live. It may give her something more to fight for.'

Sahara nodded, her eyes glazed over in shock. 'And the heir?'

'I don't know ... I never thought ... I never thought about this part of being the matriarch.'

'You lean towards Luka, don't you?'

Henri's eyes snapped up to her twin's. 'How do you know that?'

Sahara gave a sad smile. 'Athene has been positioning her daughter as such since before I left.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Your memory of her is jaded. What you think of her, it's not real.'

Sahara simply shrugged. 'I've spent a lot of time with my memories, Henri. I've come to believe that *all* memories are jaded. Even yours.'

'Stop speaking in riddles. What does this have to do with Athene?'

Sahara sighed. 'Just don't name an heir yet, Henri.'

Henri struggled to wrap her mind around where her sister was going with such obscure musings. 'Fine,' she said eventually. 'Let's not speak of it until we're back from Moredon. Speaking of which, what of the journey to Moredon Tower, then? Will you come?'

Sahara gave a grim smile. 'You are not the only one to have amassed debts with the strange Angovian Ashai. I go with you,' she said. 'To keep one eye on Bleak, and the other on my little sister.'

The corner of Henri's mouth tugged upward.

'To Moredon Tower, then?' she asked, taking in the green-and-grey irises that mirrored her own.

'To Moredon Tower,' her sister echoed.

QUEEN EYDIS WAS SEETHING. Her pacing had near burned through the carpets of the council room.

'You swore an oath to break a prisoner out of Moredon when we're on the brink of war? While that filth is already clawing her way through my lands? After you'd sworn to aid Havennesse?' Eydis' tone was icy enough to cut. 'I didn't take you for an oathbreaker, Henrietta of Valia.'

The hands of each kindred shot to their weapons, but Henri raised a subtle hand. Eydis, however, wasn't done.

‘What in the *realm* went through your mind? What is one fisherman to us? You would leave us open to attack? While you pursue a suicide mission? The Henri I knew would have seen this for the madness it is.’

Queen Eydis wouldn’t look at her, but Henri could feel the power, the rage surging around her, the utter fury pulsating from her ally. Still, Henri waited. Now was not the time to jump down Eydis’ throat. Now was the time —

‘With all due respect, Your Majesty,’ Athene stepped forward, placing a protective hand on Henri’s forearm, ‘our matriarch, our *queen*, doesn’t answer to you.’

Henri’s heart plummeted – the emphasis on the word ‘queen’ was a deliberate slight. The Wildenhaven guards were no fools. There was an audible gasp of outrage from them, two of them even stepping forward towards Athene, hands clenched around the pommels of their swords.

‘Athene,’ Henri snapped, shrugging off the touch without even a glance in her lover’s direction.

Athene fell silent, though her raging energy did nothing to soothe Henri’s already sensitive power.

‘Queen Eydis is right,’ Henri said evenly, taking a step towards the winter monarch, trying to catch her gaze. ‘I swore an oath. And I mean to uphold it. But it does not absolve me of my debts. I am indebted to Bleak, who reunited me with my sister, who we all thought long dead. It is my intention to fulfil both pledges. We will return to Wildenhaven.’

‘*If* you return. And *even if* you do, what sort of state will you and your kindred be in after waging battle with the guards of Moredon Tower? I don’t recall you being such a reckless fool.’

An insult that once would have found its mark easily and sent Henri’s hands flying straight to her katars, missed. She knew it was reckless, and foolish, and likely insane. But so seemed the hope of seeing Sahara again after all this time. And yet, here she stood. Henri took in Sahara’s stance: feet apart, arms crossed over her chest, and eyes sharp – ready for anything.

Finally, Eydis met Henri’s gaze. ‘I assume you have a plan?’ she said through gritted teeth.

Henri hid her falter. Yes, she had a plan. It was simple. Get to Moredon alive. Get Bren out, alive, and return to Havennesse. Alive. But she gathered from Eydis’ frosty demeanour that she was after a few more specifics than that. Henri opened her mouth to speak.

‘I have a plan,’ said Fiore, who had kept to the outskirts of the council chambers. His full lips were set in a grim, apologetic smile. ‘I have a plan,’ he said again, stepping into the light. ‘But you’re not going to like it.’

FIORE HAD BEEN WRONG. It wasn’t that Henri *didn’t like* his plan. She loathed it. It was the most despicable, demeaning, un-Valian plan she’d ever heard. And it had taken every fibre of her willpower and discipline not to stride across the room and punch him in the nose. Now, back in her private rooms, she gazed out the window, onto the snowy grounds below, grinding her teeth.

The door clicked open and closed, but Henri didn’t turn to greet her guest. Moments later, Athene’s warm arms slipped around her waist and pulled her close. Henri leaned back into the support.

‘You were out of line today,’ she said.

‘I know,’ Athene replied, following Henri’s stare.

Outside, Bleak and Rion appeared in the courtyard, Bleak saying her goodbyes to the teerah panther. The Angovian had infuriatingly refused to allow the beast to join them, despite Henri’s protests that having him on their side would prove a massive advantage.

‘He’s been in enough prisons to last a lifetime,’ Bleak had snapped at Henri. And that had been that. The girl was not the same Angovian orphan Henri had met in the Hawthorne Ranges. The darkness that had shown itself in Hoddinott had latched on, small but insistent, just like Bleak herself. The disease mirrored the host.

Henri turned back to Athene. ‘It can’t happen again,’ she said, taking in the crystal blue of Athene’s eyes. ‘The Valian Way demands unflinching obedience and loyalty from its kindred. I *cannot* be questioned or spoken for in a council room like that. In private, yes, but we cannot have people seeing us as anything other than unified.’

‘And yet the tactic isn’t the Valian Way, is it?’

Henri blinked. It would take her some time to adjust to having a partner, but perhaps it was a good thing. It reminded her of how she and Athene had been once, when they’d been young Valians in training, equals.

‘Sahara thinks it might work,’ she allowed, the words, the sharing, foreign on her lips as she let her fingers trail along Athene’s laces.

‘Sahara hasn’t been a Valian for a long time.’

‘Sahara has always been, and always will be, a Valian, Athene.’

Athene paused, and then said, ‘Your sister’s regard for the Valian Way has been dubious at the best of times.’

Henri’s fingers stilled at the front of Athene’s leathers.

Athene forged on. ‘Sahara never understood it. Never understood *us*.’

‘Sahara understands me just fine. She’s my sister.’

‘Yes, but the Valian Way —’

‘You need not lecture me on the Valian Way. You think I don’t know as well as you what it is, what it has meant to our people? But maybe it’s time we started changing, adapting ... We live in different times.’ It was the first time Henri had voiced aloud her thoughts on the matter. The first time she’d really even admitted their existence to herself.

Athene was gaping at her. ‘Sahara’s back from the dead for a few days and she already has you trapped in her mind games?’

Henri stepped back, magic raw and ready in her veins. ‘Mind games?’ she spat. ‘You stand here and accuse my sister of treason?’

‘Treason?’ Athene stammered. ‘I never spoke of ...’

But a deep, dark instinct flared from within Henri.

‘Henri, I only meant she manipul—’

‘That’s enough.’ The command echoed across the room. ‘You will speak no more of Sahara. Not to me. Not to anyone.’

‘Henri ...’

Henri could only shake her head, disbelief clouding her mind. ‘Get out.’

‘What?’

‘You speak of manipulation, while you’re the one whispering accusations in my ear?’ Her power raged like a wild storm within.

Athene must have seen it in her eyes, because she bowed her head and left. As soon as the door clicked closed, the room felt too quiet. Henri was left with the nagging sensation of restless frustration and guilt. She rummaged through her pack and retrieved her whetstone and spare katars. Seating herself at the small round table by the fire, she laid out her weapons for sharpening.

*Was I too hard on her? Too quick to shut her down?* The questions ate away at her as she stared at her katars, the reflection of the flames flickering across them. She took a deep breath and began her task, dragging her blade across the whetstone. After a time, as she fell into a rhythm, her anger ebbed, the soft scrape of steel upon stone somehow easing the tight grip

around her heart. Ten years of solitude ... Perhaps it had had a bigger impact on her than she allowed.

She ran over Athene's words in her mind. Was she incapable of discerning concern from manipulation? Had she become paranoid after all this time? No matter how sharp her blades became, she knew they held no answers.

Answers. There were so many she was yet to get. And at that acknowledgement, the face of the Tailor swam before her. She'd said she'd speak to him, but ... Her head was brimming with Athene, and the impending journey. Bringing a new player into the mix, one she knew nothing about, would only add to her confusion and general unease. No, the Tailor's tale could wait. He wasn't an immediate threat.

Still restless, Henri donned her palma furs and hood, and wandered down to the snow-capped gatehouse. Bleak stood by one of the fires, now alone, looking out onto the Forest of Wolves.

'He left?' Henri said from behind her.

Bleak nodded, glancing up, her odd eyes unreadable.

'I'm sorry,' Henri heard herself say, the chaos of her mind subsiding.

Bleak simply turned back to the trees.

'What do you make of this place, then?' Henri ventured.

'It's fucking cold.'

Henri barked a laugh, and then caught Bleak's look of surprise. Henri was struck anew with how little she must have laughed in the past few years. Feeling the chill, she held her gloved hands over the flames, savouring the warmth that began to spread to her frozen fingertips.

'Savage place, isn't it?' she said, nodding to the jagged mountain peaks in the distance. 'We lost three kindred in training up there. The ice got into their bones and stayed there.'

Henri remembered it well. How her comrades' lips had turned blue, how their bodies had stopped shaking from the cold, how in their final hours, their words had been the ramblings of madwomen.

Bleak shook her head. 'Why would you put people through that ...?' she trailed off.

'It's the Valian Way,' Henri murmured. 'To forge strength.'

'Bren once said, "we have to play to the strengths we're given".'

'And?'

‘And ... I don’t know much about forging strength. Despite what Luka says, I’m no Valian, but whatever strength I do have, I have to use it to save him.’

‘You know, if he *is* alive, and that’s a big *if*, he might not be the same as he was ...’

Bleak’s mouth was set in a grim line as she nodded. To Henri’s surprise, the Angovian turned to her and said, ‘I’m not the same as I was.’



## CHAPTER 29

The preparations for the Festival of Lamaka were in full swing, and the throng of people bustling through Belbarrow's city centre set Swinton's teeth on edge. Merchants tugged their food carts along the cobblestones, palace workers heaved the royal banners in great rolls down the street, while the locals chatted excitedly as the lull of the crowd tugged them down the long strip to the water. Swinton walked beside Princess Olena, hand on his sword hilt, his mind assessing every risk, every threat that came across their path. Clearly, this hadn't been his idea.

'Commander, relax. This is Belbarrow, not Heathton. Our people mean us no ill will,' said Prince Nazuri on Olena's other side, his arm looped casually through hers. The prince's own guard walked three paces behind and in front – too far away to stop any attack.

'Nazuri, that's a fool's notion,' Olena said, patting the prince on the arm.

The prince merely laughed. 'A fool's notion or a dreamer's?'

'Sometimes, they're one and the same.'

Swinton still wasn't accustomed to the ease of conversation between the Princess of Ellest and the Prince of Battalon.

'The commander is right to guard us closely,' Princess Olena added. 'Given the state of affairs at the moment.'

Swinton forced his feet to keep walking. *What does she know about the state of affairs?*

But the conversation went no further on that front. The crowds parted for the royal couple, eyeing the guards and Swinton with a mixture of fear

and awe.

‘We’re nearly there,’ Nazuri said.

‘I know. I can hear the waves,’ Olena told him.

Swinton hadn’t ventured this far north of the city since arriving in Belbarrow. While the Bay of Gifts was a popular attraction to those visiting Battalon’s capital, he’d had much more pressing matters to attend to. As the first glimpse of the water came into view, he understood what the fuss was about. The road they walked upon opened up to reveal a glimmering sapphire sea. It was nothing like the grimy, polluted ports of Ellest. The Bay of Gifts was well cared for, a prized gem of Belbarrow. The day was bright, and the foaming waves broke upon the golden sand with a calm, rhythmic hiss. Amidst the sand dunes, people had set up market stalls. The scent of spiced meat and wine sent a pang of hunger through Swinton’s stomach, but it would be a long while until he could eat.

The princess was bending over her shoes, slipping them from her small feet. As though sensing Swinton’s hesitation, Princess Olena faced his direction.

‘Some of us, Commander, have yet to feel sand between our toes ...’

It made sense, Swinton supposed. King Arden and Queen Vera had scarcely let the princess out of the castle walls. She never would have journeyed to Felder’s Bay or had a moment’s peace to enjoy what so many others did about the seaside. So Swinton bit back his argument, and followed her across the sand.

He sank into the shifting grains without grace, frustrated in the knowledge that he’d be tipping sand from his tattered boots for days.

Nazuri removed his own boots, handing them to a nearby attendant, and took Olena’s arm again, leading her down to the water.

‘It feels wonderful,’ Olena said to him.

Swinton spotted her toes wriggling in the sand.

‘It does, doesn’t it?’ Nazuri agreed.

The betrothed couple and their guards wandered down to the water’s edge. Nazuri led Olena to where the sea lapped gently at the shore, the princess’ skirts dragging through the wet sand. She laughed as the water spilled across the tops of her feet. It was the first time Swinton had heard her laugh since they’d arrived on the fire continent.

A FEW HOURS LATER, the beach was transformed. Torches lit numerous pathways through the sand, the reflection of their flames flickering across the flat, glassy surface of the dark water. Above, the yellow moon was full, bigger than Swinton had ever seen it. He tried to focus on the job at hand, but his mind kept wandering. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt peace. Terror had gripped him by the throat a decade ago and hadn't let him be since. He spent nearly every waking moment assessing danger, cloaking secrets and feeling powerless against all that threatened his son.

*My son.* He'd said those words aloud just twice in his life. Once when Zachary had been placed in his trembling arms for the first and last time, a small bundle whose cries had echoed Swinton's own grief, and once more when he'd told Fi. Swinton had accepted long ago that he would live a life of solitude, that no one ever again would know him the way Eliza, or even Fi had, before their lives had become rigid with responsibility and conflicting loyalties. And it had been worth it, if only to keep Dash safe. The boy didn't need an Ashai for a father, certainly not one who led his own people to slaughter. Certainly not one who had helped spread toxic mist throughout the realm. Someone who spied on princes. His son, bright-eyed and innocent, would be ashamed of him. Swinton carried his own shame, along with his secrets. Every day, the burden grew heavier with each passing moment, but there was nothing for it but to keep going.

*The boy still lives.* He'd received no further word. Toying with the coin of Yacinda around his neck, he wondered just how messy things would get this time if he tried to dabble in his faltering magic. Could he still use it to see —

Nearby, a strike upon an enormous gong sounded, vibrating through the sand. The crowd, already in good spirits, stood and applauded their king as he took to the stage, flanked by two of his largest guards, and made his opening address. With his voice projecting across the throng of people, he waffled on about the generosity of the water goddess, and led a silent prayer for Queen Vera. Then, he pressed his fingers together.

'I would also like to welcome our beloved guest, Princess Olena of Ellest, to her first ever festival. We are thrilled to have you.'

There was a smattering of applause from the crowd and Swinton watched as Olena graciously bowed her head in their direction. She was a fast learner.

A servant pressed a goblet into King Roswall's hand, and the king raised it. 'I hereby begin the celebrations of the Festival of Lamaka. Happy feasting.'

The moon felt as though it was only an arm's length away. A massive yellow orb, eclipsing the night's darkness. Sure enough, the waves that broke now came closer to the shore. Suddenly, there was a glimmer of silver, and the soft thud of something hitting the sand. A trout.

And then it happened all at once. Dozens of fish leaped from the next breaking wave. Servants with woven baskets scurried across the wet shore, retrieving the fish. Swinton had never seen anything like it. The beach was awash with drunk, merry Battalonians, and music – lots of music.

Not far from the royal marquee, another section of the beach had been set up for the royal household staff. There, amidst the other maids and servants, he spotted Therese, her face flushed with joy. She was dancing barefoot in the sand with the other maids. He looked away before she could sense his attention on her.

He ducked inside the royal marquee and approached Princess Olena.

'Your Highness,' he said, bowing low. 'I trust you are having an enjoyable evening?'

Olena turned in his direction. 'I am, Commander. Are you?'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

'Was the sight as peculiar as I imagined it, then?'

'Possibly more so, Highness.' Swinton made to leave, but remembered something about Dash being Olena's eyes. 'There ... There were dozens and dozens of silver fish – leaping straight from the dark waves and onto the sand. The beach was littered with their flapping bodies. Almost like they wanted to be taken by us.'

'Sounds peculiar indeed, Commander.'

WHEN THE FESTIVAL WAS OVER, Swinton returned to his chambers in the shiprock palace. The rooms were stuffy from being closed up all day, so he opened the shutters to let the crisp night air in. He didn't understand this place – how the days could be so blisteringly hot and the nights so cool. He removed his sword and his battleaxes, leaving them by the door, and poured himself a goblet of wine. He unlaced the front of his jerkin, desperate to feel the cool air on his skin. He returned to the window and finally allowed

himself to sink into one of the chairs. Sighing heavily, as always, he fiddled with the coin resting against his sternum.

*One more try*, he told himself. Just once more he would try to use his ability. He had to know. He took a sip of wine, and placed the goblet on the desk before him. With a deep breath, he lifted the coin and chain from around his neck.

A current of power coursed through him. He gripped the windowsill, gasping as the magic rushed through his veins and thrummed at his core. Blood roared in his ears and he tried to focus, but the vision swarmed before his eyes.

*KING ARDEN STOOD in a black mourning tunic at the foot of a four-poster bed. A small figure lay lifeless amidst the pillows and quilts, golden hair brushed and braided to frame a young face. Princess Olena. A crown of red flowers bloomed above her head, and crept around her body.*

*'A shame it had to end this way, daughter,' King Arden murmured.*

*Swinton watched on in horror as the crimson petals continued to grow, until they enveloped the princess' arms and legs. Until all that remained on the bed was a mass of flowers, as red as blood.*

'COMMANDER,' said a worried voice. 'Commander!'

Someone was shaking him by the shoulder. He gasped for air, his eyes burning, his chest bursting. Finally, his fingers wrapped around the coin of Yacinda, and at once, his magic was snuffed out.

He focused on breathing. *Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.*

Slowly, he became aware of his surroundings, and the steady hand still on his shoulder.

'Commander,' Therese said. 'Are you alright?'

Weakly, he pulled the necklace back down over his head, pressing the cool coin to his breast.

'Here,' Therese said, handing him the goblet of wine he'd poured earlier.

He knew he should dismiss her, but he didn't trust himself to speak. Didn't trust himself to move. He could feel his body trembling.

Princess Olena was in terrible danger. King Arden ... He would stop at *nothing*. Not even his daughter's life. And, Swinton realised with a jolt, that wasn't all.

The thread between Dash and himself was gone. He felt its absence suddenly, a bolt of lightning to his chest.

The pain that tore at his heart was unlike anything he'd ever felt, all-consuming, stealing the breath from his lungs.

Dash was dead.

'I came to deliver this, Commander.' Therese held out a letter.

Swinton's hands shook uncontrollably as he took it from her, and immediately recognised King Arden's seal. Three lines of perfect penmanship greeted him:

*Your former Captain intends to breach Moredon Tower.*

*Bring him to justice.*

*For your son.*

## CHAPTER 30

Dash could hear the quiet crackle of the fire in the hearth, its warmth soaking into his skin. Warmth ... *That* was what it felt like. For a time, he thought he would never feel it again. He remembered being cold – no, cold wasn't the word. Ice had wrapped around his bones, a death grip he thought had latched onto him forever, and yet ... He wasn't dead. He didn't feel *right*, but he wasn't dead. Dash wiggled his toes beneath the sheets. Even his *toes* felt strange.

Squinting against the soft orange glow of the chambers, Dash opened his eyes. He'd never been in rooms this lavish. Intricate tapestries adorned the walls, and thick, luxurious palma furs layered the floors, while the canopy of his four-poster bed was draped with silks ...

*Where am I?*

A quiet whistle of breath sounded from beside him and Dash whipped his head around to see Tailor asleep in an armchair, his chin resting on his chest.

Dash combed his memories. He knew he'd spent some time with Tailor. Knew somehow that the man had been kind to him, but ... *The plague*. It came rushing back to Dash, and he threw off the blankets to examine his legs, where the disease had attacked his skin first ... And cried out.

*What ... These ... These aren't ...!*

The legs that lay before him were not his own. The hands that clutched the sheet were not his own. His breaths came in sharp and fast as he tried to clamber out of the bed.

'Easy there, little brother —'

‘What —’ Dash’s hand flew to his throat – an unrecognisable voice croaked from him. ‘*What did you do?*’

Tailor gripped him firmly by the upper arms and forced him back onto the pillows.

‘Easy,’ he commanded, as though Dash was some wild colt yet to be broken in. ‘Listen here, and listen good. You’ve got a bit of catching up to do, and I’ll thank you to not panic while you do. It took a lot to keep you alive. Be a damn shame if you die on us now.’

Dash locked eyes with him, inhaling through his nose, and breathing out through his mouth.

‘That’s it ...’ Tailor reassured him. ‘You’re alright now, little brother, I promise you that.’

For some reason, Dash believed him.

Dash listened to Tailor talk for what felt like an age, but Dash didn’t mind. He didn’t want to hear the stranger’s voice that came from his own mouth. He didn’t want to ask questions. Not yet. He was too afraid of what the answers may be. So he listened. Tailor’s tale was an epic one, rich with details that stirred Dash’s dormant memories and forgotten pain. Tailor was an Ashai, he learned. And a powerful one at that. With his magic, he’d managed to transport them and the captain from Ellest to Battalon, and from Battalon to Havenness in a matter of days. They had heard of a great Ashai who was in Wildenhaven, and that he was Dash’s only hope. But the Ashai hadn’t been a healer. He’d been something very different.

Dash looked down at his hands, palms upturned. So much bigger than he remembered. His palms were wide and his fingers long and elegant. The hands of a young man, not a boy.

‘I feel ...’ The deep voice rumbled within his chest, and he cleared his throat. ‘I feel ...’ He couldn’t form the words. Tears stung his eyes, but he blinked them back. He wasn’t a child any longer. He ...

‘I don’t know how you feel, little brother,’ Tailor said gently. ‘I can’t imagine it. Perhaps ... Perhaps we just focus on one thing at a time, eh? Food first. Feelings later. What do you say?’

Dash nodded slowly, and accepted the bowl of broth Tailor handed him.

‘Drink up, will you. I imagine that new body of yours needs a lot more nourishment than it did before.’

So Dash cupped the steaming bowl with his new, large hands, and drank.



After he'd finished the broth, Tailor called for the servants to draw a bath. Dash had to stop himself from staring as the maids entered his rooms with pails of steaming water. Servants. There were servants attending him, *him* – the stable master's son.

'My parents,' he gasped, his chest tightening. 'Where are Mama and Pa?'

He didn't miss how Tailor schooled his features into neutrality before he spoke.

'They're still in Heathton,' he said.

'Why? Why couldn't they come too?'

'I could only bring you and the captain.'

Dash didn't reply. He stared at his legs again: long and muscular, covered in dark hair. Someone had put him in a nightshirt that fell to mid-thigh as he stood. Everything felt *wrong*.

'Are you alright?' Tailor asked, watching Dash take his first steps.

Dash couldn't answer. He was a stranger in his own skin. His mind was racing, faster and more complex than it had ever been.

*One thing at a time*, he reminded himself, making for the bathing chamber. Behind him, Tailor moved to follow.

'I want to be alone,' Dash said, without looking back.

Steam rose from the enormous tub in the corner of the tiled room. Dash's eyes widened as he took in the decadent space. Back at the cottage, his family's bathing room had consisted of a large barrel for washing and a privy. This ... This was something else entirely. The pale-blue tiles were warm beneath his feet as he padded across to the tub. It was big enough to fit two of him. There were little tiled steps leading up, so he didn't have to climb in, and a stand with towels, oils and soaps had been placed within reach beside it. One of the walls was covered entirely by long mirrors, and Dash started as he caught the first glimpse of his face. He could see the essence of the boy he'd been, but his features had darkened, grown sharper. The line of his jaw was like a razor, and his high cheekbones were only made more apparent by the faint shadow of hair across his chin. He gawked at his reflection; a stranger stared back. With a shaky breath, he lifted the hem of his nightshirt and pulled it up over his head, and the shock of seeing himself naked had him stepping back from the mirror, nearly knocking over the stand with the towels. It was the body of a knight. Agile and lean, albeit

a little scrawny. Soft dark hair sprouted from his chest and trailed down his navel, lower. Dash turned away from the mirror and stepped into the tub.

*One thing at a time*, he chanted to himself as he reached for the soap.

He washed himself quickly and efficiently, constantly shoving away the instincts that screamed at him – *wrong, wrong, wrong*.

There were scars on his legs where the sores had been, old scars – white and faded, not pink. He ran a thumb over their smooth surface. Not long ago they had been open wounds, weeping infections ... He emerged from the tub and dried himself, trying to hold his questions, his outrage, at bay.

*Olena*, he realised with a jolt. *What will Olena think?* He ... He was *older* than she was now. And all the things she'd known about him were gone – the weight of his steps approaching, the sound of his voice, his smell ... She wouldn't recognise him. Wouldn't *trust* him. Of all the thoughts that had raced through his head since waking, that was the one that hurt the most.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, he re-entered the bedchamber. Tailor was gone, but a pile of clean clothes sat at the end of the bed. Dash dressed quickly, suddenly incredibly conscious that someone could walk in at any moment. The notion of someone seeing him nude deeply bothered him.

He hung the damp towel over the back of a chair, his mother's regular chastising still as clear as day in his head. There was a knock at the door.

Dash found his voice. 'Yes?'

Water dripped from the ends of his hair and he laced the final ties of his shirt as the door swung open.

Captain Murphadias' hand went to his mouth as his eyes fell on Dash.

'You ...' he began. 'You look just like him ...' he said by way of greeting.

'Who?' Dash demanded, forgetting his manners.

'Your father.'

Dash hadn't been aware that Captain Murphadias knew his father so well. Nor did he think, as he again caught sight of his new reflection, that he looked much like his father at all. But the captain was called away before Dash had had the nerve to ask any questions. And so he remained in his rooms.

THE MEMORY of helping Pa with the horses and hiding in the stable rafters was distant now. The thrill of watching Commander Swinton and the captain gallop off towards the horizon had faded. In fact, all of his memories seemed far away, as though he had slept for a very long time and missed out on what was happening around him.

Dash *had* slept a lot, so Tailor had told him. And now he was restless. He needed to get out of his rooms, needed to stretch his long legs, needed to *do something*.

As he opened the door and looked out into the hallway, his heart began to race. He had no idea where he was. He knew all but two people here, and didn't know them well ... And it was cold.

'Feel like going for a wander?' Tailor said, appearing out of nowhere.

Dash relaxed at the sight of him and nodded. 'I can't stay in that room any longer.'

'Can't say I blame you, little brother. But you'll catch your death in just a shirt. Come with me.'

Dash tucked his hands under his arms as he followed Tailor down the torchlit hallways. Tailor led him into his own chambers, which were significantly plainer than Dash's. Tailor followed Dash's gaze around the bare room.

'I don't need much,' he said with a shrug.

Dash's brow furrowed. 'Nor do I ... I'm just a stableboy.'

Again, a pained expression crossed Tailor's face, but he said nothing and went to his wardrobe. He pulled a thick fur cloak from a hanger and passed it to Dash.

'Palma furs. Only thing for this sort of climate.'

Dash swung the heavy cloak around his shoulders. Instantly his body heat was trapped, and the goosebumps across his arms disappeared.

'Why are you helping me?' he said, meeting Tailor's eyes.

Tailor studied him, and rubbed the bridge of his crooked nose. 'Debts and duties, brother,' he said finally. 'Debts and duties ...'

Dash suppressed a huff of frustration. Why would no one tell him anything? What sort of answer was *debts and duties*? Whose debts? Whose ...? But Tailor was already striding out the door and into the chilly hallway.

'Tailor.' Dash jogged after him. '*Who are you? Why am I here?*'

Tailor kept walking, his footsteps echoing up the stone passage. 'I don't owe you my tale. No one here does, save perhaps for the man who did this

to you.’ He gestured at Dash’s stature. ‘As for why you’re here ... You’re here because you were dying. Because someone out there thought you were worth saving. Here was the only place where that was a possibility. Now keep up.’

Dash’s face burned. ‘Where are we going?’

‘To find Casimir.’

‘Casimir?’ The name sounded familiar.

‘The man who saved you. The one who might have some answers for you.’

They turned a corner, and another, and another, before descending a wide spiral staircase.

‘Where did the captain go?’

‘You ask a lot of questions ...’

Mama often said the same thing of him. He waited.

Tailor sighed as they reached the bottom step. ‘Debts and duties, little brother.’

‘But —’

Tailor cut him a sharp look and Dash closed his mouth. Patient. He had to be patient. Tailor was right, he *didn’t* owe Dash anything. It was Dash who owed *him*. Debts and duties ... Perhaps Dash too had some of his own now.

THE MAN they called Casimir was in the kennels. He sat on a bale of hay brushing one of the sled dogs’ thick coats, the hound calm and content beneath his touch.

‘I was wondering when you’d seek me out,’ he said, without looking up from his task.

‘The boy needs some explanation, don’t you think, Casimir?’

Casimir’s hand paused mid-stroke. ‘I don’t know what the boy needs. Maybe he can tell me himself.’

Dash stepped forward, steadying his breathing and taking a moment to find his voice. But as Casimir looked up, the entire world spun before Dash.

*HE STOOD, knees trembling, in ankle-deep snow. The jagged peaks of the mountains above cast shadows across the expanse of white before him. The icy wind stung his cheeks, and he pulled his furs tighter around him, shuddering against the cold.*

*There was a sudden cry from nearby, and the ground beneath Dash's boots began to quake. Thousands of soldiers dressed in Ellestian armour charged towards him from the white horizon ...*

'YOU ALRIGHT, LITTLE BROTHER?' Tailor had stepped between Dash and Casimir, oddly protective.

'He had a vision,' Casimir stated, looking to Dash for confirmation.

*How does he know?*

'You need not have fear of us, Dash. Wildenhaven is not like Heathton. Ashai aren't persecuted here,' Tailor said.

'What did you see?' Casimir's voice was firm.

'You don't have to answer that.'

'Anything he sees could be of use to us in the war to come. You can bet your life Ines has plenty of seers at her disposal.'

'War?' Dash's mouth went dry.

'Oremere, boy. We assumed you knew of it, judging from the books your ma packed for you.' Casimir's words came at him hard and fast.

*Olena's books? How ... Where ...?*

'We had to make sure they weren't enchanted,' Tailor explained.

'They were in quaveer,' Dash managed. 'How did you read them?'

'Queen Eydis' companion, Nicolai, he knows the language. He hails from Qatrola. His sister, she lost her sight many years ago.'

'Those are Princess Olena's books. I'll have them back.' Dash hadn't heard himself use that assertive tone before. But it suddenly felt right. He'd had enough of everything being out of his control. Enough of people making decisions on his behalf. He may have been just a stableboy, but he wouldn't stand for this any longer.

'Of course you'll have them back —' Tailor was saying.

Dash threw him a pointed look and turned back to Casimir. 'Tell me what you did to me.'

'I would have thought that was obvious.'

‘How. Why?’ Dash ground out, the deepness of his own voice still unfamiliar.

Casimir sighed and stood, wiping his hands on the thighs of his trousers. ‘For what it’s worth, I objected. I didn’t think it was right to take that choice from you. Queen Eydis insisted we try to save you.’

‘So you would have let me die?’ Dash’s stomach churned. He didn’t know what he abhorred more – taking nearly a decade from someone’s life without their consent, or letting a child die. A chill ran down his spine. Despite the constant uneasy feeling in his gut, despite the lack of familiarity with himself, Dash decided that he very much liked being alive.

Casimir’s patient expression told him that the man was waiting for him to come to the right conclusion.

‘As you’ve no doubt gathered, I aged you. It’s my Ashai ability. I aged you to the extent that your body was strong enough to fight off the remainder of the plague naturally. You’d already been tended to by a great healer in Battalon. She stopped the disease, only your body was too weak, too young to keep defending what already ran through your blood.’

Dash nodded. ‘So how old am I?’

‘I’d say you’re about seventeen, perhaps eighteen? The precision can be tricky. And I wasn’t focused on exact years when I used my ability. I was focused on the strength in your bones, in your heart.’

‘You can feel that?’

‘When you hold the years of someone’s life in your hands, you can feel everything.’

‘What happens to the years? My years?’

‘It depends. Sometimes, I take them for myself. Other times, like in your case, I dispel them. They fell away from you and into the atmosphere of the realm. There’s a thin, wavering moral line when it comes to taking years from a child. I would never take them for myself.’

‘But you’ve taken the years of others?’

Casimir gave a curt nod. ‘If this interrogation is over ...?’

‘Wait!’ Dash heard himself say. ‘I ...’

‘Thank you,’ Casimir said quietly. ‘Thank you are the words you’re looking for.’

Dash swallowed. ‘Yes. Thank you. Thank you for saving my life.’

Casimir locked eyes with him, and then took in Dash’s now mature features. ‘What did you see?’

Dash looked from Tailor back to Casimir. He exhaled an unsteady breath. 'I saw the King's Army. Charging towards me in the snow.'

## CHAPTER 31

Bleak felt naked without Rion by her side, particularly as she stood at the icy hull of *Rheyah's Prize*. Eydis had grudgingly loaned them the ship, and to say the Queen of Havennesses was less than thrilled at their sudden departure was a gross understatement. Bleak had seen a slender gloved hand reach out and grip Henri's arm in a vice-like hold as the Valian had made to board one of the rowing boats.

'I swear to the gods, Henri. If you die out there before you can aid my people, I'll hunt you down, revive you and kill you myself,' Eydis had muttered through gritted teeth.

Henri had glanced sideways at Bleak and grimaced, aware that she was well within earshot.

'Understood,' Henri had said, shaking off the grip.

Now, as the ship lurched away from Port Avesta, through the floating sheets of ice, the Valian matriarch slipped below deck, her face sporting a distinct greenish tinge.

'She's not a fan of the choppy East Sea,' Sahara quipped, following Bleak's gaze.

'Here I was thinking nothing fazed her.'

'Nothing does. She can't help needing to throw her guts up, though, can she?'

'Guess not.'

A comfortable silence settled around them for a time and Bleak took in the sight of Havennesses behind them. Henri was right, it *was* savage, with its cutting glaciers, unforgiving valleys and bone-crunching, bitter cold. But



it was also beautiful and wild – similar to Valia Forest in that regard. Both places rich in ancient myths and steeped in danger ...

‘How’re you coping without your furry companion?’ Sahara asked suddenly.

Bleak shrugged. ‘I don’t know ...’ In truth, she was trying not to think of him. Trying not to acknowledge that she had once felt at home on the water, and now without Rion, it felt ... wrong. As though a part of her was missing.

Sahara nodded. ‘I was talking to Eydis about it.’

‘Oh?’

‘She believes your connection with the panther is similar to the one she has with Bear, her wolfdog.’

‘Wolfdog?’

‘You’re not seriously telling me you think that dog is just your average sled mutt?’

‘Well, no ...’

Sahara laughed quietly. ‘Who knows what anything is these days. And who cares. Creatures are what they are, no? If they’re not trying to kill us, that sounds pretty good to me.’

Bleak allowed herself a small smile at that. She liked Sahara. Had from the very beginning. It was no surprise to her that the Valian had walked into the mist and instead of dying, had found herself a clan to lead. She may not have seen the qualities in herself, but everyone else did.

‘Are you scared?’ Sahara asked, looking out onto the crystal waters and drifting shelves of ice.

‘I think ... I think for the first time in my life, I’m not scared for me. I’m scared ... I’m scared for him. Scared of what they’ve done to him. Scared of how he’ll be ...’

‘And if he’s not alive?’ The way Sahara said it was gentle, a quiet way to make sure Bleak knew it was a possible outcome of their venture.

‘If he’s not ...’ Bleak trailed off. There was no answer to that question.

NIGHT FELL around them like a heavy cloak and the frosty air cut into Bleak’s exposed skin like razors. She longed for a drink, that Wildenhaven liquid fire that the Havennesse natives spoke so fondly of: a liquor that burned to the core and warmed from the inside out. But Bleak refused to

break. She would not falter. She was Bren's only hope, and she wouldn't fail him. Not again. Not this time.

'He thought the northern waters were worse than the East Seas around Moredon,' said a voice from beside her. Tilly held her hood tight around her face, her words creating small clouds of fog before her.

*The northern waters in high season are rough enough to turn any sailor's gut ...* Bleak had overheard that conversation between the Valian kindred and her friend. What Tilly didn't know was that those words weren't Bren's at all, but Senior's. They'd been sailing north, further north than ever before, searching for a rare species of trout that King Arden had requested for the queen's birthday celebrations. It was the first and only time Bren had succumbed to seasickness.

Bleak glanced at Tilly, who stood carving a small block of wood with a sharp knife between her fingers. They hadn't spoken much since Bleak had shared her apartments in Valia. Bleak felt the weight of what had been left unsaid hanging between them. And then there was Bren. Who, whether Tilly knew it or not, also stood between them. The memory of the Valian in bed with Bren made Bleak's stomach roll.

'I told him the East Seas were worse,' Tilly continued, her knife becoming still as she looked out across the ship's deck, watching the kindred take stock of their weapons.

'I know,' Bleak replied, pulling her furs tighter around her.

'I'm sorry,' Tilly said. 'For that day, when I saw your scar. I shouldn't have been so aggressive about it. I forget that not everyone deals with things the way we do in Valia.'

*Oh.*

'Don't be sorry,' Bleak told her. 'I reacted badly.'

Tilly shrugged. 'Still. I never meant ...'

'I know.'

The two women were silent for a time. Bleak gripped the wheel, steeling herself against the barrage of Tilly's thoughts and memories that came flying at her. Bren's crooked smile. Bren's tattoo of cresting waves down his spine. And then there were other memories. Friends who had left. Friends Tilly had lost. *Grief*, much like that Bleak herself felt constantly simmering below the surface. Tilly's thoughts quietened, and Bleak's body sagged in relief. The acute pang of discomfort at the thought of her friend and the Valian together dulled. Bleak didn't know how to feel about Tilly,

but she'd done nothing wrong. In fact, she'd been good to Bleak. And here she was, risking her life to save Bren. Bleak could only be grateful. A kindred warrior was worth twenty men, at least.

'Valians don't consider scars ugly.'

'But ... they stared, the Valians, in the baths.'

'Scars are proof that you survived something. That's why they looked. They were impressed that you'd overcome something so horrific.'

'Oh.'

Tilly smiled. 'See? Us Valians aren't so bad.' Tilly patted her shoulder. 'Here,' she said, holding out the wooden figurine she'd been carving. It was like the ones Bleak had seen back on the shelves in her apartments. A teerah panther, small enough to fit in her palm, but much more detailed than those she'd seen before. And this one had another addition: a figure at its side, *her*, she realised. It was Rion and her. Bleak looked up to say thank you, to find that Tilly had already joined Marvel and Petra, where they sat sharpening their swords.

NERVES CHURNED in Bleak's stomach, and fear had its grip tight around her throat. Any moment now, she was expecting to hear the screams ... The high-pitched screams of terror and pain that had pierced her mind when she had crossed these waters last. The sea was silent but for the slap of waves against the side of the ship. Had Bren already been taken to Moredon as she'd sailed into the mist? Had she abandoned him? Hot tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back. She had to keep it together. For Bren.

She motioned to Petra to take over at the wheel. The waters hadn't yet become too rough, and Bleak decided she needed to rest while she could. Below deck, Henri, Fiore and Sahara were standing by a round table, a large sheet of parchment laid flat across its surface.

Henri looked up. 'Good, you're here,' she said, beckoning Bleak over.

Bleak was yet to discover the finer details of the plan Fi had outlined that had caused Henri to storm out of the council chambers in Wildenhaven. Now, Fi made quick work of explaining it to her, gesturing to the garment chests that had been stacked up against one of the walls. Bleak gaped.

*Henri had agreed to this?* Though she didn't voice her disbelief aloud, worried she might somehow reverse the Valian matriarch's decision.

‘This is the layout of the prison. At least it was the last time I was there,’ Fi shuddered.

Bleak studied the lines inked onto the parchment. It was an elaborate network of passages, cells, experimental chambers and holding pens, spanning across numerous levels. Bleak’s breathing became shallow as she took in the details.

A steady hand came to rest on her shoulder. ‘You forget,’ said Henri. ‘Valians are used to mazes and challenges.’

Bleak nodded, unable to find her voice.

‘Here’s where we’ll moor.’ Fi pointed to waters not far off from the formidable tower. ‘The currents here are less prone to the worst of the rips.’

Currents. Rips. *This* was Bleak’s language. She focused on Fi’s melodic voice as he spoke of how they would moor and take a pair of rowing boats to the shore. ‘It’s how it’s always done. It won’t raise any suspicions.’

‘Good,’ Henri said, unnecessarily smoothing out the parchment beneath her hands.

‘I was wondering,’ Bleak said, glancing from the map to Fiore. ‘Perhaps, if Fi will allow it, it might be prudent for me to see this place for myself? Before we moor?’

‘What?’ Henri said, brow furrowed.

‘My magic ... I’m just thinking, if I can prepare in any way, we need to take advantage of that, right?’

Henri pursed her lips and nodded. ‘Captain?’

Fi shifted from foot to foot, but then shrugged. ‘If you think it’ll help?’

Sahara nodded. ‘You might even be able to figure out exactly where they’re holding him. It could prove incredibly useful when we’re actually there. Seeing a map drawn is different to having already walked the path.’

‘*We have to play to the strengths we’re given*, right?’ Henri said.

Bren’s words wrapped around Bleak. She could do this.

Focusing on steadying her breathing, Bleak stepped towards Fi, who took a deep breath.

‘Ready?’ she asked, sounding more confident than she felt.

Fi nodded.

Bleak gripped his hand as a reassuring gesture, but found herself falling immediately upon contact.

She fell easily through the layers of his mind. Much more easily than she had with Luka. It was as though Fi had opened a gate and allowed her

to rush in, like water into a dam. She fell and fell and fell. And then halted, having reached the depths of his memories. His mind was structured like Luka's – a corridor, with numerous passages leading off from the main artery. And there was the familiar pull. Like a rope was tied around her waist and someone on the other end was gently tugging, encouraging her to follow the thread. She did. The rooms within Fiore's mind were full of Battalion. The searing heat of the deserts, the raging whirlwind of firestorms, the commander, and family. A family Bleak had never asked about. Muscular, giant men; brothers and cousins, no doubt. They looked like him, the same broad nose and kind, warm eyes.

Bleak remembered herself. Remembered how easy it was to get lost in someone else's history. She was here to find Moredon Tower. To find Bren. She quickened her pace, and as if in answer, the invisible rope pulled her along faster. Until she came upon a dull, iron door at the end of the passage. Her magic recoiled as she reached to push it open. Fear gripped her. Whatever lay beyond this door ... she wouldn't be able to unsee. Whatever she saw here would stay with her, would become a part of her own history. She took a deep breath, Bren's words in Henri's voice still echoing in her head, and pushed open the door.

WHEN BLEAK RESURFACED from Fiore's mind, she felt weak. Her whole body trembled as Sahara helped her sit up, and wrapped a heavy blanket around her shoulders. Henri and Fiore were still standing by the table, Fiore's face etched in concern, Henri's schooled expertly into neutrality. Sahara pressed a steaming mug of mint tea into her hands.

'This should help,' was all she said.

Somehow, they'd realised she wouldn't and couldn't speak. Not yet.

Sahara cupped her hands around Bleak's and brought the mug to her lips. Bleak obliged and took a sip, her hands feeling steadier beneath Sahara's.

Henri turned back to Fiore and the map he'd drawn. 'Fifty, you say?'

'Thereabouts. No more than fifty. It's better to overestimate, old friend.'

'True. Weapons?'

'Swords, mostly.'

'Archers?'

‘Not likely. The outskirts of the mist tend to cloud the skies from the arrow slits.’

Henri nodded, crossing her arms over her chest and turning to the Battalionian. ‘These men will die. You know that.’

Bleak watched as Fiore studied the Valian queen.

‘The men who guard that tower, and the prison beneath it, they work there for a reason. They can stomach what goes on there, for a reason.’

‘And you have no qualms about signing their death warrants?’

Fiore sighed deeply. ‘It is no easy thing to end a man’s life, and I will always have qualms, as you say, with killing someone. But these bastards less so than most.’

‘Good,’ Henri said, and turned back to Bleak. ‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

Bleak swallowed another mouthful of tea, and accepted Sahara’s hand to help her up.

‘I know where Bren is,’ she told them.

## CHAPTER 32

Henri's skin was still crawling hours after Bleak had told them what she'd seen in the passages of Fiore's mind. Bloodcurdling images swept before Henri, and sent a rush of goosebumps across her arms. What she'd heard – the cruelty, the carnage of it all – was worse than she could have imagined. Ashai folk rounded up like cattle, and treated worse than. The very idea of it turned her stomach. Especially when she thought of poor Bren.

*There was nothing I could have done for him*, she told herself. She had been mid-escape when Fi had told her of Bren's capture. A foolish attempt to get close to Bleak. So foolish. There was *nothing* she could have done. And surely it was better that Arden didn't have both of them? With Henri's abilities, who knew what the crazed king and his supposed queen would have done ... But the reasoning didn't stop the guilt. It didn't stop the squirm of discomfort deep within her gut. If this was how *she* was feeling, she could only imagine the gut-wrenching terror Bleak was going through. And despite Sahara keeping quiet about the specific events in Oremere, Henri had gathered that Bleak had suffered something terrible down in the cells of Freyhill, something that made her fear run deeper still.

Henri's power was restless as she lowered herself into the rowboat knocking against the side of *Rheyah's Prize*. Athene steadied her, but she avoided her lover's questioning look. They hadn't spoken since the argument in Henri's chambers. Since Athene had brought Sahara into everything. Old tensions had grown taut once more. Though her first-in-command and her sister had never been overly fond of each other, the strain

between them was worse than ever. Everyone could sense it. However, now was *not* the time to ask.

*One battle at a time*, Henri told herself.

In disguise not for the first time in recent months, she hiked her layered skirts up around her knees and sat beside Tilly. She glanced down at the low cuts of their bodices, pushing breasts together, the moonlight showing off the pale skin there. Athene followed her gaze and raised a brow, having not changed her stance on the un-Valian nature of the events to come. Instead, she'd fumed silently as Queen Eydis' seamstress had strapped her into a corset and made her adjustments.

It was all part of Fi's elaborate, and frankly offensive, plan.

Henri rested a hand on one of her katars, strapped firmly to her thigh beneath the silken fabric. She was still herself – the steel resting against her skin made sure of that.

They rocked gently with the current, and she took in the sight of her kindred, spread across two small boats. Their cloaks covered what they'd had to become in order to gain entry to this gods-forsaken place, while Bleak remained at the back, dressed in her usual pants and tunic, a heavy coat pulled across her shoulders. It was agreed that the girl's odd eyes would likely give her away, so she was best kept in the shadows.

Henri's boat swayed suddenly, as Fiore's heavy weight dropped down into it. Tilly hissed a curse and gripped the side.

'I don't want to drown in this piece-of-shit gown, *Captain*,' she said.

'It's not drowning you've got to worry about, old friend,' he countered, picking up the oars.

Tilly glared at him, but the Battalionian was unfazed.

Across the rippling, glassy surface of the sea and past the shifting fog was Moredon Tower. A single column of stone on a rocky island, torches flickering behind the arrow slits.

'Doesn't look so bad,' Petra quipped. 'We can take that, no trouble.'

'It's not the tower we need to take,' said Bleak's quiet voice from the boat beside them. 'It's what lies beneath it.'

As the boat lurched forward, Henri looked across to Sahara. Her sister's eyes were bright, and her hair swung loose about her chin. She sat with her back straight and her hand grasping the pommel of her sword.

'Don't look so grim, Henri,' Sahara said, sensing her gaze. 'I thought you liked teaching lessons to disreputable men ...?'



Henri knew her answering smile didn't meet her eyes. She had only just got her sister back. Ten years had passed without her, and now, where they were going ... With each pass of the oars, she grew more tense. This was a different fight to those she was used to. This was a beast of deception, of dishonour. Here, her katars would not be her only weapon.

All too soon, both boats crunched atop the shale-covered shore. The power that surged here took Henri's breath away. A force stronger than the magic running through the living bridges of Valia. Power that fed off something darker. Henri suppressed a shudder. She had felt power like this only once before. In the cellar of Heathton Castle, which housed King Arden's toxic mist. Finding the hilt of her katar through her skirts, she focused on the stretching shadow of the tower ahead.

'Take off your cloaks,' Fi whispered as they stepped onto the beach. 'Try to look ... alluring.'

Despite the lurch in her gut, Henri let her cloak fall from her shoulders, and nodded to her kindred to follow suit. The kindred's gowns were made with the finest Wildenhaven silk, hugging their lithe figures and soft curves. But beneath the shimmering fabrics and cosmetics, death smiled.

Boots on gravel sounded, and Henri looked up to see six guards dressed in black marching to greet them. Their eagerness wasn't out of duty, but rather, lust. Their eyes shone with greed at the sight of Henri's kindred, their mouths open.

'King Arden and Madame Joelle Marie send their regards, and their thanks for your service in the name of the crown,' Fiore said, stepping forward and motioning vaguely to the women behind him.

Courtesans. Harlots. Whores. Stripped of their fighting leathers, that's who they'd transformed into. Henri's hands itched to grip her katars.

'I want the redhead,' one of the guards blurted.

Henri nearly flinched.

'You know that's not how it works, old friend,' Fiore said. 'Now, let's show the ladies inside, yes?'

'What's with the small one?' The same guard sneered in Bleak's direction.

Fi shrugged. 'Cupbearer.'

Someone barked a laugh. 'Still wouldn't mind a go on her.'

The company of supposed whores and guards made for the narrow path ahead. An arm slinked around Henri's waist. It took every fibre of her being

not to kill the man then and there on the beach.

‘After you, love.’ His breath reeked of tobacco and the faint vinegary hint of opiate. Instead of throttling him, Henri fixed a lazy smile upon her face and leaned into his embrace. His pungent body odour nearly made her gag, but around her, the kindred followed her lead.

‘We’ve been waiting months for you ladies,’ the guard said to her, his sour breath hot in her ear. ‘You gonna make us beg for it?’

Henri focused on the rocky path leading up to the tower. ‘You have no idea.’

When they reached the gates, Bleak and Fiore slipped away unnoticed by the men. Their minds were clearly elsewhere.

However, the accompanying hum of power Henri had become accustomed to from the Angovian girl ebbed away, leaving only the dark, eerie energy of Moredon Tower itself.

‘This way, love,’ the guard growled, roughly squeezing Henri’s waist. She took a deep breath and entered the tower.

Inside was a large common room and a blazing fire in the hearth. Plates of crushed opiate and half-filled pipes littered the table in the middle, along with playing cards and decanters of liquor. The sickly odour of unwashed bodies hung heavy in the air and Henri had to stop herself wrinkling her nose in disgust.

The guards had a system of short straws to determine who got to lie with each of Madame Joelle Marie’s girls first. Henri could taste bile at the back of her throat as the men bartered with each other and spoke of her kindred as though they were slabs of meat at a market.

The guard who had claimed Henri from the first approached her. ‘I bargained for you,’ he declared, as though she should be charmed by the notion.

‘Good,’ she said, resting a hand on his chest and batting her lashes. She’d seen enough pleasure alleys throughout her travels to mimic the body language of their occupants.

The guard licked his lips as he surveyed her body. He gripped her wrist. ‘My chambers are upstairs.’

‘Then lead the way.’

From the corner of her eye, she saw her kindred peel away from the common room, each with a ‘suitor’ of their own. Sahara was playing her part convincingly, toying with the shirt fronts of not one, but two men. The

wink she gave Henri was deadly. Sahara may have lived as an Oremian for the past decade, but she was still a Valian through and through. Henri smirked back at her sister. They may have been stripped of their fighting leathers; however, their true armour had always lain beneath.

The climb up the stairs to the guard's chambers seemed to take forever, though it gave her a decent look at the structure of the tower, the various rooms and sentry postings.

'Do many guards reside here?' she asked as they rounded another bend.

'Curious, are you?'

Henri replaced what would have been a scoff with a coy smile. 'Of course. The girls back home talk, you know.'

'I bet they do.' He eyed her breasts. 'Forty-three of us stationed here.'

*Fi was right.*

'Here we are,' he said, pushing open a door to his left.

She followed him inside.

The room was an opium den. Drab and musty, with jars of the drug and long smoking pipes covering nearly every surface.

'I don't usually share with Madame Joelle's girls, but ... I like you.'

Henri played with a loose strand of her hair. 'I'm flattered,' she said. 'But it's all yours. I'll pour us a drink?'

The man grunted in agreement, lighting a pipe and taking a long drag. Henri went to the nearby mantle and pretended to browse through the various bottles of wine.

'Do you enjoy your work here?' she asked him, selecting a vintage and uncorking it.

'Enjoy? I enjoy the *benefits* of working here. But on any given day, there's too many men, not enough women.'

Henri laughed lightly. 'How many is too many?'

'There's fifteen of us here in the tower if you want to make the rounds.' He took the goblet of wine she offered and positioned himself behind her, pressing his erection into her back.

Henri turned around to face him, smiling. 'Well, you first,' she said, pushing him away. 'You bargained for me, after all.'

'I did.' He drained his glass and reached for his laces. 'How do you want it, then?'

'Well,' she said slowly, her hand pulling up the hem of her skirts. 'When there's passion ...'

‘Yes?’

‘I like to take it slow,’ she said, revealing a smooth, defined calf.

‘And?’

She inched her skirts up higher. ‘And I like to savour every moment.’

His eyes glazed over as he drank in the bare skin of her leg, and then the tops of her breasts. ‘Yes?’

She trailed a deliberate finger down the laces of her bodice. ‘I want you to feel ... every second of it ...’

The guard’s hands were at his belt. ‘I’m sure I will.’

Henri closed the gap between them, and let her fingertips trail along his jawline. She clamped a hand over his mouth, and slid her katar along his ribs.

‘I told you I would make you beg.’

TILLY AND PETRA were already rifling through the head guard’s office when Henri found them.

‘Anything?’ she asked by way of greeting.

Tilly raised a brow at her blood-spattered gown, though hers matched Henri’s. ‘Coordinates in Havenness. Where we think Ines is planting more cults. An inventory of Ellestian weapons. Maps,’ she rattled off and pointed to the papers stuffed into a pack on the floor.

‘And this.’ Petra held out a jar at arm’s length. A jar of mist.

‘Bring it. Perhaps Eydis will know someone who can examine it safely. But for the gods’ sake, don’t break it.’

Petra tore off a layer of her skirts and carefully wrapped the jar in the fabric.

Henri took in the rest of the room. ‘Where’s Sahara? And the others?’

‘Last I saw, she was heading to the upper floor.’

Henri was already out the door, leaping in bounds up the stairs. It was unlike her sister and the others to linger. Fear flooded her. What if something had happened? What if —

‘In here, Henri,’ Sahara called.

Henri’s breath caught. Inside was a bloodbath, with Athene, not Sahara, at its heart. Her lover was on her knees, knuckles dripping red, gown torn to shreds. Four guards lay mutilated and lifeless around her.

‘Athene,’ Henri said softly as she approached.

‘I’m sorry,’ Athene stared at her hands. ‘I should have ended it quickly, mercifully.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No.’

‘What happened?’

‘I ... I got angry ...’

Sahara was still standing in the doorway, her face unusually pale. But Henri looked to Athene.

‘Angry?’

‘They had such hatred for our kind ...’

‘Our kind? Did they know we were Valians?’

‘No. *Women*, Henri,’ she said. ‘They hated *women*. I have never felt violence like that, for ...’

Henri took a steadying breath. She had. Too many times.

‘Sahara, take Marvel and the others. Find Bleak and Fi. They’ll need backup.’

Sahara left after a single nod.

Henri knelt beside Athene, the blood on the floor seeping into the remaining fabric of her skirts.

‘It’s okay,’ she said, reaching for Athene’s hand.

Athene flinched, and looked up, locking eyes with Henri. ‘Is it?’ she asked.

## CHAPTER 33

A set of stone steps and two heavily armed guards marked the entrance to the prison. The men stood between two flickering torches, chatting quietly.

‘It’s not very well guarded,’ Bleak hissed to Fi, crouching behind the tall grass fronds in the darkness.

Fi shrugged, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword. ‘Doesn’t need to be. Stay here. Wait for my signal.’

Before Bleak could nod, Fi was striding towards the guards.

They greeted him with familiarity, their stances relaxed, bowing their heads in respect. Within seconds, Fi knocked the first guard out cold, and before the second had time to react, he had a dagger to the man’s throat. A whistle sounded, and without hesitating, Bleak bolted towards them.

‘Easy, McMillan,’ Fi said. ‘If you play your cards right, you won’t die today. Not a sound, though ... Bleak?’

Bleak looked from Fi to the wide-eyed McMillan, who was trying to edge away from the blade. She could do this. She had proven that, time and time again now.

She took a deep breath and focused, blocking out the crash of the waves on the shore below, blocking out McMillan’s furious exhalations. *Nothing*.

‘There’s something ...’ *Of course*. Arden wouldn’t leave the guards of an Ashai prison unprotected. ‘He must be wearing a talisman with Valian herbs,’ Bleak said, peering down the man’s collar for a pouch like the one Henri wore. McMillan tried to shuffle back, but Fi pressed the blade firmly to the soft skin of his throat; a trickle of blood appeared.

‘What’s protecting you?’ Fi said. He sounded far calmer than Bleak felt. This was taking too long. They needed to get in and get out, *quickly* and *quietly*. Who knew what reinforcements Arden had given this place without Fi’s knowledge?

McMillan made a strangled noise as Fi pulled his head back by the hair, exposing the bearded column of his throat. ‘I won’t ask you again,’ he said quietly.

The guard’s hand twitched towards his pocket, and Bleak lunged. The talisman was a smooth, round grey stone, with the face of a woman expertly carved into it. It had been treated in Valian herbs for sure; it made her fingertips tingle. She slipped the stone into Fiore’s breast pocket.

‘Hurry,’ he said to her, nodding to the wide-eyed McMillan.

It was like slipping into the sea, the drop into this guard’s mind. Open and easy, with fewer passages than the minds she’d breached before. Bleak tried not to recoil as she found the network of cells she was looking for, winding down, down, deep into the earth. She braced herself against the onslaught of dizziness.

*Bren*, she reminded herself. *Where’s Bren now?* The question itself drove panic to her throat as she delved further into McMillan’s memories. She didn’t want to be here. The cowardly part of her didn’t want to see this. To see what she’d done to poor Bren. She hadn’t locked the shackles, but she may as well have signed the order.

After a moment, her eyes flew open.

With a nod from her, Fi hit McMillan over the back of the head with the hilt of his dagger, and he slumped to the ground.

‘Find him?’ Fi said, pulling a bundle of keys from the guard’s belt.

‘I think so. Fiore, there are two men stationed every yard ...’ She offered the information as an out. Who was she to ask Fi to risk his life? More so than he already had?

‘Then we’ve got our work cut out for us,’ he replied.

She nodded, and followed him down the steps.

A thick iron gate greeted them at the bottom. She could already smell the despair from within. The gate screeched loudly as Fi pushed it open and stepped inside. Bleak stayed close behind. Torchlight revealed a small stone antechamber. Bleak gasped as her foot left the last step, causing Fi to whirl around in question.

‘It’s alright,’ she breathed. ‘It’s just ...’ Her magic was gone, snuffed out like a candle in a gale.

‘What?’ Fi hissed, eyes back to the door on the other side of the chamber.

‘This place ... The whole prison, it must be treated with those herbs. And a lot of them.’

Fi nodded. ‘Makes sense. Doesn’t change anything, though, does it?’

She keenly felt the absence of her magic, as though she were off-balance, not entirely whole. When had she become so familiar with it?

She shook her head. ‘No, nothing.’

‘Good. Let’s move.’

They crept through the antechamber. Blood roared in Bleak’s ears, her grip clammy against the leather-wrapped hilt of her own dagger. The room was empty but for a shelf holding numerous bottles of mead and opiates, and a rack storing spare boots. Fi pushed open the far door, his boots scuffing on the wet stone floor as he stepped into the narrow passageway beyond. Bleak bit the inside of her cheek and ignored the instincts clawing inside her, screaming at her to run.

In front of her, Fi reached a spiral of stairs, the passage so narrow he had to turn sideways. They began their descent, careful not to rattle the chains on either side. Bleak held her breath and focused on taking one step at a time. The stones were wet and slippery, with moss growing in the cracks.

Fi held up a fist, and she stopped abruptly. He signalled for her to wait, and he disappeared around the bend.

Two soft thuds followed. He reappeared, blood gleaming on the blade of his dagger. They pushed on, and she stepped over the bodies without looking down.

The staircase opened up into another chamber, this one, a room of cells Bleak recognised. A row of iron doors. Moans from the prisoners within sounded, but she shook her head. He wasn’t here.

‘Further down,’ she whispered to Fi, who gave a single nod.

As they spiralled into the darkness, the air became thicker, harder to breathe. The damp seeped through her clothes and clung to her skin, and the stench of the place made her queasy. Everything was wet, with blood or with water, Bleak didn’t know.

Three guards appeared ahead. She froze.



There was a moment of confusion. Fiore approached them. With a single shove, one guard's skull left a smear of red against the stone, his body slumped to the ground. Fi's fist collided with the face of another, sending him sprawling. The quarters were too close to draw weapons but for the dagger Fi twirled in his hand. The third guard leaped for something – a bell. Fiore blocked him as Bleak stood dumbly in the shadows. Where Henri moved like an elegant water dancer, Fiore's fighting was sheer brute force. A solid wall of muscle, using his strength to overpower his opponents in mere seconds.

'Bleak.' Fi's voice brought her back. 'Hurry. It won't be long until they realise something's amiss.'

Down and down they spiralled. Bile rose in Bleak's throat as they passed more chambers, more cells. Ashai people, her people, were in there, and had been for who knew how long. From what she could see and smell, the conditions were horrific. A dozen or more to a cell, with rags for clothing, crammed into the cold dark. The rot of flesh and spirit alike was pungent. There was death here. She could taste it.

'Here,' she heard herself say as they reached the foot of yet another staircase. 'He's somewhere here.'

'Oi,' said a gruff voice. 'Didn't know we were expecting you, Captain?'

In the centre of the passage of cells, a guard sat at a table with nine others, cards in hand.

Fiore grabbed Bleak roughly by the upper arm and dragged her towards them. Out of instinct, she fought against him, but he held her firm. 'Brought you another piece of scum,' he said, his voice laced with disgust.

Bleak wasn't acting; the blood drained from her face as she saw the whips, branding irons and shackles hanging from the walls.

The guard eyed her. 'McMillan coulda done that for you, Captain. No need to be trudging all the way down these parts yerself.'

'Wanted to deliver the good news myself, old friend. Madame Joelle Marie sends her best, and her best girls. I gave the order to leave five untouched for you lads.'

Some of the guards had stood at the mention of Madame Joelle Marie.

'Five of you are relieved of your duties. Decide among yourselves.'

The first punch was thrown before Fi even finished his sentence. A full-scale brawl broke out. The men were shouting, and one smashed another over the back with a chair.

‘Which cell?’ Fi hissed in her ear.

Bleak looked to the row of iron doors. ‘All of them,’ she breathed.

‘What?’

‘We can’t leave them.’

‘Are you mad?’ Fi shoved her towards the cells, but no one was watching. ‘That was *not* the agreement.’

‘These Ashai, they’re my people, Fi. How can I abandon ...?’ The words felt foreign on her lips, yet it was true. She thought of herself, of Henri, of Casimir, of her childhood friend Ermias – they were one kind.

‘You’ve lost your mind!’

‘I haven’t. I’ve *found* it. Fi, please. It could have been me. It could have been any —’

‘Bren first. Where is he?’ Fi glanced back at the guards.

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat, and nodded to the far cell.

Without another word, Fi dragged her towards the iron door.

‘Captain?’ said a guard from behind them.

Six. There were six of them left, bloodied and panting, but six still standing.

Fiore pressed the bundle of keys into Bleak’s palm, and turned to face them, drawing his sword.

‘What in the realm?’ the guard said, drawing his own weapon, the others behind him following his lead. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

But there was an intake of breath from the other guards.

Sahara appeared at the foot of the stairwell, her gown torn and bloodied.

‘Need a hand, Captain?’

Petra and Marvel followed, swords at the ready.

‘Go,’ Fi told Bleak, and lunged.

Bleak darted to the door, fumbling with the keys, not daring to look back as she heard the first strike of steel.

Her fingers numb and clumsy, she tried key after key, until finally, a firm click within the lock sounded. The door swung open, and the light from the torches behind her streamed in.

*Bren.* His name caught in her throat.

He was strung up between two posts, hanging limply by his wrists in shackles. Wearing only undershorts, his once muscular torso was withered, each rib prominent beneath his pale, blood-covered skin. Bleak rushed forward.

‘Bren,’ she gasped, holding his face to hers. ‘Bren, it’s me.’ She fumbled with the set of keys, trying to match one with the lock of his shackles. Her hands were shaking too much.

‘Come on, come on ...’ She panicked, twisting another key and failing. She needed more time. ‘Hang on, Bren. Hang on.’

The stream of light disappeared. The iron door swung shut.

A single candle now glowed from the corner of the chambers, and an all-too-familiar figure stepped forward.

Bleak’s heart stopped. ‘You ...’ The word came out as a sob as she backed into Bren.

‘I wondered if you’d show,’ Langdon said, brandishing a thick chain. ‘My queen will be much pleased.’

‘What ... What have you done to him?’ Bleak managed, steadying herself against her friend.

‘What *haven’t* we done to him?’ Langdon took a slow step towards her.

‘Please ...’

‘There are those manners again ...’

‘Let him go, and have me.’ Bleak looked around wildly, trying to find something, *anything* she could use as a weapon. There was nothing within reach. He’d be on her in seconds.

‘Why would I do that? I have you both.’

‘I ...’ Bleak stalled. She needed time, she needed to *think*. But Bren’s body was cool behind her. Was he already dead? He couldn’t be, not after —

‘You found the key, only to wind up here.’

Bleak’s legs turned to water. ‘How do you know about the key?’

‘Who do you think gave it to you?’ Langdon dragged the length of the chain between his fingers.

‘Liar.’

The end of the chain scraped against the stone floor as he began to close the gap between them. ‘Am I?’

‘Yes. You ... You tortured me, you tortured Bren. You wouldn’t —’

‘How would you know what I would and wouldn’t do? You barely remember who you are, Alarise, let alone what anyone else is capable of.’

‘Why, then? Why help free me, only to capture me?’

‘I was trying to give you a chance. Just like I gave —’

The iron door burst open, and Fiore staggered in, blood shining on his uniform and oozing from a cut on his brow. A deadly calm seemed to wash over him as he laid eyes on Langdon. Langdon, in turn, sized him up. And then struck.

Fi blocked the chain clumsily, and Bleak's heart sank as she realised the captain was injured.

'The shackles, Bleak!' he barked as he parried.

Jumping at the command, Bleak started over on the keys. The clanging steel set her teeth on edge as she tried and tried to open the shackles. Finally, the lock gave way, and Bren's body swung to the other side, the irons clattering against the metal post.

Bleak threw herself at Bren's other wrist, heart in her throat as the men duelled, the clash of chain and sword ringing in her ears.

Langdon fell into her as Fi advanced, clutching a wound at his side. Without thinking, she gripped the length of the freed shackles in her hands, and threw the chain over Langdon's head, pulling it tight across his throat. Langdon gasped, dropping his own chain, his hands flying to the iron wrapped around his windpipe. But Bleak didn't let go. She pulled harder, tighter, choking him, the rasping sound of his struggles filling the chamber.

'Your prince,' he gasped, eyes tearing. 'Don't you want to know about ... little Ermias?'

Bleak gritted her teeth and pulled harder.

'He —'

She pulled tighter still, the iron cutting into her own hands, but she didn't care. She would end this, *him*, here and now. His hand clutched at the fabric of her tunic, balling it up into a fist, his nails scraping the skin of her arms. She didn't stop.

'Bleak ...' The voice was distant. 'Bleak!' Sahara was at her side. 'Bleak, Eydis and Henri would want him alive. He's more use to us *alive*.'

Bleak didn't let go. She didn't want him alive. Not after what he'd done to her. To Bren. To a thousand others before.

'Bleak!' Fi's deep voice boomed. He wrenched her away from Langdon. 'We have to go.'

Fi, bloodied and breathless, pulled Bren's limp arm across one shoulder. Bleak shoved Langdon's unconscious body away and rushed to them.

'Tie him up and bring him,' she heard Sahara say to Petra.

'You really think that bitch will negotiate for him?' the Valian said.

‘No, but when opportunity presents itself, don’t knock it back.’

Bleak and Fi hauled Bren out of the torture cell, kicking aside the dead guards, with Bren’s bare feet dragging through the blood that pooled atop the stone floor.

‘Fi – the others,’ Bleak panted beneath Bren’s weight.

‘No time,’ Fi managed. ‘This place could be swarming with guards at any moment.’

‘But —’

‘No. We came for Bren. We have him. The rest is a battle for another day. *If* we get out alive. You hear me?’

Bleak turned back and took in the sight of the cell doors, guilt twisting her insides. ‘Take him,’ she said to Fi. ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

‘Bleak!’ the captain yelled, as she snatched the keys back and bolted for the first cell.

‘I’ll open the cells, that’s it.’

‘All of them?’

‘All that I can. Please, take him.’ Hands steady, she unlocked the first cell, kicking the door in. She wouldn’t leave the Ashai at the hands of Ines.

Something crashed and clattered to the ground. Bleak whirled around.

Sahara was kicking down doors, the timber splintering beneath her boot.

‘We have to hurry,’ the Valian said.

And so, Bleak went to the next cell. And the next.

Emaciated Ashai staggered from the darkness. Beneath their rags, their skeletal bodies were awash with wounds and filth. They shielded their eyes from the torchlight, flinching at the sound of more doors being broken in.

‘The stairs,’ Bleak shouted. ‘Up the stairs!’ There was no time to be gentle. This was make or break, now or never.

Once the cells were open, they didn’t wait. She and Sahara sprinted up to the next level, and opened each cell there. Bleak didn’t think, didn’t hesitate. The faster she moved, the sooner she’d be back at Bren’s side.

She worked in a trance, to a rhythm. *Alarise. Alarise. Alarise.* The name she’d kept hidden all these years comforted her as each door swung open, as more prisoners were set free. She didn’t know if they’d manage to get them all off the island, but it didn’t matter, not yet.

*Alarise. Alarise. Alarise.* She could almost hear it aloud.

Energised by some unknown force from within, Bleak ran, catching up with Fi and the unconscious Bren at the entrance of the formidable tower.

Sahara was right behind her, taking over for Petra with Langdon. Bleak took half Bren's weight on her shoulders, and looked around desperately for Henri. Bren needed help. Now.

*The beach.* Torchlight illuminated the movement on the shore. Fi seemed to notice at the same time and they stumbled towards it. Bren hung lifeless between them as they dragged him across the shale towards the rest of the kindred. The Ashai, as though under a spell, lurched towards the water.

'What are you waiting for?' Bleak cried as they reached Henri, Athene and Tilly. She blanched at the sight of them. Only scraps of their dresses remained, and their weapons dripped red.

But Henri's gaze was fixed on the sea before them. She palmed her katars.

The crunch of a boat sliding onto the shore sounded. Bleak's fingernails cut into Bren's skin.

A tall, dark figure led a host of soldiers from a longboat.

'You know I can't let you leave,' said Commander Swinton, and reached for his battleaxes.

## CHAPTER 34

As Swinton took a step towards Fi and the Valians on the shores of Moredon Tower, his battleaxes felt heavier than ever before. They were not alone. Behind them, dozens of Ashai prisoners stumbled across the dunes. Ashai that, in one way or another, he'd helped put here. His feet were bricks of lead.

Moonlight streamed down on them all. The Valians and Fi were bruised and battered. Fi ... The friend he'd trusted with everything he held dear. The friend who'd betrayed him. The Battalonian shifted nervously, adjusting the weight of the unconscious, half-naked Bren across his broad shoulders, with Bleak on the other side.

Swinton heard the scrape of steel being unsheathed as his soldiers disembarked and awaited orders. Amidst the sorry sight before him, Swinton caught Henri's gaze. He baulked. No, not Henri – he *knew* Henri, knew what to expect when they locked eyes. A hatred that ran so deep it could pierce to the core. The moss-green eyes that met his now held something else.

'I think he remembers me, Henri,' the woman said.

Swinton stared. Henri stood beside her mirror image. Both women were clad in ripped gowns, blood splashed across their bare skin, fire in their eyes.

'You met once before,' Henri said evenly, her voice matching her sister's. 'When we were children ... He *paid his respects* at your memorial, though.'

Sahara of Valia stepped forward, red already dripping from the blade she held. 'So I heard. Though that's not what I'd call it ...'

‘Brother,’ Fi cut in, his voice hoarse. ‘You don’t have to do this.’

‘You gave me no choice,’ Swinton spat, feeling the soldiers restless beside him.

‘Gave you no choice? There is *always* a choice, old friend.’

‘An action made with a knife to the throat is no choice. And I’m not your friend.’

‘There is no knife to your throat now.’

There was *always* a knife to Swinton’s throat. *Always*. And Fi had never, *could never* understand that, even now. He would never know how deeply terror had latched its talons into Swinton’s heart. And how terror made a man do terrible things. But now ... Now it was *Fiore* who had done a terrible thing. To Dash. To *his son*.

Swinton was going to show him how it felt to have a knife to the throat. He lunged.

Fi flung Bren away and ducked out of range.

‘Dimitri,’ Fi wheezed, finding his footing and lifting his sword. But Swinton would hesitate no longer.

There was a shout from his new captain, and his soldiers charged. The clang of steel drowned out all else, and Swinton struck at Fiore again.

‘You betrayed me,’ Swinton spat.

‘*Betrayed* you?’ Fi blocked his blow and dropped to a roll.

Swinton swung again, his axes singing through the cool night air. Fi snatched a discarded piece of wood from the ground and used it as a shield, the first of Swinton’s axes lodging deep, the second splintering it in half. Fiore flipped up on his feet, and Swinton caught his grimace of pain. The Battalionian was already wounded.

‘How can you call me traitor, old friend, after all I have done?’

Everything around them faded. It was just Fi and him. Any other day, it could have been sparring in the training ring. Not this day. Swinton drove forward, swinging his axes, hearing a hiss of pain from Fi as one blade found its mark. Blood flowed freely from a cut on the Battalionian’s upper arm. Fiore cursed and adjusted his stance. Raising his sword, he advanced. And Swinton was ready. He parried to the left, feinted and kicked the back of Fi’s legs. The Battalionian staggered but didn’t fall. He struck back, his sword gleaming with the blood of who knew how many Moredon guards. Swinton sidestepped and deflected Fi’s blow with his axe. Fi spat blood and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.



‘This is wrong, Dimi. I don’t want to fight.’

‘I. Don’t. Care.’

There was a shriek of pain from the beach, and Swinton looked up in time to see half a dozen fire arrows rain down. They found their marks in his soldiers, who screamed as they caught alight. Swinton whirled round. At the crest of the dunes stood Sahara and Tilly, already nocking more arrows to their bows.

Swinton scanned the shore, panting.

*How ...?* The kindred had been tired, wounded and outnumbered. And yet ...

Bleak was struggling beneath Bren’s weight as she dragged him to one of the rowboats. Two Ashai prisoners came to her aid, lifting the Angovian into the boat. Henri was calling to her kindred, who were running down the beach. His men ... His men were surrendering ... or dead. He turned back to Fi.

‘You did this,’ he said, his voice low.

‘Dimitri,’ Fi said, his eyes pleading. ‘Look around you. *Arden* did this. Ines did this. The people *you* serve.’

‘The people you *did* serve. Where is your loyalty?’

‘My loyalty is to the *people*. The people Ines and her lapdogs are imprisoning, *slaughtering*. *Your* people. *Your* kind. *Your son’s* kind.’

Swinton’s axe went flying. ‘My son? What about *my* son, Fi? Where is he? What did you do?’

Fi dived, the blade missing him by a mere inch.

In the distance, Swinton heard Henri’s voice order the kindred and the freed Ashai to the boats. From the corner of his eye, he could see the first boat push off into the water, and the remains of his men bleeding on the beach.

‘Fiore.’ Henri approached them, katars drawn and ready. She eyed Swinton with deadly calm. She would end him here, he realised. Her katars would find his heart, and she would find the retribution she so badly sought.

‘Go,’ Fi said quietly. ‘This is between us, Henri.’ The Battalionian picked up a discarded shield.

Henri paused, glancing between them. Her grey-green eyes were cold as they considered Swinton and weighed up her thirst for vengeance. But then she looked to Fi, gave a curt nod and left.

Swinton took a deep breath and faced his old friend. 'You were supposed to save my son,' he said softly, dropping his remaining battleaxe and drawing his sword.

'I —'

'Where is he?' Swinton roared. 'I couldn't see him. I couldn't feel the thread. What did you do to my son?' Rage pummelled through him like a wave, and he struck Fi's shield over and over with his sword. He didn't care for his exposed middle, he didn't care that Fi took longer and longer to recover, to stand. The dull thud of steel upon shield spurred him and his fury on.

'*Where is my son?*' he bellowed.

His secret was no more. He would shout it to the edges of this gods-forsaken spit of land, where already so much pain and sorrow had seeped into the sand and shale.

'He's alive, brother.'

Swinton struck again.

'He's *alive*.' Fi cast aside his shield. He threw his hands up, leaving his heart exposed, offering Swinton the killing blow. 'Much changed, brother, but your son is alive.'

Swinton fell to his knees. 'Where.'

'Wildenhaven. Guarded by a host of Valians, teerah panthers and Queen Eydis' army.'

Swinton choked. 'What?'

Fiore sat up, resting his elbows on his knees. 'I told you I would look after him as my own. And so I have.'

'But have you? I couldn't feel the thread, the —'

'We did what we had to do to save him.'

Hot tears stung Swinton's eyes.

'Dimitri, he looks ... He looks just like you.'

'He's just a boy.'

'He's a man now.'

Swinton's heart sank. 'What?'

'It was the only way.'

Swinton gripped his dagger. 'What did you do?'

'He was aged, so his body and mind were strong enough to fight the disease. It was the only way we could save him, old friend. The *only* way.'

The last boat was being pushed into the water, kindred and Ashai side by side.

Fi was looking at him, a sad smile behind his warm, kind eyes. 'He's very much like you,' he said.

'I hope he's nothing like me, Fi.'

'Come with us,' said Fi, lurching to his feet.

'I can't.'

'There is *always* a choice, Dimitri.'

'Fi —'

'Do you remember what I told you when I left Belbarrow?'

Swinton swallowed. He would remember those words until the day he died.

*Someday soon, you are going to have to accept who and what you are.*

'I can't come with you,' he told Fi.

'For Liir's sake!'

'I have to get back to the princess. She's in danger ... I had a vision. Arden ... Arden will kill her, Fi. And she is Zachary's friend. His *only* friend. An innocent, left amidst the vipers, Fi. I have to do right by her ... I can never face my son if I don't.'

'You gave her the letter?'

Swinton shook his head. 'I ... I destroyed it.'

'Will she believe you without it?'

'I don't know. But I have to try.'

Fiore bowed his head.

'Go,' Swinton said, nodding towards the last boat. 'You can still catch them.'

Fi shook his head. 'Old friend, my place has always been, and always will be, by your side.'

'Zachary —'

'Is in good hands, brother. You have my word.'

Swinton and Fi stood on the shore, watching as the boats reached the moored ship in the near distance. Fi waved to them, and a lone hand waved back. Bleak. A thank you. A debt.

Swinton turned to his brother-in-arms, remembering his words.

*I would like to know that man, to fight alongside him.*

IN FRONT of the remaining wounded Ellestian and Battalonian soldiers, Commander Swinton arrested Captain Murphadias for high treason. The captain was badly beaten, his broad nose broken, his hand clutched to an open wound at his side. Swinton put him in irons and shoved him roughly into one of the rowboats. He pulled his face into a look of utter disgust as he turned to face his men.

‘We tend to our wounded, and then it’s back to the ship. We sail for Battalon,’ he barked.

As they rowed towards the ship, Swinton warily eyed the mist. It was closer than when they had anchored. He’d seen much mist in his time, more than he cared to admit, more than he ever *would* admit, but it made it no less terrifying. Each time he’d released a jar under King Arden’s orders, he’d watched it, for as long as it was safe. It wasn’t natural. It acted as though it had a will, a mind of its own. From the sturdy deck of the ship, he watched it now. Its movements seemed to answer his thoughts, seemed to sense the magic that thrummed beneath his skin, even with his talisman coin protecting him.

‘Commander?’

Swinton whirled around. A young guard sporting a blooming bruise on his cheek was waiting.

‘Yes?’

‘What should we do with Captain Murphadias?’

‘*Ex-Captain,*’ Swinton snapped, forcing away the thought that it wouldn’t be long until he was *ex-Commander* ...

‘Apologies, Commander. What should we do with *Ex-Captain* Murphadias?’

Swinton followed the guard’s gaze to where Fi stood, unsteady on his feet. ‘Put him in the brig,’ he said sharply. ‘And clean him up, will you? Can’t have him die before a trial.’

THE JOURNEY SEEMED to take forever; they had none of Arden’s magic aiding them upon their return. Every night that passed left Swinton feeling more and more uneasy. How long until Princess Olena was no longer safe? How would they get to her in time? And once they got to her, what would they do? How would they convince her of all that was occurring? Whom within the shiprock could they trust?

Swinton had no doubt that by the time they reached Belbarrow, the realm would know of his treachery. He would enter Battalon's capital as an outlaw, alongside Fi. A leader of the Ellestian armies, fallen far, far from grace. His mother and father would be shamed, perhaps even stripped of their titles ... His gut clenched. Questions and scenarios plagued Swinton, and with Fi locked down below in the brig, he was left to ponder their answers in solitude. He wished he could risk his power, but with the mist so close and his magic so fragile, it seemed reckless. So he stayed in the captain's cabin, poring over maps of Belbarrow, over maps of the whole realm, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together as the ship drew closer and closer to the fire continent.

THE BLAZING HEAT from the shores of Belbarrow pulsed outward towards the ship and Swinton mopped the perspiration from his head with his sleeve.

*Gods, what are we going to do?* He watched as two guards hauled Fiore up onto the deck. The captain looked worse for wear, trying to shield his eyes from the sunlight.

'You two,' Swinton said, pointing at the guards either side of Fi. 'See if the others need help with the sails. I'll watch the traitor.'

Swinton seized Fi's arm, and the guards hurried away towards the bow of the ship.

Still holding Fi, Swinton leaned in. 'Tell me you have a plan?' he muttered to his friend.

'They already know something is amiss,' hissed Fi. 'We won't get far into Belbarrow before a host of guards greet us. We need to slip away. I can get us to the shiprock undeterred, but we need to leave. *Now.*'

'Now? How do you suppose we do that?'

'Jump.'

'What?'

'Jump overboard. We'll swim to the Bay of Gifts. It's not far.'

'Fi, what about the —'

'*We don't have time.*' Fi was eyeing his irons pointedly. 'Can't bloody swim with these, can I, old friend?'

Swinton swore under his breath as he subtly unlocked Fi's chains. 'Aren't there sea serpents in there?'

‘Not many.’

‘*Not many?*’

‘If something bites you, punch it in the nose.’

‘I’ll bloody well punch you in the nose in a minute.’

‘Dimitri, *now*.’ Fiore had swung himself overboard, the only evidence a soft splash that sounded below.

Heart in his throat, Swinton didn’t look back at the guards as he unstrapped his battleaxes and jumped.

The weight of his leathers and boots dragged him under. The waters swelled around him as he kicked, finding each movement like pushing through mud. His lungs were already straining for air, but he kept kicking, trying to get to the top. A large hand gripped the front of his shirt and hauled him up. He gasped for breath as his head broke the surface.

‘Come on, old friend,’ Fi said quietly, pulling him through the currents.

They were swimming towards one of the great piers, Swinton realised gratefully. At least a structure like that would provide some cover.

*Don’t look back, don’t look back*, he chanted to himself. And he didn’t. He followed Fi. Fi, who was yet to lead him astray. Fi, whom he trusted not only with his life, but his son’s as well.

Stroke after stroke through the warm waters of the bay had his muscles aching with fatigue. He was short of breath, and his chest burned with the effort, yet still they swam on. True to Fi’s word, it wasn’t long before the Bay of Gifts came into view. It was just as breathtaking from the water as it was from the shore, Swinton decided, especially when his waterlogged boots touched the sandbank.

‘Come,’ Fiore said. ‘This way.’

Staggering onto the beach, Swinton forced himself to jog after Fi.

‘Where are we going?’ he rasped.

‘Later,’ Fi panted.

Tradesmen and fishermen glanced up at them in surprise as they passed, but as soon as they saw Fi, they averted their gaze, as though the bedraggled commander and captain of the Ellestian army hadn’t just blundered by.

Swinton kept his mouth shut as he followed Fi up the beach and into a side alley off the main road. The narrow roads were a maze, twisting and winding deep into the slums. Fi was faltering, clutching the wound at his

side. Still saying nothing, Swinton looped his friend's arm around his shoulder.

'Not much further,' Fi managed through gritted teeth.

He directed Swinton in a series of short, sharp commands, and Swinton obeyed, heaving Fi's body weight onto his own as much as he could.

'Here, right here,' Fi said, pointing to a 'closed' sign hanging over a door. 'In there, quickly.'

Swinton didn't wait. He pushed open the door and pulled Fi inside.

A musty aroma greeted them as the door shut behind them. Candles flickered across every surface that wasn't covered in eerie trinkets and phials.

*An apothecary, Swinton realised.*

'Does no one read anymore? The damn sign says "closed"! ' snapped a sharp voice from the next room. A woman in her sixties appeared from behind a curtain in the doorway, hands on hips, with a harried expression on her lined face.

'Ethelda,' Fiore said.

Swinton hauled him upright, and recognition swam in the woman's face.

*Ethelda ... Where have I heard that name before?*

'Fiore?' she said, surging forward. 'Good grief, lad, what happened to you?'

'Need a bit of help, I'm afraid, Ethelda.'

'You don't say ...' she muttered, lifting his shirt and staring at the wound in his side. 'Bring him through this way, Commander,' she ordered, already turning on her heels, her skirts ruffling behind her.

Bewildered, Swinton shuffled Fiore through the curtain and into the next room. The room behind the shopfront was vastly different. Brighter, cleaner, with a single bed in the centre. Books and potions lined the shelves on each wall, and a small tray of metal instruments sat by the bed. A healer's room.

'Sit down, Fiore,' Ethelda said. 'You know what to do by now.'

Grimacing, Fi sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his shirt. He lay back, swinging his legs up onto the bed as well.

'Gods, Fiore. Will you ever come and visit me in one piece?'

'Likely not.'

Ethelda huffed. 'I thought as much.'

The sharp smell of alcohol filled Swinton's nostrils and he looked over to see the woman soaking rags in a small dish.

'It's going to hurt,' she said.

'Don't need to tell me that, old friend.'

'Good.'

Swinton stood out of the way as Ethelda went about washing out Fiore's wounds, with Fiore swearing like a madman.

'So are you going to tell me what trouble you're in this time?' said the healer, as she began stitching the wound with brutal efficiency.

'The less you know, the better,' Swinton said from his corner.

'He speaks!' Ethelda mockingly held a hand to her chest.

'He's also not fond of joking, Theldie.'

'Imagine my surprise. So I stitch you up, no doubt will put food and drink in your bellies, and you'll spill no secrets?'

'I have money.' Swinton patted his pocket.

'I'll have you know, Commander, I've never accepted payment from this brawny fool.' She jabbed a finger in Fi's direction. 'I don't intend on starting today.'

Swinton frowned, glancing between the two Battalionians. 'How do you know each other?'

'You mean to tell me, Fiore Murphadias,' she turned to the bleeding Battalionian, 'that after all these years, your brother-in-arms doesn't know your own grandmama when he sees her?'

'What?' Swinton baulked.

Fiore gave a ragged laugh. 'Ethelda's being dramatic, as usual. Strictly speaking, she's not quite my grand—'

'Listen here, boy,' she snapped, pushing him back down onto the bed and putting a bandage in place. 'When a woman cleans as many cuts and scrapes, and stitches as many wounds as I have for you, she's got a right to call herself whatever she damn well wants. You hear? If I call you my grandson, that's what you damn well are.'

Fi's face became serious as he clasped the healer's hands in his. 'Ethelda, I meant no offence. You are family to me in every sense of the word that matters. I only meant to avoid confusion for Dimitri over here, who looks about ready to pass out.'

Ethelda grunted. 'Well, if *Dimitri* had any brains left in that big head of his, he'd sit down, wouldn't he?' She pushed a stool towards him.



Gobsmacked at this whirlwind of a woman, Swinton took the stool and sat without a word.

‘So?’ she said, crossing her arms across her chest, glaring expectantly at Fiore.

Fiore smiled grimly. ‘It’s a long tale,’ he said.

Ethelda only raised her eyebrows and waited.

With a glance at Swinton and a heavy sigh, Fiore began the story. As Fi launched into the description of their journey to Angove to find a rare mind whisperer, Swinton became suddenly grateful to be off his feet. Fi’s voice was melodic as he wove the tale of Bleak, Henri and the Valians together with the rhythm and detail of a true Battalonian. Swinton’s eyelids grew heavy. When was the last time he’d slept? Or had a hot meal? Or *bathed*? None of it mattered now. The tale, *their* tale, being told right now, was the only chance for repose they’d get in a long while, he knew that much. So Swinton rested his back against the wall behind him, and let Fi’s voice wash over him like a wave.

‘YOU SHOULD REST a day or two, Fi,’ Ethelda was saying.

Swinton sat up with a start. He’d dozed off.

‘No time,’ Fi said. ‘The princess is in danger as we speak.’

‘You’ll rip those stitches right open.’

‘Probably,’ Fi said, clapping Swinton on the shoulder.

Ethelda tutted and gave Swinton a once-over. ‘Well, you can’t go anywhere looking like that.’

‘Like what?’ Swinton said, glancing down at his still-damp, unkempt attire.

‘Like the traitor Commander of the King’s Army.’

Swinton frowned, ignoring the barb. ‘I can’t help what I look like.’

‘Fi, hand me those scissors, and that razor over there,’ Ethelda said, motioning vaguely to the corner of the room. ‘And you,’ she said to Swinton. ‘Sit.’

Judging by the look Fi shot him, Swinton was best to do as he’d been told.

Swinton sat like a statue as Ethelda hacked off his dark locks. The black, wavy strands fell about his shoulders and spilled onto the floor. Heat flushed his face, and he avoided eye contact with Fi. Instead, he

concentrated on breathing steadily through his nose. As each lock floated to the ground, it was as though he was shedding his former self. From this moment on, he was no longer Commander Swinton of the King's Army. He was Dimitri, disgraced son of Sir Caleb Swinton. Outlaw. Traitor to the crown. A blemish in Ellest's long history of military leaders.

'There,' said Ethelda, efficiently brushing the loose hair from his shoulders.

Swinton reached up and rubbed his head, his hair now cut close to his skull, like Fi's.

Fi was picking his nails. 'You look younger,' he said with a shrug.

'Aye, and not like the young commander so many foolish women gossip about,' added the healer, sweeping cut hair into the corner. 'I trust you need horses?'

Swinton stood, running a hand over his head again. 'No. We have mounts up at the stables.'

He waited for Fi to protest; a journey to the stables was an unnecessary risk. But his Battalonian friend said nothing.

'Then you'll need supplies?'

'If you have anything to spare, we would be in your debt, madam,' Swinton said, bowing his head.

'Don't believe in debts, Dimitri,' Ethelda replied, striding into the other room. 'I believe in giving,' her voice called back to him. 'It all comes full circle in the end.'

'All the same,' he said, when she reappeared with two small packs.

She smiled as she handed over the packs. 'Not used to accepting help, are you?'

'He's new to it,' Fi said with a grin.

Shouldering their packs, Swinton led Fi back through the apothecary, to the door.

When his hand grasped the handle, Ethelda's voice sounded once more from behind them.

'A mind whisperer, you said?'

Swinton turned to face her. 'Sorry?'

'The girl, the one from Angove. Did you say she was a mind whisperer?'

Beside him, Fi nodded. 'Yes, a girl, no older than nineteen or so.'

'They're rare, even among the Ashai, you know.'

‘So we’ve gathered,’ Swinton said. ‘The king took great interest in her. Went to great lengths to get his hands on her.’

Ethelda was nodding. ‘I wonder ...’ she muttered.

‘Wonder what, Theldie?’

She chewed her bottom lip, her brow knitted together in concentration. ‘I met an Ashai once, a mind whisperer.’

‘I don’t think Bleak’s ever been to Belbarrow,’ Swinton said slowly.

‘It wasn’t in Belbarrow,’ said Ethelda. ‘It was in Heathton. I lived there for a time, to keep an eye on this one.’ She jutted her chin towards Fi. ‘It was a long time ago now, but ... I remember her. Scrawny little thing. Angry. Stole the bloody coin back off me.’

Swinton and Fi exchanged looks.

‘What did she want?’ Fi asked finally.

‘A cure,’ Ethelda said. ‘A cure for her magic.’

## CHAPTER 35

Bleak had sat by Bren's bedside throughout the journey back to Havenness, and for the past three days in Wildenhaven. On board *Rheyah's Prize*, one of the former Ashai prisoners, a healer, had put Bren into a light remedial slumber. He was yet to wake.

Sahara had visited every day, usually to force food upon Bleak and to try to pique her interest in the affairs with the Ashai, but Bleak hardly responded, and eventually, Sahara and the rest let her be. Rion, however, remained with her. The hulking beast had found his place at the foot of Bren's bed in front of the fire. Bleak could feel him monitoring every breath, every murmur of pain from her Angovian friend. He too understood what Bren had been through.

As the hours ticked by, Bleak could sometimes fool herself that it was just Bren and her, as it had been all that time ago, before the King's Army had come to Angove. Before any of it. Throughout their many years of friendship, they'd each been bedridden with fevers, injuries, hangovers ... And each time, they'd got better. It was never long until the two of them were back out on the waters of the East Sea with Senior at the helm. But it wasn't the same now. Not now, as she sat by his bed and lived through his horrors alongside him, his mind dragging her through every wretched memory, every hurt.

She looked at him. Even days later, she still wasn't used to him this way. How beneath the layers of blankets, his broad frame had wasted away, how his once sun-kissed skin was now sallow and littered with bruises.

Bleak didn't realise she'd covered her mouth with her hands until Athene, whom she hadn't heard come in, pulled it away and squeezed her

shoulder.

‘It’s alright,’ the Valian said. ‘He’s *alive*.’

Words were beyond Bleak. The sorrow was too great, and the expression too insignificant.

‘He hasn’t woken?’

Bleak shook her head. She wanted to reach out and touch Bren, but it was suddenly too hard. She didn’t know if she should, or could.

‘The Ashai you saved,’ Athene said, sitting in the chair beside Bleak’s. ‘They’re doing well. Eydis has her best healers tending to them. They are grateful to you. They ask where you are.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ Bleak heard herself say.

‘What?’ Athene looked at her in disbelief. ‘You saved them. If it weren’t for you, they’d still be rotting in those cells.’

Bleak said nothing. She could have saved a thousand Ashai, yet nothing would change the fact that she – that Bren – had been left to die in that torture chamber. She desperately wanted to see his crooked smile, to feel the weight of his arm slung carefree about her shoulders. She didn’t know if she’d ever have that again. A chasm of grief opened inside her. She had to close her eyes to keep the hot tears from spilling.

As she exhaled, the all-too-familiar whisper of outside thoughts filled her head. She whirled around to face Athene, searching for the Valian’s usual pouch of protective herbs.

‘Where is your ...?’ she began, but Bleak was pulled into the undercurrent of Athene’s mind.

THE PASSAGES of Athene’s mind reminded Bleak of Luka’s. Hard, glossy black stone, only with more doorways, more levels to descend. Bleak’s footsteps echoed down the walkway as she followed the gentle tug of the invisible thread around her middle. There was something to be seen here. Some of the doors she passed were open, some were sealed shut. She hadn’t seen that before, sealed doors ... *What does that mean?*

She halted suddenly. A door to a recent memory.

Athene and Henri stood opposite each other, both cloaked heavily in palma furs, in Henri’s chambers in Wildenhaven. The two women were breathless, eyes heavy-lidded.

‘I’ve missed you,’ Henri said to Athene.

Bleak's stomach twisted. She needed to leave. Whatever happened between the Valian matriarch and her kindred was none of her business. But she couldn't move, she was rooted to the spot, watching the intimate moment unfold.

Henri was slowly unlacing Athene's leathers, the flicker of candlelight revealing a rare tenderness in her graphite-green eyes.

Finally, Bleak felt a pull. She was taken deeper into Athene's mind. The complexity of it was intense. Experiences, emotions and memories layered on top of one another, until they became as dense as stone.

Beyond the next door was Valia. Upon seeing the network of living bridges and sprawling treetops, Bleak realised how much she missed the forest. The air was crisp and fresh on her skin as she peered through the branches to see Athene and Luka.

They were hurrying through the forest, Athene's expression harried, with dark circles below her eyes.

'Keep up, Luka,' she hissed at her daughter.

Luka bore a look of bewilderment, but obediently followed her mother. They wove effortlessly between the trees, ducking beneath low-hanging branches, and turning sharp corners.

'Where are we going?' Luka said.

'Somewhere private.'

'Ma, what —'

'Hush. Don't speak again until I tell you. Just keep up.'

Bleak scurried after them, the path suddenly feeling familiar, and forbidden. They climbed up into the canopy of the forest, well above the bridges.

Bleak realised where they were heading. *The matriarch's grotto.*

Athene grasped Luka's hand and helped her up onto the platform. Into the sacred quarters where Bleak knew no one but the queens of Valia went.

Luka shifted uncomfortably. 'Ma, we shouldn't be here,' she said quietly.

'Do you know what this place is?' Athene asked.

'I think so. I've only heard rumours. But I guess ... I guess they're true.'

'They're true.'

'Why are we here, Ma? Can't we get banished to the Sticks for this?'

Bleak's stomach churned. This was wrong, so wrong. What was Athene playing at?

*She shouldn't even be here,* Bleak thought. *Let alone Luka.*

Henri had reacted badly when Allehra had brought Bleak to the same sacred spot; that had been enough for Bleak to understand how special the grotto was for rulers of Valia.

'Ma.' The note of urgency in Luka's voice couldn't be missed. 'You're scaring me.'

'Henri has left,' Athene said, turning calmly to Luka.

'What?'

'She's gone. With Bleak. They're answering the royal summons.'

Bleak started at the mention of her name. It was a surreal realisation, that she had now become a part of the kindred's lives, part of their memories.

'Why did you need to tell me that here?'

'Because, Luka, now's your chance.'

'What?'

'Now's your chance to prove yourself. To show your worth, your leadership.'

'Ma, come on!'

'We have not worked this hard only for you to —'

'I work this hard because I'm a Valian,' Luka said sharply. 'It's the Valian Way.'

'Yes. It is. But —'

'I don't want to talk about this again.' Luka sounded tired. 'I never wanted what you want.'

'Glory? To be etched in Valian history? I only want the best for you.'

Luka shook her head and turned to the ladder. 'You shouldn't have brought me here.'

Bleak was pulled away from the matriarch grotto, hard. The doorways flew by, and she found herself in Valia again, but it was different to the forest she knew. Stepping through the door, she realised she was *deep* in the past.

The Forest of Ghosts was not the sea of charred tree skeletons as she knew it in the present. It stood before her now, full of life, the air heavy with the sweet scent of the magical herbs it grew. From where she was hidden in the canopy, moonlight caught in the drops of dew scattered across

the emerald-green leaves, and the steady trickle of water sounded from the nearby stream. It was breathtaking.

A flicker of movement above caught Bleak's eye. She nearly yelped as someone darted past her. *Sahara*, her cropped hair swinging by her jaw as she scanned her surroundings. Her face was fuller, younger. Bleak got the immediate sense the Valian was doing something she shouldn't be ... Sahara made to keep moving, but someone started after her. *Athene*.

'Where are you going?' Athene said, arms crossed over her chest.

'I should have known you couldn't mind your own gods-damned business.'

Bleak balked. She'd never heard Sahara use that tone.

'Well?'

'I don't answer to you, Athene,' Sahara said coldly. 'I order you to go back to your post.'

'I don't answer to you, *yet*. I get the feeling I never will.'

'If you want it that way, I suggest you go back.'

'You rigged the guard change.'

'I did.'

'Why?'

Sahara didn't respond.

'I can't let you do this.'

'No, you *shouldn't* let me do this. But you *will*, if I know you at all. Isn't that what you want? For Henri to be queen. For you to be her second. And then when little Luka is old enough ... Well, I get the feeling you have some grand plans for her.'

'No —'

'Don't deny it, Athene. I'm no Ashai, but even I have the power to see it. So you'll let me go.'

Bleak's heart pounded against her sternum. This couldn't be ...

'I —'

'Goodbye, Athene.' Sahara dropped down to the forest floor, and ducked away into the darkness.

Athene stared after Sahara. Then, with a newfound purpose, Athene dropped to the ground as well, and started after the young Valian heir.

They wove through the tree trunks and underbrush of the forest, Athene breaking into a sprint. Bleak followed suit. She'd never been to this part of



the forest, and it occurred to her that it no longer existed. They ran and ran, until —

Bleak gasped, skidding to a stop beside Athene.

Mist roiled before them.

At its hungry mouth stood Sahara.

*Don't!* Bleak wanted to yell. But she couldn't. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move.

Sahara pulled a glove from her hand and let the mist wrap around her fingertips.

Bleak watched on in horror as Sahara took in the breadth of mist before her, and made her decision. Then, she turned back to look at the forest. To say a silent goodbye to her home, her family.

Beside Bleak, Athene was as still as death, watching intently. Bleak wanted to shake her. To yell, *What are you doing?*

But Athene did nothing. She did nothing as the heir to Valia set her shoulders straight, and walked into death's open arms.

'BLEAK!' Someone was shaking her. 'Bleak!'

Bleak opened her eyes to see Athene's panicked face.

'Are you alright?' the Valian asked, still gripping Bleak's arms. 'You were in some sort of ...'

Bleak couldn't form any words. She just stared. This woman, the highest-ranked of the elite kindred, had watched her rightful ruler, her lover's twin, surrender her life to the mist. And she'd told no one. If Henri knew the truth ...

'Bleak?' Realisation dawned on Athene's face. 'What did you see?' she said, clearly fighting to keep her voice even.

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat.

Athene's hands on her became bruising. 'I said, *what did you see?*'

Bleak struggled against the Valian's crushing grip.

'What's going on, Athene?' said a sharp voice from the door. Henri strode in wearing her leathers, fiercer than ever.

Athene released Bleak. 'I was —'

A soft moan sounded from the cot.

'Bleak?' a broken voice said.

Bleak whirled around to see Bren looking up at her, eyes bloodshot.

‘I’m here,’ she said, taking his cold hand in hers. ‘It’s me. I’m here.’

His gaze went to their hands, and then back to her face, drinking in her features as though he had expected never to see them again.

‘You’re safe now,’ she told him.

Her words had no effect. There was no relief in his eyes, only a question.

‘Bleak,’ he managed. ‘Who’s Alarise?’

*Alarise. Alarise. Alarise.* The chanting she’d heard in the prison filled her head once more. A chorus of pain and hope entwined. Henri and Athene had long since faded into the background. It was just Bren and her, as it had always been. She squeezed his hand.

‘Me,’ she said. ‘I’m Alarise.’

Her own name tasted like a stranger’s on her lips. Fighting her instincts to lie, to cover up who she was, each syllable rolled reluctantly off her tongue. How long since she’d said her name aloud? Since she had owned it?

Suddenly, she was keenly aware that Henri and Athene were still here, and that around her, the room had fallen silent. Her name hung heavy between them like a curse.

‘Alarise?’ Henri said slowly.

Bleak turned to her and nodded.

The Valian matriarch frowned. ‘That’s what they’ve been saying,’ she muttered, meeting Bleak’s gaze. ‘The Ashai, they’ve been saying your name.’

Rion raised his head and growled softly from the foot of the bed.

‘Shhhh ...’ Bleak soothed him, reaching across and scratching behind his ears. The teerah panther quietened, but continued to watch on, his claws unsheathed. Bleak glanced at Bren. He was staring at her as though he didn’t know who she was. It broke her heart. She wanted to explain, to tell him that she was still the same person, the same gutter rat from Angove he’d grown up with. But ... she couldn’t lie. Not anymore. She squeezed his hand again. He didn’t squeeze back.

‘Do we have to drag it out of you, *Alarise*?’ Athene said, arms crossed over her chest.

Bleak studied the warrior for a moment, her fiery red braid, her fresh fighting leathers, and the defensive stance she had taken up. Bleak turned to Henri. ‘I want Sahara here.’

Athene flinched. If she had any doubts about what Bleak had stumbled upon in the depths of her mind, they were doubts no longer.

Henri frowned, eyeing them suspiciously. 'Fine,' she said, nodding to Athene.

Athene hesitated in the doorway, looking as though she was on the verge of saying something, but after another frown from Henri, she disappeared.

Henri rounded on Bleak. 'What in the realm was all that about?'

'I —'

'And not just that, *before*. What was she saying to you? Why have you got her handprints on your arms?'

Bleak looked down, and sure enough, red welts had appeared where Athene had gripped her. How could she explain it to Henri? What had come to pass all those years ago? How would Henri react?

A hacking cough from Bren startled her. She leaned in close, helped him sit up, and pressed a cup of water to his cracked lips. That was when it hit her. He didn't smell like Bren anymore, like the smell of saltwater and briny wind she'd always cherished. The liquid dribbled down his chin.

'Bren,' she breathed, wiping his mouth with a rag. 'It'll be okay.'

His eyes didn't meet hers as he took the cup and drank.

'Not so much, Angovian,' Henri said from behind her. 'Too much too fast won't end well.'

The door burst open and Sahara stormed in. 'What is it?' She looked wildly from Henri and Bleak to Bren. 'Athene said it was urgent.'

Behind her, Casimir's lean figure appeared, and he leaned against the doorframe. He gave Bleak a single nod. He knew why they were here.

Bleak turned back to Bren. 'I want to tell you who I am.'

He didn't say anything, but Bleak could feel the tension from the rest of those in the room. And the magic, hers, Casimir's and Henri's, tentatively reaching out, exploring. With a final look at Bren, she let his hand go and stood. Rion came to her side at once.

'My name is Alarise Thornton,' she said, her voice wavering. 'My parents were Gesa and Gabriel Thornton. I was born in Freyhill, the capital of Oremere.'

Henri and Sahara's expressions were unreadable. But Casimir ... Casimir's eyes seemed lighter.

'What does that mean?' Sahara finally said.

Bleak faltered. She didn't know. What *did* it mean?

Casimir spoke. 'It means that Alarise is a member of one of the reigning families of Oremere.'

'What!' Henri snorted.

'Alarise's parents were the mediators who stood between and advised the two royal families. She is one of three Ashai heirs to Oremere.'

'And Casimir is another,' Bleak said, finding her voice.

'So you're telling us ...' Sahara started. 'That we have two of three rulers of Oremere standing here in this room?'

'Yes,' Bleak said.

'What?' Henri looked to be in shock. 'You're ... You're a *princess*?' she managed. 'You?'

'She didn't mean that how it sounded,' Sahara said.

'Not a princess,' Bleak replied evenly. 'But part of the reign of Oremere, yes.'

Henri shook her head. 'And what of the third part?'

'Dead,' Bleak said. 'Killed when he was only a child.'

'Are we su—' Sahara began, stepping forward.

Bren suddenly gasped for air, choking and spluttering. Bleak rushed back to his side, pouring him more water.

At last, he met her gaze fully. 'I know who you are,' he rasped.

'Bren —'

'You're a liar.'

There was an intake of breath. Hers. 'What? Bren, I —'

But his words were as sharp as any blade, poised to cut deep. 'You've lied to me about who you are – *what* you are – our entire lives,' he said. 'You're a *liar*. That's who you are.'

## CHAPTER 36

Dash stood before the Queen of Havennesse, his palms clammy and his heart thundering. The throne room here was simpler than the one in the great hall at Heathton Castle, but no less intimidating. It held the strangest mix of people Dash had ever seen: legendary Valians standing alongside Wildenhaven generals, and a group of ragged vagabonds. From her throne atop the dais, with a number of great hounds at her feet, Queen Eydis studied him, her gaze lingering on his umber eyes and dark hair. Dash fidgeted, until Tailor gave him a pointed look from across the room.

‘You appear much recovered, Mister Carlington,’ Queen Eydis said, her voice clear and calm.

*Mister Carlington.* Only his Pa was called that. Though Dash supposed the Queen of Havennesse wasn’t likely to call him by a silly childhood nickname ...

‘Thank you, Your Majesty. For your part in saving my life.’ Dash bowed his head, grimacing at the uncertainty in his voice.

‘We do not let children die here in Havennesse. I wish the same could be said for where you come from.’

Dash looked at the floor. He didn’t know of such things, and he would not speak ill of the king.

‘Mister Carlington, it has been brought to my attention that you and I have something in common,’ the queen continued.

Dash’s stomach squirmed and his magic fluttered beneath his skin. A deep sense of foreboding filled him. Having ... power ... Being an Ashai ... It couldn’t be good. An Ashai now stood accused of murdering Olena’s

mother. How long before that anger shifted from Valian royalty to the common folk?

‘I too am a seer,’ Queen Eydis said, allowing him time to process her words, her admission.

*Wildenhaven is not like Heathton. Ashai aren’t persecuted here.*

‘You and I must work closely together,’ she continued. ‘If we are to play a role in the war to come.’

There it was again, *war*.

Anxiety held Dash’s heart in its clenched fist. He felt as though he had woken from a deep, deep sleep, with the realm as he knew it changed forever. He swallowed the lump in his throat and bowed his head, as he had seen the others do before him. ‘I am your servant, Your Majesty.’

‘I have servants enough, Mister Carlington. What I want is an ally.’

Dash’s eyes snapped up to the winter queen’s. *An ally? To the Queen of Havenness?* He was just a stableboy. He ... But he wasn’t a boy any longer. He wasn’t mucking out stalls with Pa.

Dash lifted his chin. ‘I’ll do anything I can to help.’

‘Then tell me, what did you see?’

Forcing himself to stand still, Dash took a deep breath and described the scene that had unfolded before him: the ground quaking beneath his boots, and the Ellestian army charging towards him.

Queen Eydis nodded, thoughtfully twisting a loose strand of hair with her finger. ‘I had a similar vision only days ago. The horizon places it at Port Avesta. The Ellestian army will reach our shores in a matter of days, then ...’ The queen spoke as though she was thinking aloud, as though it was just the two of them in the throne room. Dash waited.

The queen stood and signalled to a man Dash didn’t recognise, and a young redheaded Valian. ‘Our shores will be breached,’ she said. ‘I am certain of it. Nicolai, prepare our forces, we leave in two days. Where is Henri?’

The redhead stepped forward with a bow. ‘She and Sahara are visiting the Angovian in the medical wing, Your Majesty.’

‘Very well. Mister Carlington, care to guess how many men we’re facing?’

Dash bit his lip, recalling the vision yet again. ‘Thousands, maybe ten thousand?’

Queen Eydis glanced at the man named Nicolai, who gave a brief nod before turning on his heel and leaving the hall.

‘I don’t suppose you know how to fight?’ the queen asked Dash, her voice now tired.

Dash paused. He hadn’t thought ... Hadn’t thought to try his secret drills with his new body, new strength.

‘I’m not formally trained, Your Majesty, but ...’

‘But?’

‘I trained with the squires, every now and then.’

The queen gave a single nod and then turned back to the redheaded girl. ‘See if he can defend himself, Luka. I want another seer on the field.’

‘As you wish,’ Luka said, bowing her head again.

‘Then I take my leave,’ Queen Eydis said, and left with a final grim smile in Dash’s direction.

Luka turned to him. ‘So you’re the boy from the other night?’

Dash nodded.

‘Not a boy anymore, though, are you?’ she said, surveying him.

Heat flushed Dash’s face.

‘Come on,’ she said with a grin. ‘I have a soft spot for strays.’

THE BARN WAS empty but for the racks of saddles and horse tack mounted on the walls, and the loose hay at their feet. The subtle, sweet scent of it reminded Dash of home. Outside, the wind howled and rattled the doors, but he had to keep his focus. Despite the chill, he wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and swapped sword hands, the only thing that had come naturally to him since ... Since everything had changed. The weight of the blade in his hand was a comfort, an anchor to some distant form of normality he longed for. And it felt *right*. He drove forward and sliced at Luka. She knocked the blow aside and smacked the side of his head with an open palm, shaking her head.

‘If this is how they train all Heathton soldiers, then the battle won’t be a problem,’ she said.

‘I told you, I *wasn’t* trained —’

But Luka lunged, fierce and fast.

Dash sidestepped the first blow and blocked the second.

Luka rolled her eyes, twirling her sword in mock boredom. He circled her, having long since come to terms with the notion that he was fighting a girl. She was better than any of the squires he'd seen training. *A lot* better. In fact, Dash was pretty sure she'd be able to take on the weapons master himself.

'Use your surroundings,' she said, knocking aside another blow. 'There's more at your disposal than the blade in your hand.' She kicked the loose hay up into his face, and in a whirl, had him disarmed with her blade to his throat.

'Not as bad as I thought you'd be. Not great, but not terrible.'

Dash supposed that was a compliment of sorts, coming from a Valian warrior.

'I'm ... I'm not used to this body,' he began, but she jumped in.

'You know what we say in Valia? Excuses are for weaklings.'

Dash set his mouth in a hard line and adjusted his stance.

'That's more like it.'

Dash whirled his blade, feinting to the right and striking Luka's left. She blocked, just.

'Good,' she said. 'Again.'

The pair sparred in silence, the clang of their swords echoing through the empty barn, the straw crunching beneath their boots. The rest of the world faded into obscurity, and for now, it was just Dash and his sword, and Luka and hers. Each time the steel sang, Dash revelled in the reverberation. Each time Luka struck him, he found purpose in the throb of new bruises, getting up time and time again when his feet were knocked out from under him. He was sweating and panting, but alive. More alive than he'd felt since leaving Heathton.

Luka stepped back, giving him a moment to catch his breath. 'You've got the skills, somewhere in there,' she said. 'But as soon as you stop swinging that sword, you look lost. And to be lost is to be vulnerable.'

Dash said nothing. He hadn't realised how plainly he'd been wearing his emotions on his face.

'Why are you so lost?' she said, sheathing her sword and taking a swig from the canteen she'd brought.

Dash handed back the sword he'd borrowed and shrugged. 'How can I not be?' he replied. 'A week ago I was ten years old, and now I'm ... eighteen? I don't even know how old, exactly. I've missed eight years of



my life. I don't ... I don't feel like a child anymore, but I don't know how ... How I changed, or who I became in the process. It's like waking up and finding out you're a different person.'

Luka passed him the canteen and leaned back against a bale of hay. 'Sounds awful.'

Dash took a long drink, only to feel his throat burn. He coughed and spluttered.

'Oh yeah,' she grimaced. 'That's not water.'

Dash spat out the bitter taste and tossed the canteen back to her with a frown.

'Look,' she said. 'I don't know much about Ashai. Or Ashai ageing other Ashai. But it sounds to me like you need a purpose. Something to ground you, something to use as a path to finding out who you are.'

'What do you mean?'

Luka shrugged. 'I've not lost eight years of my life, and I *still* don't know who I am. But when I'm feeling unsure of myself, I ask myself: *what do I want more than anything?*'

Dash shifted from foot to foot, not knowing what to say.

She clicked her tongue. 'Well? What did you want? Back then? What did you want more than anything?'

It felt like a lifetime ago. Talking with Olena on the stone bench in the royal gardens. Sparring with the squires in the courtyard. Watching the commander and captain canter out of the grounds towards the horizon. Dodging the castle cook with stolen sugar-oat biscuits.

'A knight,' Dash said. 'I wanted to be a knight.'

'There you go, then.'

'It's not that easy.'

'Who said easy? I said there you go.'

'But ...'

'Use it. Hone it. Looks to me like you've been given the opportunity to become who you wanted to become. So don't mess it up.'

'But the king ... The war ...'

'What did I tell you about excuses?'

'Excuses are for weaklings.'

'Damn right they are.' She pushed herself off the bale of hay and headed towards the doors. 'Come on, it's lunchtime. You're going to need your strength for the journey.'

‘Journey? I didn’t think I was good enough ...?’

Luka laughed. ‘You’re no kindred, that’s for sure. But I suspect you could hold your own against a shitty Ellestian soldier or two. You won’t be in the front lines, anyway.’

‘I’m coming with you, then?’

‘Catch on quick, don’t you?’

Dash’s heart soared. ‘Really?’ He was scared to hope.

‘A knight’s got to learn sometime, right?’

Outside, the wind was like blades on Dash’s skin and they hurried across the grounds back to the towers and the warmth of the great hall. Upon their entry, a group of young kindred waved to Luka, gesturing to a seat they’d saved.

‘Hope you know what you’re getting yourself into, Dash,’ she said, before turning to her friends.

On the far side of the hall, Dash spotted Tailor waiting for him.

‘Luka?’ Dash called out.

‘Mmm?’ she said, pausing mid-step.

‘What do *you* want? More than anything?’

She gave him a wicked grin. ‘To be the best damn Valian warrior the realm’s ever seen.’ And with that, she dipped her head and went to the kindred.

For the first time in a long while, Dash felt the corners of his mouth tug upward. Luka was right. If he could find his purpose, he could find himself. Which meant there was something he needed to do before dawn tomorrow.

Dash approached Tailor. ‘I need to write a letter,’ he said.

## CHAPTER 37

Henri scrutinised the letter she held, lines of messy scribble scrawled across the parchment. Thankfully, among the differences the sisters had, penmanship was one of them. This was unmistakably Sahara's hand.

'Do you think she'll believe it?' Sahara asked quietly, perched on the edge of Henri's desk.

Henri sighed. 'I don't know. But we have to try. Allehra will fight for her life if she knows you're alive.'

'She wouldn't do the same for you?'

'Clearly not. She is much changed since you left.'

'Even so.'

Henri shrugged. She didn't know what sort of answer her twin expected. No two relationships were the same, and the one she had with Allehra was vastly complex. It was not one of mother and daughter, but rather, of ruler and adviser. Though 'adviser' was a loose term for what Allehra was, with her cryptic nature and web of secrets. It had been like that for as long as Henri remembered.

'Are you certain we should send for her?' Henri said, folding the letter. She dripped hot black wax upon it, sealing it.

Sahara nodded. 'Yes. Her best chance for survival is here.'

'With the war that's about to start?'

'With her *family*.'

Henri looked up as the word left Sahara's lips. It had been a long time since she'd thought of family, and being a real part of one. The idea of it now sparked fear in her chest.

‘Sahara?’ she said.

‘Hmm?’

‘I can’t lose you again.’

Her sister locked eyes with her, sadness flashing across her face. ‘I’ll try not to die in the upcoming battle, then.’

Henri felt a smile tug at her mouth. ‘I’d appreciate that.’

HENRI WAS HEAVING on layers of palma furs when Bleak found her.

‘I’ve been looking for you everywhere,’ she said, reaching for a cloak of her own.

‘Oh?’ Henri still hadn’t quite wrapped her head around the fact that the girl she’d come to know as a scrappy, untrained Ashai was apparently a ruler of a continent. And that her name wasn’t, in fact, Bleak.

‘Have you sent your missive to Allehra yet?’

Henri waved the bit of parchment. ‘Just about to go to the Valley of Twisted Trees now. It’s quicker to send one of Eydis’ wolfdogs. Less risky, too.’

Bleak nodded. ‘Can you include a message from me?’

Henri’s hands stilled at the buttons of her cloak. ‘What?’

‘We need the groundlings.’

‘Say that again?’

‘We need the groundlings, the Valian groundlings. With the war to come, we’ll need healers, and yours are the best. Valia is their home, too, I’m sure there are some that would wish to help.’

‘It’s not a matter of if they want to help or not.’

‘Yes, it is. Give them the *choice*, Henri. I met a groundling, Lyse, before we left for Heathton. They take pride in their work, in their home. Give them this freedom, to help their people if they wish it. We’ll need them.’

Lyse ... The name of one of the groundlings helping Allehra. Henri took a deep breath. To send for help from the groundlings. It wasn’t the Valian Way. The kindred were the defenders of Valia; it was their duty to protect its people.

Bleak held out a piece of parchment. ‘Don’t you think it’s time the Valian Way adapted?’

Henri’s hand flew to the pouch of herbs around her neck. ‘How did you ...?’

Bleak smiled. 'Believe it or not, I might actually just be getting to know you.'

'What?'

'Sometimes, you don't need magic to know what another person is thinking.'

In spite of herself, Henri laughed.

'I'll come with you to the valley.'

'Don't you want to stay with Bren?'

Bleak sadly shook her head. 'He doesn't want me there,' she said. 'He asked for Tilly.'

Henri hesitated, and then handed Bleak a woollen scarf. 'Alright.'

The pair finished bundling on their layers. Henri hated how the coats restricted her movement, but they were a necessity. The blistering cold was unforgiving.

They borrowed two of Eydis' many dogs from the kennels and started off towards the Valley of Twisted Trees on horseback. Henri's teeth were already chattering as the wind picked up around them. Bleak muttered numerous curses under her breath.

'Henri!' someone called. 'Henri, wait!'

Athene reached them at the outer gates, her cheeks flushed.

Henri didn't miss the look of dislike that passed across Bleak's face as her kindred came up alongside them. Strange. Something had happened between them. Athene had always been Bleak's favourite.

'What is it?' Henri asked.

Athene glanced between her and Bleak. 'You should have a guard. Let me saddle up.'

'That's not necessary,' Henri told her. 'Bleak and I are safe enough. It's not far.'

'But ...'

The more Athene protested, the more it fed Henri's suspicions.

Athene kept pushing. 'You and *Alarise*,' the name came out forced, 'are too valuable. We can't have —'

'I said it's not necessary. Thank you.' Henri squeezed her horse's sides with her heels, following the canines' lead, and didn't look back as they left Athene at the gates.

Snow fell heavily, dusting their hair and shoulders with wet flakes. Their mounts trotted steadily through the deep powder, unaffected by the

icy gale.

When they entered the forest, Henri couldn't stand it any longer. She turned to Bleak. 'What happened? With Athene?'

Bleak grimaced, her grip visibly tightening on the reins. 'I went into her mind. Accidentally. I saw ...'

'What?'

Bleak sighed. 'I think you should ask Sahara.'

'Sahara? Why? What's she got to do with Athene?'

'Just ask her, Henri. It's not my place.'

Henri clicked her tongue in frustration. There were too many secrets floating around for her liking. Which reminded her ...

'Did you notice anything unusual about the boy, Dash?' she asked Bleak, urging her horse deeper into the trees.

Bleak gave her a sideways glance. 'Like?'

*You were supposed to save my son*, Swinton had said to Fi. The salt-sprayed wind had carried the words across the wet shale back to Henri. *My son ...*

A piece of the puzzle had dropped into place for her then, and she'd been turning it over in her mind ever since. It explained so much about the commander. But the boy ... The boy clearly had no idea who his real father was.

Bleak was watching her.

'Well?' Henri said.

Bleak nodded. 'Well ... he looks like ...' she trailed off, pulling her reins taut.

A vicious growl sounded.

Henri's hands shot to her katars, unsheathing them in an instant. Bleak drew a dagger. Henri didn't know if the sound had come from one of their dogs up ahead, or something else. They inched forward on their horses, the insistent snow dampening Henri's sharp senses. Henri signalled for them to halt and leaped down from her mount. She looked at Bleak and pressed a single finger to her lips. Bleak nodded.

Henri crept through the snow, using the trees for cover. She could hear something moving. She followed the sound, careful not to make any noise of her own, and spotted their canines, watching on from behind a bush.

*What's out there?*

The rustling sound grew closer, and closer, until —

Henri threw herself into the open, colliding with a petite frame. She shoved her opponent into a trunk, and pressed a katar to the stranger's throat.

It wasn't a stranger.

'*Mariette*,' she snapped, drawing back her blade. 'What in the realm are you doing?'

Mariette shoved her off, annoyed. 'I don't answer to you,' she bit back. 'But if you *must* know, I'm looking for Bear. Eydis can't find him.'

'Bear?' The dog hardly left the queen's side. 'Do you need help?'

'No, I'm fine. He'll be around here somewhere.'

Bleak appeared with the horses.

'Just me,' Mariette said to her.

'So I see ... Henri, we should get going.'

Henri nodded, taking the reins from Bleak. 'Sorry,' she said to Mariette.

'No harm done. See you back at the towers.'

Swinging herself back onto her horse, Henri gave a final nod. 'See you back there.'

They left Mariette in the woods and continued to push deeper into the forest. The trees closed in around them, until finally, they reached the Valley of Twisted Trees. Although Henri had seen it a handful of times now, it was no less eerie. The trunks and branches were malformed and bare, and yet still somehow rich with magic.

Dismounting, Henri showed Bleak to the entrance. Down inside the cavern, the women secured their letters to the dog's harness.

'Do you think they'll come?' Bleak asked as they watched the canine disappear into the darkness.

'Only time will tell,' Henri said, getting to her feet.

The journey back to the towers was mostly silent but for the crunch of snow beneath the horses' hooves. Henri didn't mind the newfound ease between her and Bleak ...

*Alarise*, she corrected herself as the gates of Wildenhaven came back into view. The girl hadn't turned out as Henri had expected. It seemed like a lifetime ago she was leading them through the living bridges of Valia, finding herself in the company of a mind whisperer for the first time.

She glanced across at her friend. 'What is it?' she asked, noting the pained expression Bleak's odd eyes held.

‘He ... He called me a liar,’ she said softly, more to herself than to Henri.

‘Aren’t we all liars? To a certain extent?’ Henri asked gently. ‘You did what you had to do to survive.’

Bleak gave a heavy sigh. ‘I don’t want to be a liar,’ she said. ‘Not anymore.’

‘Me either,’ Henri told her.

IT WAS a relief to shrug out of the cumbersome furs and step into the blazing warmth of the hall. Bleak ducked away quickly, no doubt to go and visit Bren, while Henri sought Eydis. The winter queen sat at a large table, with Dash, of all people, beside her. Their heads were nearly touching as they leaned in close and talked in lowered voices. To Henri’s surprise, she spotted Bear at Eydis’ feet.

‘You found him?’ she asked, taking up the chair opposite the pair of seers.

‘What?’ Eydis said, looking up with a furrowed brow.

‘Mariette, she told —’

‘My queen,’ Nicolai interrupted, appearing at the head of the table, snow still dusting his shoulders.

‘Nicolai?’

‘They’ve breached our shores,’ he said, his face grave.

‘Where?’

‘Port Avesta.’

Eydis nodded, taking a deep breath. ‘Very well. We must —’

‘That’s not all, my queen.’

‘Tell me.’

‘There’s mist, Your Majesty.’

‘What?’

‘Mist. Rolling in from the south.’



## CHAPTER 38

Dash edged away from the chaos unfolding in the hall. Heated debates broke out instantly between Queen Eydis' generals, the Valians and Casimir's group of rebels. Tailor sidled up beside Dash, crossing his arms over his chest.

'I don't want any part in it either,' he said, looking on. 'Though, best they get it out of their systems now. Can't be having this on the battlefield.'

*Battlefield.* A few months ago, Dash never would have dreamed he'd be anywhere near such a thing, but now ... It was different now. His hand went to the hilt of the old broadsword sheathed at his hip. Luka had given it to him.

Tailor followed his gaze. 'Heard you know how to use that thing?'

Dash shrugged. 'Some.'

'Some's better than none, little brother.'

But Dash wasn't listening anymore. Eydis had taken to the dais, her long gown trailing after her, her eyes shining fiercely.

A gong sounded, and Dash's hands went instinctively to his ears.

'That's enough,' Eydis yelled.

Silence fell.

'We march for Port Avesta at dawn,' she said.

'What about the mist?' a voice called from the crowd.

'We will find a way to contain it. I will not have these false subjects invade our lands and terrorise our people.' The queen's voice was laced with challenge, but Dash couldn't imagine anyone arguing with her in this moment. Queen Eydis was a force to be reckoned with in her own right.

A Valian woman stepped forward, with braided hair black as midnight and eyes like a cat. The woman from the wanted posters. Henrietta of Valia.

He turned to Tailor. 'What's she ...?'

But Tailor was gone.

'My kindred and I will lead the attack,' said Henrietta, looking every bit the legendary warrior.

Queen Eydis bowed her head in thanks. 'Our forces will fall in line behind you.'

Another woman stepped forward and Dash started at the sight of another Valian – who looked nearly identical to Henrietta, only with shorter, unbound hair.

She cleared her throat. 'Our rebel clan stands with you as well.'

Murmurs of approval sounded from around the hall.

With the formalities over, Dash watched as Queen Eydis dismissed her generals and approached him. Unsure of the appropriate response, Dash froze as she rested a hand on his arm and leaned in towards him.

'I want you close by me,' she whispered. 'Something's amiss, and I think our visions are strongest, most accurate, when we are near an Ashai of likeness.'

Over the past few days, Dash himself had thought the same thing, noticing that whenever Eydis was near, the magic felt thicker in his veins.

'Of course, Your Majesty,' he said, bowing his head.

As the queen made to leave, she hesitated. 'You're doing well,' she told him. 'I know it must be no easy adjustment, from boy to man, from stablehand to royal ally.'

Dash was hit with a wave of gratitude. Someone was finally acknowledging what he'd been through. He wanted to talk about it. Wanted to tell Eydis, Luka or even Tailor how confused and unsettled he felt.

'Let us talk tonight, after supper, my friend,' Queen Eydis said, catching her general's eye. She peeled away from Dash and left him there alone.

'I KNOW YOU, DON'T I?' the girl they called Bleak said, approaching him at the dining table. 'I recognised you when they brought you in, before you changed.'

Dash lowered his knife and fork and took in her odd-coloured eyes, her messy ash-blond hair. He nodded. 'In Heathton. In the castle. You – you

were a prisoner.'

She swung a leg over the bench he was sitting on and faced him. 'That's it! You're how I found out about Oremere. I saw a map, in your —' she cut herself off.

But Dash knew; the Valians had talked about her over dinner numerous times now. She was a mind whisperer. If she'd seen a map, *the* map, the one from Olena's books, it meant she'd seen inside his head.

'Sorry,' she said, her face flushed. 'I can't — I can't always help it.'

Dash shrugged. 'I saw you once before.' The words were out of his mouth before he could think. 'In a vision. I watched you sail into the mist ... I was there. For a moment.'

Bleak went still, and the colour drained from her face. 'Oh.'

'I can't always help it either ...'

She nodded, glancing back to the group of prisoners. 'I'm Bleak.'

He offered his hand. 'Dash.'

She gripped it firmly and nodded to his plate. 'You're taking your time with dinner.'

Much of the dining hall had emptied.

'I eat a lot more than I used to.'

Bleak nodded absent-mindedly.

'Have you had anything to eat?' he asked, noting the dark circles beneath her eyes.

She hesitated. 'No ... I don't think I have. I can't remember ...' She trailed off.

Dash took the bread roll from his plate and placed it in front of her.

Bleak smiled. 'A friend of mine has this rule.'

'A rule?'

'She says, *when there's a hot meal, eat.*'

Dash leaned across the table and dragged a steaming pot of broth towards Bleak. 'Now, you have a hot meal.'

Bleak looked from the broth back to Dash. 'I suppose I do.'

They ate in comfortable silence, and while Dash didn't know Bleak, he felt relieved to be in the company of someone from Heathton. Somehow, it made home feel less far away. She loudly slurped the dregs of her broth straight from the bowl. Dash grinned. He picked up the leftover chicken from his plate and gnawed at the bone.

‘You needn’t worry about table manners with me,’ Bleak said, placing her bowl back on the table. ‘I grew up with a bunch of fishermen. Be surprised if they knew what cutlery was.’

Dash laughed, and the sound startled him. He hadn’t heard himself laugh in a long while, and now, it was different. A stranger’s laugh.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ Bleak said, getting to her feet. ‘It’s a nice laugh.’

It was only after she left that Dash realised she had read his mind again.

## CHAPTER 39

*A* midst the chaos of the Belbarrow moon markets, Swinton and Fiore were easily two ragged vagabonds, taking in the striking surroundings. They wandered at a forced leisurely pace. Swinton felt vulnerable without his battleaxes and with his newly shaven head, but Fi led the way, chatting with merchants and pointing out unusual wares.

Fruit and vegetables spilled onto the dirt path in front of the stalls, fire torches stuck out from the ground and lanterns hung overhead, casting shadows and lighting the way. Sacks of colourful spices lined much of the thoroughfare, their peppery aromas tickling Swinton's nostrils. He nearly tripped over a woman sitting in the dirt weaving baskets, a great pile of them stacked behind her. She glared at Swinton and sized him up. Beside her, another woman was selling intricately patterned fabric. A thickly muscled trader flagged them down, but Swinton shook his head and continued after Fi. They stopped at numerous stalls, taking up jars of pickled goods and diligently studying their labels.

'Where is this so-called contact?' Swinton hissed, placing a jar back, having stared at the instructions until they were a blur. His Battalionian reading was rusty at the best of times.

'He'll be here,' Fi said quietly, smiling at the young shopkeep.

Even in the shadows, Swinton saw her blush furiously.

Swinton shook his head. *Unbelievable*. When all this was over, he and Fi were going to have a *very* long talk about what exactly in the former captain's past life had made him so casual in the face of grave danger.

He reached to toy with the coin of Yacinda, but Fi's hand shot out to grip his wrist.

‘You are well known for that tic, old friend,’ he said. ‘Don’t draw attention to it. If I were you, I’d get rid of the blasted thing altogether.’

‘I can’t,’ Swinton whispered. ‘The visions come on all the time. And I told you – there’s something wrong with them. They’re not right.’

‘How do you know?’

Swinton glanced around, wary of being overheard. ‘I was shown something that never was, and never could be. Myself, younger – a teenager, sparring with that redheaded Valian, Athene. I’m not getting any younger, Fi, and I’d never met the woman until they came upon us in the Hawthornes.’

Fi massaged the bridge of his nose. ‘Old friend,’ he said with a sad smile. ‘I’m guessing that wasn’t you ...’

‘What?’

Fi nodded. ‘That’ll be young Dash now. And I’ll wager that it wasn’t Athene, but rather her daughter, Luka.’

‘He ... That’s not possible.’

‘He looks just like you, Dimi. I told you.’

‘Psst,’ someone hissed.

Swinton whirled around, seeing no one.

‘Psst!’

Swinton spotted the source of the noise standing by the next stall.

‘Kamath?’ His official Battalonian squire pressed a silver coin into a vendor’s palm. Fiore was already by his side.

‘Sir.’ Kamath bowed in Swinton’s direction.

Incredulous, Swinton’s gaze flicked between his squire and his friend. ‘What ... How do you ...?’

‘No time, Dimitri. Kamath has a way in. We have to go, *now*.’

He had no choice but to follow them through the swelling crowds. They wove their way through merchants, street artists and even a troupe of fire eaters. All the while Swinton’s heart hammered against his sternum. But no one glanced their way. They were simply commoners, shoving their way through the throng like everyone else, trying to find the best bargains the moon markets had to offer.

Kamath led them the long way around the outskirts of the shiprock, to one of the nearby service entrances to the palace. Swinton stopped at the sight of two Battalonian guards, but Fiore nodded to them. The guards

acknowledged him by raising two fingers to their brows in salute. Not for the first time, Swinton turned to Fi.

*Who are you?*

‘Here,’ said Kamath, gesturing to a large laundry trolley filled with sheets.

‘What?’ Swinton started, but Fi was already swinging himself inside.

Swinton swore and did the same, trying not to inhale the musty scent of the old linens as Kamath rearranged the laundry on top of them.

They began to move. Swinton winced as the wheels of the trolley squeaked loudly beneath them. The entire thing rattled as they jolted down a step from the rough dirt road to the smooth marble floor of the palace.

Swinton swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to quell the churning in his stomach. There was no going back now.

The conversations between Kamath and the internal palace guards were muffled by the layers of sheets, and Swinton’s doubts began to fester. Sooner or later, someone was bound to ask Kamath why he wasn’t heading in the direction of the royal laundry.

Swinton was thrown against the side of the trolley as they rounded a sharp corner. He heard Fi curse under his breath, and Swinton spared a thought for his friend’s newly stitched wounds. They came to a sudden stop, and the creak of a door opening and closing sounded.

‘Commander, Captain,’ Kamath said quietly. ‘It’s safe.’

Swinton threw back the sheets and struggled out of the tangle of linens. Once he was out of the trolley, he helped Fi do the same. Fresh blood seeped from Fi’s stitches, but the Battalionian didn’t complain. They’d suffer worse if things didn’t go to plan.

The small shed was illuminated by a single torch secured in a nearby sconce. An array of tools – rakes, hoes, shovels – lined the walls, and the air smelled like damp dirt.

‘Where are we?’ Swinton demanded.

‘This is where we store the garden equipment. It is a shed on the outskirts of the royal conservatory.’

For the first time, Swinton anticipated betrayal. ‘How did you get us here? Why would you bring linens here?’

‘We often use old sheets to protect the more fragile plants from the heat,’ Kamath replied, gesturing to an old pile of linens in the corner of the room.

Fiore gave him a reassuring nod and Swinton fell quiet.

‘The princess is close,’ Kamath continued. ‘She sits on the stone bench by the tulips. The prince is with her.’

Swinton grimaced. ‘The prince?’

‘We knock him out,’ Fi said. ‘By the time he wakes, we’ll be gone.’

Despite their current traitor status, Swinton didn’t like the idea of striking the prince. And from what he’d seen on the training ground, the prince wouldn’t go quietly. But they were here now. What had to be done would be done, one way or another.

‘What of the guards?’ Swinton turned back to Kamath.

‘Six, from what I saw. I’ll create a distraction. Protocol states that at least two will stay with the royals.’

‘I’ll take care of them,’ Swinton muttered.

‘Dimitri,’ Fi said. ‘*We do not kill*. The Battalionian guards are good men, ignorant perhaps, but good.’

Swinton nodded. ‘Fine. Disarm only.’

Kamath made for the door. ‘On my signal, then?’

‘What’s the signal?’ Fi asked, hand at the hilt of his sword.

‘Fire,’ said Kamath, the door closing behind him.

Swinton and Fi waited in the stuffy shed, each second feeling longer than the last. What if Kamath was caught? What if gardeners happened upon them while they waited? The doubts and fears plagued Swinton’s mind like a swarm of insects. As did King Arden’s threats.

*Were the consequences of inaction not made plain enough for you, Commander?*

Now, Swinton didn’t know if it had been a dream or some kind of magical illusion from the monarch. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that he would no longer bend to the king’s will, would no longer do his bidding. Word of his betrayal would have reached the ears of everyone in Belbarrow now, perhaps even Heathton. He was no longer Commander Swinton, no longer the noble son of Sir Caleb Swinton. Now he was just Dimitri, but he was his own man.

They heard a commotion.

Swinton and Fi burst from the shed, weapons at the ready, and raced towards the heart of the garden. Fi led them through the narrow pathways and manicured hedges and flowers at breakneck pace, all the while



clutching the wound in his side. He halted suddenly, nearly sending Swinton crashing into his back.

There, the prince and three guards had their swords drawn, backs to the princess, ready to defend.

Heart pounding, his own sword in his hand, Swinton looked to Princess Olena.

‘Your Highness,’ he said, not taking his eyes off the guards before them, the pleading clear in his tone.

‘Is that my long-lost commander?’ the princess said, her clouded gaze following his voice.

‘It is, Your Highness.’

‘Stand down, Commander.’ Prince Nazuri held his blade at the ready, taking in Swinton’s shaved head and lack of uniform. ‘You have forsaken your duty and betrayed your princess. I order you to stand down.’

‘I cannot,’ Swinton said, forcing himself to speak calmly. ‘It is my duty to protect her, and this is the only way I can.’

The prince took a step forward. ‘By threatening her guards? By drawing your weapon in the presence of her betrothed?’

‘By any means necessary, Your Highness. It’s no longer safe here.’

‘Zuri,’ Princess Olena said, reaching out to the prince. ‘I want to hear what he has to say.’

‘Olena, we can’t —’

‘I want to hear him.’

Swinton risked a glance to Fi beside him, his friend’s features a pained mix of desperation and regret.

The prince didn’t lower his blade.

‘Are we not equals?’ Olena challenged, somehow sensing the continuing impasse between both sides. ‘Have our dreams of the future not been genuine? Or am I subject to your orders?’

The anger in Nazuri’s dark eyes softened. He turned to the princess. ‘Never,’ he said softly.

‘Then we *will* hear what my commander, and his captain, if I’m not mistaken, have to say. And we will hear it quickly.’

‘You’re not mistaken,’ Fiore spoke up. ‘We have ... We need ...’ His usually confident voice faltered, and he looked to Swinton.

‘Your Highness,’ Swinton said. ‘War is coming. You’re not safe here.’

‘What?’ Prince Nazuri exclaimed. ‘If that’s true, this is the safest place for her.’

‘I’m afraid not, Your Highness. This war has started from within. King Arden is responsible for the death of Queen Vera. I fear the princess is next.’

The prince reached once again for his sword, but Princess Olena held up a hand.

‘You have said all you need to say, Commander?’ she asked.

‘Not by half, Highness, but we have no time.’

‘Olena,’ Prince Nazuri implored. ‘Even if what he says is true – we will find no safety or peace with two outlaws.’

Princess Olena nodded slowly. ‘That is true ...’

‘Your Highness.’ Desperation laced Swinton’s voice. ‘Your friend, the stable master’s son?’

The princess froze, her pale complexion becoming paler still. ‘What of him?’

Swinton took a deep breath. ‘He’s not the stable master’s son,’ he told her. ‘He’s *my* son. So you see, I must save you, I *must*. Or he’d never forgive me.’

The princess’ expression was unreadable, and by her side, the prince stared at him as though he was seeing him for the first time. Princess Olena took a step towards Swinton.

‘For the longest time,’ she said, ‘he wanted to be like you.’

‘Olena,’ Prince Nazuri warned. ‘We don’t know —’

‘But we do.’

‘Olena —’

‘I have told you of the fifth continent,’ she said. ‘I have told you what I have learned.’

*The princess knows? How could she?*

‘The books, Commander,’ Princess Olena said, as though sensing his confusion. ‘The history books in quaveer were the only ones not altered or destroyed. Either people didn’t know what they contained, or thought they were just the deranged ramblings of the blind. Either way, I know the truth.’

‘Olena, it’s not safe with them. How can two known traitors protect us out there?’ Prince Nazuri argued.

‘We won’t be safe,’ she said, turning back to her prince. ‘Not out there, but not in here either. We have to go with them, Zuri. If this realm has a

chance at a future, we go with them.'

Swinton held his breath. *We?* It was one thing to steal a princess, but another to kidnap the heir of an entire continent. The look on Fi's face told him he thought the same.

Prince Nazuri addressed his guards. 'Stand down, men. Do *not* raise the alarm.'

'Your Highness —' one protested.

Swinton drew himself up to full height. 'That was a direct order from your future king.'

The guard fell silent, though Swinton knew the moment they were gone, the guard would follow protocol.

'Ten paces back, guards,' Olena said, her voice cool and authoritative.

Reluctantly, the men did as she bid.

Seeing his opportunity, Swinton leaned closer to the two royals. 'We need to get to the outer city stables. We leave on horseback, tonight.'

'We shall meet you there,' Prince Nazuri said, linking his arm through the princess'. 'If we leave the palace with you, it's over before it begins.'

Swinton hesitated. He didn't know enough about the foreign prince, but there was no time.

'Your Highness?' He turned to Princess Olena. 'Do you trust him?'

For the first time, Olena smiled. 'With my life, Commander.'

That had to be enough. He had to trust *her*. 'Then we shall meet you in the stables in three hours. Do not burden yourself with possessions.'

Prince Nazuri gripped Swinton's arm. 'Commander?'

'Yes, Your Highness?'

'The guards,' the prince said. 'Get rid of them. They will kill you before they let you leave.'

Swinton turned to Fi and gave a single nod.

SWINTON AND FIORE managed to escape the shiprock the way they had entered, having locked the three unconscious guards in the shed. Kamath pushed them through the palace corridors undetected, and Swinton thanked the gods for the realm's most loyal, unflinching squire. In the slums of Belbarrow, they bid him farewell.

Swinton grasped both of Kamath's hands in his. 'I truly hope to see you again,' he said.

‘And I you, sir,’ he replied, before disappearing into the night.

Fiore’s hand clapped Swinton’s shoulder. ‘He’ll be alright, old friend. He knows what he’s doing.’

‘I hope so,’ Swinton said, following Fi into the shadows.

The city was still buzzing with life, even as the hour grew late. The men passed many a drunken reveller, and pushed away the insistent hands of the capital’s harlots. The merriment from the moon markets carried across the city, providing them with excellent cover as they navigated the dark, twisting alleys.

Finally, they reached the outskirts of town and the outer city stables. Much to Swinton’s despair, Xander had been placed under a heavy guard. King Arden knew him well, it seemed, knew he couldn’t leave behind the one reminder of Eliza he had left.

But the guards who had been assigned to the station weren’t happy about it. Being put on horse-watch was an insult to a trained warrior. They were drunk, and with a few precise blows, Swinton and Fi had them sprawling across the hay.

The stablehand on duty took one look at Fi and gave him a two-fingered salute, disappearing into the tack room.

‘One day, Fi,’ Swinton said, ‘you’re going to have to tell me your secrets, too.’

Fi laughed, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. ‘One day, old friend.’

Relief swelled in Swinton’s chest at the sight of Xander, who nickered softly as he approached. ‘It’s good to see you, too, comrade.’

They waited. An hour passed. Then two. In the dark hours of the early morning, the moon markets finally closed, and Belbarrow slowly drifted towards sleep.

Swinton’s heart sank. They’d put their trust in the wrong person. The princess had been wrong about Prince Nazuri.

The worry on Fi’s face told him he’d reached the same conclusion.

‘We have to leave,’ Swinton said, leading Xander from his stall at last.

‘I know.’

Swinton ran a hand over his shaved head. ‘We hide, until we can find another opportunity to talk with the princess. We can’t give up. Can we stay with Ethelda?’

Fi shook his head. ‘I won’t ask that of her,’ he said. ‘But there are plenty of places, if one knows where to —’

‘There’s nothing more romantic than an early-morning ride,’ said a smooth voice from the entrance to the stables. ‘The princess and I wish to ride out to watch the sunrise together. Get out. All of you.’

Swinton and Fi peered through the cracks of their hiding spot to see Prince Nazuri and Princess Olena stride in dressed in formal riding attire.

‘Your Highness, your father —’

‘It was my father’s idea.’ The prince’s tone was as sharp as any blade. ‘Or shall I tell him of how you ruined the princess’ day, after all she’s been through?’

‘No, no, Your Highness. Of course.’ The poor stableboy couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

All was quiet.

‘Are they here?’ the princess said softly. ‘We’re so late, they may have left.’

Swinton emerged from the shadows, Fi close behind him. ‘We’re here, Your Highness. Do you ride?’

She turned in his direction. ‘Likely better than you, Commander,’ she replied.

The sky bled shades of flame as Swinton, Fiore, Princess Olena and Prince Nazuri rode out of the royal Belbarrow stables. They cantered along the outskirts of the city, avoiding the night watch and guard patrols, following the coastline well out of the capital.

Swinton watched the princess carefully, but she didn’t falter. True to her word, she rode well – better than well. She moved seamlessly with her horse, having mastered the delicate balance between control and give. Nazuri stayed close by her, his face lined with worry. Swinton wanted to reassure him but didn’t have the words. There would be no reassurance, no safety from here on.

They rode hard, only stopping for water on two brief occasions. It was dusk when they reached the Janhallow cliffs and the narrow, rocky path down. Swinton hesitated on the threshold, his hand instinctively reaching up to toy with the coin of Yacinda.

Fi nudged his horse up alongside Xander. ‘Don’t you think it’s time you let it go, old friend?’

Swinton glanced down at the worn coin between his fingers.

‘Thought we had said goodbye to your secrets?’ the Battalonian said.

They had.

Swinton tugged the chain, feeling the clasp give out at the back of his neck. As they began their descent down the precarious trail, Swinton let the coin fall from his outstretched palm. It hit the dirt with a soft thud. His magic surged, knocking him in the chest with full force, more powerful than it had ever been. He gripped Xander's reins tightly and welcomed that power with his entire being. For the faint thread that had once connected his life to his son's ... Suddenly, it grew taut and strong.

When they reached the bottom of the path, what lay before them took Swinton's breath away. The Janhallow Desert, red and barren, stretched out as far as the eye could see.

They didn't stop. The company of four rode towards the horizon at full pelt.

## CHAPTER 40

Bleak followed Henri through the cold corridors of the third Wildenhaven tower, half jogging to keep up with the Valian. They were due to set out for battle in a matter of hours, and everyone was on high alert. But Bleak had two stops to make first.

At last, they reached the makeshift medical wing Eydis had set up for the Ashai folk from Moredon Tower. Henri pushed open the door for her, and she stepped inside. Cots lined the floor in rows, and a fire blazed on either end of what was ordinarily a dining hall.

‘How many?’ Bleak asked Henri under her breath.

‘Fifty-one now,’ Henri replied. ‘Four didn’t make it through the journey.’

Bleak’s heart sank. They’d been too late. ‘How are the survivors?’

‘Varying states.’

She was right. There were people of different ages in different states of health and care. Bleak scanned the hall, taking in the faces, the injuries, the moans of pain coming from numerous cots. What she was about to ask of them ... She didn’t know if she could. She wished Rion was there, but Henri rightly had pointed out that bringing a teerah panther to a request like this might be seen as a threat.

Henri elbowed her. ‘These are your people,’ she said. ‘And we need all the magic we can get. If we don’t stop Ines, how many more will suffer their fate?’

Bleak’s instincts were telling her to back away into the shadows, that she couldn’t handle the onslaught of thoughts humming around her and the agony that these people had endured. But she had no choice.

Straightening herself, she made for the platform at the end of the room. She could do this. She *had* to do this.

*Alarise. Alarise. Alarise.* Her name was a whisper on strangers' lips and in their minds. A chant, a question, a prayer. With each step, with each repetition of who she was, she found her voice.

'My name is Alarise Thornton.' Her voice projected to the far corners of the hall. 'I have something to ask of you today ... And given everything, I hate to be the one to ask it, but I must. I know many of you are injured and weak, I know I can only imagine what you've been through ... But Prince Casimir and I need your help. We need every ounce of magic we can muster in the upcoming fight. You are our best hope. We seek any able Ashai folk who are willing to help us.'

The room fell silent, and Bleak looked out onto the crowd, whose faces bore the fear she felt.

She forced the names from her tongue. 'Ines and Arden's forces have breached the shores. They march for Wildenhaven. Half a dozen villages lie between us and them, so we must meet them on the frozen moorlands of Port Avesta. We need your magic. Who will stand with us?'

Bleak had to keep her voice from trembling. She could taste the desperation lacing her words. It was a fool's hope. Ines had more men, more weaponry and the mist. She had weaponised it, Casimir had said. It would bring nothing but horror, Bleak knew. And yet she asked – she asked her people for help. People who had already suffered and lost so much. She stood atop the platform, heart in her throat, heat flushing her face. Bleak saw Henri's crestfallen expression. She made for the steps and froze.

A single hand rose from the crowd. And another. And another.

*Alarise. Alarise. Alarise.*

More hands were raised. Until she was staring at the majority.

'Thank you,' she managed, exhaling a shaky breath. 'Thank you.'

Henri pulled her through the throng of people towards the door when another chant stopped Bleak in her tracks.

*One ... two ... three ... four ... one ... two ... three ... four ... five ...*

'What's that?' Bleak asked, tugging Henri back.

'What's what?'

'That counting?'

Henri paused, straining to hear.

*One ... two ... three ... four ...*



Bleak looked around wildly, trying to find the source. 'I can —'

'Bleak, Henri,' Sahara's voice called sharply. 'We're leaving. Bring whoever you can to the armoury. We ride out within the hour.'

Bleak's attention was dragged back to the tasks at hand. She still had one more stop to make. She left Henri and Sahara, promising to meet them in the courtyard.

BREN WAS SLEEPING when she entered his chambers. She knelt by his cot, careful not to disturb him. He looked peaceful. Colour had returned to his face, and someone had washed the dirt and blood from his skin. While he was still thin, he looked more like the Bren she had always known.

'I promise I'll come back for you,' Bleak whispered, holding her head in her hands.

There was a rasp for breath, and her head snapped up.

'Bren?'

'Don't.'

That single word was a knife to her heart.

'Bren ...'

His eyes opened. The blue irises that had always held so much light were now stormy and cold. 'Get out.'

'I just —'

'I said, get out.'

Bleak took a deep breath and stood. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she wanted to beg forgiveness for. But for once, it wasn't about what she wanted. And so, as she left the room, and passed Tilly in the hallway, she made the vow to herself. Bren had fought for her for the past ten years. Now, it was her turn to fight for him.

SURROUNDED by Valian kindred and Ashai folk, Bleak sat atop Rion's back and rode out into the hinterlands of Havennesse. Henri and Casimir flanked her, both leaders looking equally grim, their horses whinnying nervously as they cantered alongside the great teerah panther.

Bleak couldn't help but look back at their forces. Even with the Valians, the rebels and the Ashai, they were outnumbered. Outnumbered and lacking

in experience as a unit. She didn't need to be an army general to know that the odds weren't good. And there was the mist ...

She turned to Casimir. 'Do we even stand a chance?' she yelled over the thunder of hooves.

He pulled a thick scarf away from his mouth. 'Only one way to find out.'

## CHAPTER 41

Dash's magic rushed through his veins as they rode through the wintry wild. It was as though the untamed snowlands of Havenesse had awoken something lying dormant within him. Now, as he cantered alongside the Wildenhaven soldiers through the blistering cold, he was different, he was *himself*. The wilderness seemed to have the same effect on Queen Eydis. She glanced back at him from atop her Kildaholm thoroughbred in the front line. Yes, he would hazard a guess that Her Majesty's magic felt the call of the hinterland as much as his.

He was an extension of his horse; a lifetime of being a stableboy had finally paid off. He rode better than most of the soldiers around him, and it hadn't gone unnoticed. Beneath the furs, his borrowed armour was heavy. Luka had helped strap him into it, and he prayed that it wouldn't make him too much slower when the time came to fight.

He'd dreamed of this moment for as long as he could remember. Of the day he'd march into battle, sword in hand, no fear, only courage in his heart. It didn't feel like how he'd imagined. There was no sense of glory. Only the monotony of the onward push through the freezing lands, the sting of the cold, and the terror. The terror was a separate beast that stalked through the lines of soldiers, its essence contagious, latching its talons deep into anyone who acknowledged it. Dash gripped the hilt of his sword to steady himself. He wouldn't acknowledge the terror. Not yet.

'You won't be in the front lines, little brother,' Tailor said from his left. The man was hunched over in his saddle, as though he was bored.

'I could be,' Dash argued.

Tailor shook his head. 'Eydis wouldn't allow it. You're too valuable to risk. Besides, I didn't drag you halfway across the realm only to have you die.'

'I can fight.'

'Didn't say you couldn't. Doesn't mean you should. You hear?'

Dash frowned. He didn't know why Tailor was suddenly his keeper. He hardly knew the man. No one did. He seemed to flit between the groups, forever the outsider.

'How do you know my parents?' Dash asked, guiding his horse closer to Tailor's.

'I don't,' Tailor replied. 'I know the captain, and he's friends with your father.'

'They're not friends. Captain Murphadias just boards his horse at our stables.'

'Know everything, do you? Brother, I say this with kindness ... Might be time to start asking questions.'

'I always ask questions. Mama and Pa hate it.'

'Then it might be time to start asking the *right* ones.' Tailor clicked his tongue and pushed his horse forward, catching up to Casimir. *Prince Casimir*, the Ashai folk had been whispering. The legend himself. The more Dash had overheard over the last few days, the more he realised that the stories in Olena's letters hadn't been stories at all. She'd been sending him the truth in the only way she knew how. She'd taken a great risk in doing so, all for him. Her history books had been right, and Olena had known from the beginning, had tried to warn him. It made Dash miss her all the more.

He wriggled his toes in his boots, wary of the cold latching onto his extremities. With the rhythm of the march, he found himself thinking back on the letter he'd sent a few days ago. He knew it off by heart, after deciphering it from written word to quaveer.

*DEAREST OLENA,*

*I'm afraid I am much changed since my last letter. I don't even sound like me as I write this, I know. I cannot explain it here and now, but hopefully one day soon.*

*I'm writing to warn you. Everything you have written to me about has been discovered. War is brewing. It may already be here.*

*I will come to you as soon as I can. My place will always be by your side.*

*Forever in friendship,*

*Dash*

HE'D WANTED to explain it all, wished so badly to close the seas between them, and be with her as he'd always been. But his letter had said all he could say. He'd spent hours perforating the parchment, creating the dots that Olena, and hopefully only Olena, would be able to read.

THE TOWERS of Wildenhaven had long since disappeared. Now, they were surrounded by snow-covered trees and looming mountains, each one more perilous than the last. The craggy peaks vanished into the clouds, and the sheer cliff drops made Dash's stomach squirm. They cantered alongside a frozen river, its sleek, hard surface like a looking glass.

Dash had heard enough of the planning that he knew roughly where they were: north of the Kildaholm Alps. They had taken the longer route, with Eydis and her general hoping to catch Arden's forces by surprise from the south-east. But Dash was no fool. He felt the doubt seeping through the soldiers. He looked back to the polished sheen of the ice river, and suddenly, his head was spinning ...

*THE GROUND WAS TREMBLING. Shaking so hard, his knees knocked together and the vibration reverberated through his whole body, making his teeth ache. It was dark, so much inky black that he couldn't tell if his eyes were open or not. And the cold ... The cold was as though he himself was frozen inside a giant brick of ice, trapped beneath the glassy sheets of the river itself. The ground continued to shake, rattling Dash's entire being until ...*

*Everything was white.*

‘BROTHER.’ Someone was in his ear. ‘Little brother, come back to us. Can’t have you falling off your horse.’

Dash opened his eyes. Tailor was wrenching him upright from where he’d been slumped against his horse’s neck.

‘You alright?’ Tailor asked, peering into his face with concern.

Dash nodded. ‘I think so.’

‘Vision?’

Dash nodded again, gripping the saddle horn, still feeling shaky.

‘What was it this time?’

‘I need to speak with the queen.’

They came to an abrupt halt. Ahead, Nicolai had signalled, and Dash lurched forward in the saddle as his horse pulled up short. Blood roaring in his ears, he craned his neck to see what lay ahead.

*Teerah panthers.* Three more of them, prowling towards the horses. Their silvery-black coats glimmered over muscular torsos, and their huge paws sank deep into the snow.

‘What are you doing here?’ said a woman’s voice. Bleak, Dash realised.

She came up from the tail end of their legion, on the back of a panther larger than the rest. The entire army waited as she jumped down and greeted each of the beasts, reaching up and scratching behind their ears. The beasts leaned down in turn and nuzzled her neck.

Dash still couldn’t quite believe they existed. After years of Mama’s bedtime stories about them, here they were, as real as the horse he now sat upon.

‘Take ten minutes to stretch your legs,’ General Nicolai called out.

There was a murmur of relief from the soldiers around Dash. He swung his leg up over his saddle and dismounted, plunging into knee-deep snow. He needed to speak with Queen Eydis. He pushed his way through Eydis’ forces, men and women alike rubbing their gloved hands together, tending to their mounts and standing in small huddles. Spotting a flash of red hair, Dash made a beeline for Luka. She was with her mother, Athene; they’d help him get to Eydis. But as he approached, he caught their hushed, angry words.

‘She *knows*, Luka. We need to act!’

‘There is no “we”, Ma. I never wanted —’

‘You’re seventeen. What do you know about wanting?’

‘Enough to know what I *don’t* want! Enough to know that this is *wrong*.’

‘We haven’t worked this hard —’

Dash turned away. It was none of his business. And the last thing he wanted was for his only friend here to think he was eavesdropping on her private conversations. But what did they need to act on? Ignoring his burning curiosity, he stepped out of earshot. Instead, he saw Queen Eydis. She was wrapped in a brilliant black pelt and beneath it shone gold women’s armour. She was surrounded by her generals, the Valians and some of the rebel leaders. He forced his way through them, ignoring their protests and irritated glares.

‘Mister Carlington,’ Queen Eydis said, her eyes meeting his. ‘There you are.’

‘I was coming to see you, Your Majesty. I —’

‘You saw something.’

He nodded.

Bleak appeared at Casimir’s side. ‘What did you see?’

Dash hesitated.

‘Well?’ The odd-eyed girl’s face was flushed from the cold, but she gave him a nod of encouragement.

‘The ground was shaking,’ he told her. ‘And there was white everywhere. Nothing but white.’

‘Shaking? What do you mean? From the march of the army?’ Bleak asked, her eyes suddenly bright.

Dash shrugged. ‘I don’t know. That’s all the vision showed me.’

‘What do you think, Eydis?’ Bleak said, turning back to the winter queen, frowning.

Queen Eydis raised a brow at the lack of formality, but with a glance towards Dash, she answered, ‘I assumed the ground shaking was due to Arden’s army. They have a large force, Bleak.’

‘What if it’s not from that?’

‘What are you talking about?’ Henri said, stepping forward, her hands resting on the grips of her katars.

Bleak chewed her lip. ‘What if the ground trembling isn’t from the army, but from us?’

‘Our force isn’t large enough,’ Nicolai said impatiently.

Dash had no clue as to what Bleak was on about. She looked suddenly wild, her eyes darting from the queen, to him, to the panthers and to the mountains, as though her words couldn't keep up with her mind.

'A snowslide,' she breathed.

'What?' The queen was just as bewildered as Dash.

'Dash's vision, it was a snowslide.'

Tailor shuffled in beside Dash, crossing his arms over his chest. 'A snowslide will kill us all.'

Bleak ignored him. 'Those tunnels,' she said. 'The ones beneath the Forest of Wolves or the Twisted Trees Valley or whatever you call it.'

'What about them?' Eydis asked slowly.

'Are there any below us? Any close to here?'

'Yes.'

With a glance at Dash, Bleak took a deep breath. 'Then we don't need to outnumber Arden. We don't need to contain the mist,' she said. 'We need to *dig*.'

DASH HAD no idea what in the realm digging had to do with anything, but he found himself pushed back to the outskirts of the group as Bleak's words sent the others into a flurry. For a reason unbeknownst to him, new hope simmered at the surface of their actions now, a sense of urgency filling the air around them. Nicolai shouted orders and Dash mounted his horse, straining to hear the rest of the conversation between the leaders.

'What's going on?' Luka asked as she joined him.

'I don't know,' Dash replied. 'Bleak said something about digging.'

'What?'

Dash waved her away. He was still trying to listen, but his attention snagged on Casimir and Tailor standing nearby. They weren't speaking. They stood close together, watching Bleak atop her teerah panther. There was something odd about the way they were monitoring her.

'I need to get a better look,' she was saying to Eydis, Henri and Sahara. 'From higher up. See what we're facing. If it can be done ...'

Queen Eydis gave a grim nod. 'Very well,' she said.

Dash watched as Bleak pulled her hood around her face and gripped a fistful of the panther's fur, pressing herself close to his back.

'Where's she going?' Luka asked, alarmed.



‘To scout for us.’

‘What? She’s no scout. We should send one of the kindred.’

Bleak and her beasts had already turned towards the mountains.

‘Thornton,’ Henri’s sharp voice called out.

Bleak’s head whipped around, a question on her lips.

But the matriarch’s face broke out into a rare grin. ‘Don’t die.’

Bleak offered her own roguish smile. ‘I’ll do my best, Valian.’

*Thornton.* The name sent a jolt of recognition through Dash. He’d heard the rumours around the halls. One of the ruling families of Oremere ...

Dash nearly called out to her himself as Bleak broke away from the group. To say what, he didn’t know. It was too late in any case. The panthers tore off across the snow, their silvery-black fur shimmering beneath the sun’s glare.

‘Well I’ll be damned,’ Tailor said softly.

‘What?’ Dash asked.

‘Alarise Thornton ...’ Tailor murmured. ‘Didn’t think she had it in her.’

The sound of a battle horn obliterated all the thoughts in Dash’s head. He gripped his reins and swallowed hard.

A host of Ellestian soldiers was on the white horizon.

## CHAPTER 42

Henri had always hated the sound of battle horns. They seemed redundant to her, and typical of the moronic armies they so often represented. As the Ellestian horn blasted through the icy air again, she cursed and urged her horse forward.

The Ellestian forces were only a few leagues away at best, and creeping in from the southern side was mist. Henri would bet her life on the fact that it wasn't the sort of mist Sahara had walked into all those years ago. This was the fast-moving stuff, the weaponised version Arden had bottled in his cellar, that he'd released on her home.

'Eydis,' she called. 'We need more time.'

'We don't have any,' the winter queen called back, fear bright in her eyes.

Henri surveyed the horde before them. Ten thousand strong at least. She reached out with her magic, sending it rushing across the snow towards the enemy. She met a wall.

'Fuck.'

'What is it?'

'They're wearing talismans, or have ingested our defensive herbs. Magic can't be used against them.'

Eydis nodded, resting a hand on Henri's arm. 'We expected that, Henri.'

'Doesn't make it any less of a pain in my arse,' she snapped, adjusting the shield on her back. She snatched a bow and quiver of arrows from one of the Wildenhaven soldiers.

'Archers,' she yelled. 'Nock!' She pressed her horse into a gallop to join her kindred. 'Mark!'

She reached the front lines of their force and nocked an arrow into her own bow. She called out to them, and the archers beyond. '*Draw!*'

'What are you doing!' barked Nicolai, halting his horse in front of hers.

'Leading the attack,' Henri retorted, nudging her mount to form up alongside Sahara and Fletch.

'No, you're not!'

Henri's magic flared, begging to be unleashed. 'We don't have time for this.'

'This is Havennesse soil, I —'

'*I don't care.* I didn't bring five hundred warriors all the way from Valia to take orders from you. Now get out of my way, before these Heathton bastards and mist are the least of your worries.'

'Eydis,' Nicolai bellowed.

Eydis shook her head. 'Henri leads.'

The general's face contorted in disbelieving rage. He swore, and cantered off to the right flank of the army.

Henri would deal with him later. She focused. '*Archers,*' she commanded, drawing her own bow. '*Loose!*'

The first wave of arrows shot into the sky, a blanket of darkness against the brilliant white. They whistled through the air, raining down on the front lines of Arden's legion, finding their marks in the soft flesh of the enemy.

'Again!' Henri yelled, the first thrill of battle surging through her like a drug. The energy pulsing around her from her kindred told her they felt the same.

'Nock!' she cried, pulling another arrow from her quiver. 'Mark!' She found her next target, a great hulking brute brandishing a war hammer. 'Draw!' She drew her arrow into the bow string, her shoulders and back straining.

'*Loose!*'

She released, and watched as her arrow joined the hundred others hurtling through the wind, and found the heart of her mark.

A shadow crossed the clouds. Return fire.

'*Shields,*' she roared, wrenching hers from her back and bracing herself. The impact of three arrows quaked down her arm, the hard thud of each echoing through the base of the shield. She heard cries from around her, the enemy's arrows finding their marks, too. None of her kindred.

She chanced a glance in Sahara's direction. Snow dusted the crown of her sister's head, and her cropped hair stuck to her face. She drew her sword, and feeling Henri's gaze, she looked up and smiled.

'You always wanted to ride into battle together,' she called, swinging her sword.

Henri drew her own sword. '*Forward*,' she yelled, swinging her shield back across her back and urging her horse onward. Her kindred would lead the charge, with Eydis' forces to follow. They had to draw Arden's forces in.

Henri's magic thrummed against her skin and the wind whipped her face as she rode down the ranks of their host.

'Kindred, Wildenhavians,' she called over the thundering of her horse's hooves. 'Charge!'

The sound of thousands of horses surging into a gallop made Henri's heart sing, and above it all, she heard Petra's Valian warrior cry.

They charged at full speed towards the enemy, ignoring the mist churning in, leaving any inkling of fear in their wake. She held her breath as they closed the gap of white between the forces. Thinking not of her sister, not of her lover, not even of herself, but only of the steel that awaited her, Henri gripped her sword tightly, and launched herself into the fray.

The collision of both forces came in a roaring wave. The clang of steel, the first cries of the wounded and the tang of fresh death exploded as they struck their first blows. Henri took down two, three, four men in a single swing of her sword, their blood spattering across the snow and shining on her blade. She swung again as their bodies were still falling, and around her, her kindred inflicted the same precise brutality on Arden's soldiers.

Henri felt hot blood slap across her exposed skin, felt life leave men as her sword left them. She met each blow with her blade, the song of steel spurring her on, as she parried and glided, the dance of the Valian warrior. She relished the different sort of fight a sword offered, but as she cut down another man and embedded her sword in another, she drew her katars. *This* was what she was born to do.

She dismounted her horse in a single motion. Now, from the ground, knee-deep in blood-stained snow, the battle was messier. Men swarmed Henri, their sheer numbers forcing her back into her kindred, into Eydis' soldiers, even as she kicked their legs out from under them and sliced them open with her katars. There wasn't enough damn room down here. She

brought her elbow crashing into a soldier's face, hearing bone crack and a muffled cry. A long shadow cast across the fallen bodies before her.

She turned to see a man towering over her, his full suit of armour gleaming, unscratched in the sun's glare. Through the slit in his helmet, his hazel eyes were full of hatred. She leaped back as he thrust his longsword at her middle and made another swipe for her neck. She ducked and brandished her katars. He drove forward, swinging at her with all his might. The strength of him ... Each time she blocked a blow, her arms trembled. He used his size against her, overwhelming her on the already cramped battlefield. An armour-covered hand collided with her face and she was sent reeling backwards. Startled, she ignored the pain throbbing at her mouth, and the metallic taste of blood on her tongue. She spat red onto the snow and lunged. Her katars chimed against iron armour, barely scratching its shining surface. In one aggressive grab of his fist, he suddenly had Henri by her braid. Pain tore at her scalp as he wrenched her into his body, his sword at her throat. It dripped with the blood of how many of her kindred?

She twisted, freeing an arm to find the gap in his armour between the shoulder and the chest plate. With all her might, she plunged her katar there.

The man gave a grunt of pain, but ripped her hair back in a vice-like grip.

'King Arden sends his best,' the man growled in her ear, his blade scraping her throat, ready to make the stroke of death.

He choked.

His grip weakened and Henri shoved him off, feeling his warm blood course down the back of her neck. She whirled around.

Three arrows protruded from his throat as he fell to his knees, rivers of red gushing from the wounds. Henri's eyes fell on Sahara, who sat atop her horse firing arrows into the enemy as their kindred fought. Her sister had saved her life.

There would be time for thanks later, if they survived. Henri dislodged her katar from the dead soldier and launched herself at another.

Amidst the clang of steel and the cries of pain, Henri heard her name.

'Henri!' the voice shouted again. Henri looked around wildly to find the source. *Luka*. She was cutting down men like they were but crops in a field as she made her way towards Henri.

'Henri,' she panted when she reached her. 'Queen Eydis needs to speak with you.'

Henri sliced her blade across a man's throat. 'Now?'

Luka nodded. 'Yes, now.'

'Tell her I'm a bit fucking busy.'

'It can't wait,' Luka insisted with a grimace. 'Take my horse.'

'No. My kindred —'

'Know well enough how to fight.' She kicked a falling body away.

Henri faltered. She couldn't leave them. She was —

'Go!' Luka said. 'It's important. It could turn the tide of this thing.'

Henri surveyed the bloodshed, and Arden's numbers as they poured in. If it could turn the tide of the battle ... She gave Luka a stiff nod.

Henri galloped through the slaughter, slaying the enemy as she ignored the instincts that screamed she was going in the wrong direction. Athene. Sahara. The others ... She had *never* left her kindred on the battlefield. She felt as though a part of her was being ripped away from her.

She reached Eydis at the back lines of the conflict, guarded by her Queen's Guard with Dash and Tailor at her side. The teenager's eyes went wide at the sight of her, and she knew she must look a mess, covered in other people's blood. Behind Eydis, the Ashai folk Bleak had asked for help stood shivering in the snow, terror etched on their faces. Fat lot of help they'd been.

'What's the meaning of this?' Henri barked, glaring at Eydis.

'I need you to go to the mountains.'

'What?'

'Henri. We need to try Bleak's idea.'

'Are you mad? Have you lost your damn mind, Eydis? A bloody snowslide will kill us all.'

Eydis merely pointed. To the left, the roiling mist was only a few leagues away. 'That bastard Swinton did this,' she hissed. 'If we don't try, we *will die* because of him.'

Henri shook her head. 'Swinton didn't release that mist. Not this time.'

'No?'

'No.' Henri braced herself as the words left her mouth. 'Mariette did.'

Eydis blinked. 'What?'

Henri had been piecing it together for some time. Had noted the jar they'd brought from Moredon go missing. Had noted Mariette disappearing for days at a time. And she remembered the kennel master alone in the woods with lies on her lips.

‘It was her, Eydis.’

The winter queen exhaled a shaky breath. ‘It doesn’t matter now. What matters is that you must *try*.’

‘I’m worth *twenty* of your men – and you would have me leave?’ Fiery rage burned through Henri.

‘Your magic is no use out there. But *here*. Henri, we need it here. Tailor will bring the Ashai after you.’

‘Majesty.’ Tailor nudged his horse alongside Henri’s. ‘With respect – many of the Ashai are still fighting off the effects of the herbs they were treated with in the prison. I cannot move them.’

‘I have seen it,’ Eydis told him. ‘The herbs were diluted; it should be wearing off. You need not move them far.’ She pointed to the foot of the mountains. ‘Just there.’

Tailor bowed his head. ‘If you say it can be done, it will be done.’

Panic constricted Henri’s throat. She couldn’t believe what was being asked of her. It was a fool’s hope, the plan of a madwoman.

Eydis nudged her horse and closed the gap between them, her hand gentle on Henri’s arm. ‘Shift snow and earth, Henri. Shift it, and we’ll draw them in.’

‘Gods,’ Henri muttered, locking eyes with her friend. ‘This is ...’

‘Not the Valian Way.’ Eydis nodded. ‘Perhaps it’s a better way?’

Henri took a deep breath, and brushed the loose hair from her eyes. ‘Tell Sahara ...’

‘Tell her yourself when we’re on the other side of this.’

Henri urged her horse into a gallop, and the thoroughbred’s hooves kicked up the snow, leaving a white cloud in their wake. The cold stung her face as she raced towards the foot of the mountains, the rhythm of the ride like the sound of war drums beating beneath her.

*Shift snow and earth ...* Like it was *that* simple. Like there weren’t a hundred other elements and factors to consider. Henri clenched her teeth and squeezed her horse’s sides with her heels. *Faster*. She needed all the time she could get if she was going to pull this off.

*If.*

*Gods*, she thought. *What if I can’t? What if I fail?* Fear turned to lead in her stomach. She tried to push the questions aside. Not now. She would not falter now.

*Shift snow and earth ...* Maybe it was that simple.

She slowed her horse as she reached the foot of the jagged mountains. The Kildaholm Alps. Breathtaking. Treacherous. Looking up at the formidable peaks in awe, she tugged the reins and finally came to a halt.

*This is it.* Her boots sank deep into the snow, and she could sense different energy below where she now stood. *This is the place.*

She glanced up at the slopes, the ridges, the unforgiving crags. If what Bleak said was true, then Henri was at risk of causing a snowslide. She fought to keep herself level-headed. This was a problem, but it *could* be solved. It *had* to be solved. She tucked her hands under her arms to trap her body heat as she paced. There was a way, she *knew* it.

There was a sudden shimmer in the distance. And another, closer. And another, closer still. Before her eyes, Tailor and a dozen Ashai appeared from nowhere. With a gasp, Tailor staggered towards her, and collapsed in her arms. She hoisted him up.

‘I thought you said —’

‘Short distances. Managed it. Barely.’

‘Wish I could say the same.’ She gestured to the unchanged snow around them.

‘You have to.’

‘I can’t do it alone,’ she said quietly.

‘Don’t have to,’ Tailor said, still catching his breath. He gestured vaguely to the Ashai shivering before them.

‘I thought ...?’

‘Eydis was right, damn her. Whatever they were treated with or ingested has mostly worn off. They’re weak but not void of power. One of them helped me get them here, I could feel it.’

Henri turned to the Ashai. ‘Are any of you energy shifters? Anyone?’ She didn’t even try to keep the note of desperation from her voice. She *was* desperate.

Two women, sisters, shuffled forward. ‘We are,’ the smaller one said.

An older woman, perhaps sixty or so, stumbled to the front of the group after them. ‘As am I,’ she croaked.

Relief soared in Henri’s chest. It wasn’t much, but it was something. She motioned for them to join her.

‘Then here’s what I need you to do ...’ she began.

The three Ashai stood at the base of the mountain, hands outstretched before them, forcing the energy of the mountains back, containing it as



Henri worked.

Feet apart, Henri's stance was that of the warrior she was, but ready for a battle of a different kind. Eyes closed, she sank into the depths of her magic, raising her hands before her, sculpting the energy of the snow and the earth upon which she stood. She felt it shift. She felt it give way to her, felt it mould to her will. A bead of sweat trickled from her temple; however, she didn't break her focus. She wouldn't. Her arms strained beneath the weight of the energy she was moving. Her muscles quivered, but she didn't stop.

In the distance, the roar of conflict echoed through the valleys. She didn't look back. Not all wars were fought with blades and shields. Not all courage was found in the heart of a battle. Bleak had taught her that.

Henri steadied her stance, and shifted snow and earth.

## CHAPTER 43

Bleak and Rion watched everything unfold from a ledge midway up the mountain. The realm and all its problems seemed so small from here, mere specks against the stark white sea of snow. For a moment, despite the bone-snapping cold, Bleak wished she could stay up here, wished she could simply take her place as a spectator in all the battles to come. But she wasn't a spectator. She hadn't let life pass her by in a long while now. She was a part of it, a moving player in a much larger game, where the stakes were as high as they came.

She eyed the three teerah panthers positioned at the summit, awaiting the signal. Taking a deep breath, she leaned forward on Rion's back and stroked his silken fur. 'It's time,' she told him.

They began their descent.

Snow slid from beneath Rion's giant paws, and Bleak held on for dear life. But Rion did not falter. He prowled down the mountainside with the surefootedness of a born predator.

Bleak squinted, focusing on the group of people at the base. Henri was leading the Ashai. And in the distance, the kindred and Eydis' forces were being drawn closer to them. Bleak's stomach twisted at the sight of the churning mist sweeping in from the south. Its pace had quickened. They were running out of time.

'Hurry, Rion,' she urged.

Bleak held on tight as Rion lurched forward, his powerful body sinking deep into the snow. When they reached the bottom, Bleak stared at Henri. The Valian was covered in blood, and a nasty gash on her lip was swollen and bruised. But more than that ... Her hands were outstretched. She was

shifting huge masses of snow and dirt with her magic. A massive hole in the ground gaped before her. Bleak could see a cave of crystals below.

*This is my plan ... If it doesn't work ...* She'd just signed the death warrant of thousands of people if it didn't. Bleak looked at Henri again. She'd never seen the Valian under strain, until now. Beads of sweat ran from her face, and her brow was furrowed in concentration.

'I don't know how much longer she'll last,' Tailor said, appearing beside Rion.

'I'll go to the others.' Bleak made to leave, but Tailor gripped her wrist.

'You don't remember me, do you?' he said, searching her face.

Bleak studied him. She *did* remember him; he'd been the vagabond in Heathton who'd warned her not to go searching for a cure. Who'd told her she was drawing too much attention to herself. But ... There was something else ...

Only there wasn't time. She took off with Rion towards the battle.

The metallic tang of blood was heavy in the air as they approached the rearguard of the Wildenhaven forces.

'Luka,' she called, spotting the redhead on horseback. Luka stood alongside Dash, cutting the fletching from one of two arrows through her shoulder.

'Gods,' Bleak gasped at the wounds.

'It's nothing,' the Valian said, sawing through a shaft with a grimace.

Her horse's ears flicked nervously as Rion approached.

'What's happening?' Luka asked.

'We need to draw them in now ...' Bleak's attention snagged on the two figures at the heart of the fray. Sahara and Athene, back to back, moved as a seamless unit, cutting men down with a single sweep of their swords. Any animosity between them had been replaced by their formidable Valian training, and the Ellestian soldiers surrounding them ... They didn't have a chance. But their numbers were greater, and Bleak blanched at the sight of the Havennesse recruits being gutted and trampled in the chaos. They had to move. Fast.

'Get word to them?' she said to Luka. *'It has to be now.'*

Luka gave a single nod, and urged her horse into the field.

Bleak turned to Dash. 'Come on.'

Her heart was in her throat as she and Dash rode back to Henri and the Ashai. She could hear Dash's racing thoughts and confusion, but she didn't

have the energy or time to reassure him as they skidded to a stop at the base of the mountain.

Henri stood with Tailor, wiping a trail of blood from her nose.

‘You alright?’ Bleak asked.

‘Fine.’

‘You should get down there.’ Bleak nodded to the tunnel that was now revealed below the mountain.

‘I don’t go without Sahara,’ Henri said. ‘You sure about this?’

Bleak swallowed and glanced up at the jagged peaks. ‘As sure as I can be.’

‘That’ll have to do, then.’

Beneath her, Rion shifted restlessly. They needed to go.

‘Look after Bren?’

Henri nodded.

They didn’t say goodbye. Rion leaped forward and bounded up the mountain, the sheer power of him still leaving Bleak in awe. They clambered up the icy face, until they reached a ledge. Bleak watched as Queen Eydis’ forces drew the Ellestian army closer and closer to the base of the mountain, as the mist roiled inward, closing in on them.

*Bring down the mountain.* Henri spoke into Bleak’s mind. Her voice as crystal clear as it would be if she was beside her. Bleak slid from Rion’s back, and cupped his face.

‘It’s your turn, Rion.’

Rion stared deep into her eyes, and then turned to face the summit, where his three brothers waited. He gave an almighty roar, the sound blasting up the mountain, echoing through the glaciers and the valleys.

Bleak closed her eyes, sending a silent prayer through the alps, to whatever gods were listening.

The thunderous roar of the teerah panthers answered.

The sound vibrated deep in Bleak’s chest. It shook the entire mountain. She saw it, *felt* it. The slide of white at the peak. A slight shift at first, then, devastating. The snow pummelled down the valley, a great, catastrophic cloud of white. It gained momentum as it tore down the mountain, obliterating everything in its path. Trees, rocks, cliff faces became nothing. It swallowed them whole.

*What have I done?* Bleak could no longer see the specks of her friends at the bottom as the masses of ice and snow hurtled towards the base. She

and Rion watched in horror from the safety of their ledge. Watched as the snowslide thundered past them, devouring everything before it.

It hit the foot of the mountain with a furious crash, sending a wave of snow hammering into Arden's soldiers. Thousands of men were wiped clean off the board, their existence flattened to nothing.

Bleak's breath caught in her throat. The mist. The toxic weapon Ines had sought to ruin Havennesses with was gone. The snowslide had annihilated it. But along with it ... She scanned the landscape, desperately searching for any sign of Henri and Eydis' forces. Bleak saw no cavalry, no cluster of magic-wielding Ashai folk, no kindred five hundred strong.

At the base of the mountain now, there was nothing but stark white.

## CHAPTER 44

Bleak raced back to Wildenhaven atop Rion's back, his powerful legs kicking up the snow behind them. They rode at breakneck speed across the hinterland, darting between the skeletons of trees and skidding across patches of ice. Bleak's exposed cheeks burned as the icy wind whipped her skin, and her eyes streamed as they passed glaciers and mountains in a blur. The other panthers weren't far behind, but Rion didn't slow, not once.

Bleak exhaled a shaky breath as the three formidable stone towers came into view from behind the gatehouse. The gates swung open and she leaped from Rion and sprinted into the courtyard.

It was as they had left it. Empty.

She ran through the doors of the middle tower and into the great hall. Fires flickered in the hearths, as did the torches that lined the walls. But there was no one there.

The hours ticked by slowly as Bleak waited, waited to know the fate of her people, and the fate of her friends.

Rion and his companions were spread out around the hall, warming themselves by the great hearths, but their presence did nought to ease Bleak's churning mind. It had been *her* idea. Their blood would be on *her* hands, should they not return.

She shuddered at the memory of the snow cascading down the mountain, swallowing everything in its path.

Throughout the evening, castle porters came and tended to the fires, but she hardly noticed. Instead, she remained sitting on the steps of the dais, head in hands, heart in throat.

Rion's vicious snarling woke her. Scrambling to her feet, she saw that he and the other teerah panthers were prowling the hall, hackles raised.

'What is it?' she said quietly.

Rion came to her side.

'Rion ...?'

The great hall doors burst open.

Bleak gasped as Henri and Sahara staggered in, Tilly's limp body between them. Behind the three Valians was Eydis, her face flushed but seemingly unharmed. Bleak rushed forward as what remained of their forces trickled in.

She threw her arms around Henri. 'Are you alright? Is everyone alright?'

Henri eased Bleak off her and squeezed her shoulder gently. 'Not everyone.'

Bleak's gaze went to Tilly. 'Is she ...?'

'Wounded, but she'll be fine,' Sahara said, helping Henri lay Tilly down on a nearby bench. 'It's not her ...'

Bleak froze.

Henri wouldn't look at her. Instead, the Valian queen shoved through the mass of people spilling into the hall and cleared a path.

Athene and Marvel carried Petra between them. Her skin was pale, her body lifeless.

Bleak's breath caught in her throat.

The Valians placed their fallen warrior on the dais.

'May she rest well with Enovius,' Bleak murmured.

'May Rheyah keep her,' Sahara said.

Athene and Marvel repeated their prayers as they sat beside Petra's body, exhausted and grief-stricken. Henri was quiet, and Bleak couldn't find the words.

They would never hear Petra's warrior cry again.

They had lost others. Three of the older Ashai hadn't made it. Over three hundred of Eydis' men had been killed in the battle or caught in the snowslide. And Kyden, Geraad's son, was missing. They would lose more by the night's end.

Bleak couldn't staunch the bleeding in her heart. The pain for these people, the pain for Henri. She had gained one sister, only to lose another.

Casimir sat down beside her, following her gaze. 'You saved us,' he said.

'Not all of us.'

'No, not all of us. But more than we thought possible.'

THE NEXT DAY, the great hall of Wildenhaven was converted into a makeshift medical wing for the wounded. Valians, rebels, Havennesse soldiers and Ashai alike all bled the same colour, side by side.

Bleak wandered up and down the rows and rows of cots, filled with the injured. She had never seen such carnage. Arrow wounds, deep gashes from blades and spears, and bruising that matched the changing shades of the ocean. The air was thick with the smell of blood, and the sharp tang of cleansing alcohol, while shock and grief washed over what remained of their forces in waves.

But they had made it. The bulk of their people had made it into the tunnels beneath the mountain, the passage sealed off just as the snowslide had barrelled into the mist, and into Arden's forces. It didn't make their losses any easier to bear, but it was some comfort in the face of the war still to come.

There was a featherlight tap on Bleak's shoulder.

She couldn't believe her eyes. 'Lyse!' she cried, pulling the groundling healer into a tight embrace. 'You came.'

'Of course we did.' She squeezed Bleak back.

'We?'

Lyse smiled. 'See for yourself.'

Bleak followed her friend's gaze to the entrance of the hall. The graceful form of Mother Matriarch Allehra in the doorway was unmistakable. Her face was badly scarred with burn marks, the silver-streaked hair on one side of her head singed away.

A quiet cry sounded from nearby. Sahara raced forward and threw her arms around her mother.

'She survived,' Bleak breathed.

'She survived.'

Bleak wasn't the only one staring. Around the hall, wounded Valians were struggling to their feet and craning their necks to get a glimpse of their Mother Matriarch. Those who could, bowed. But Henri hadn't moved from



where she stood in the corner of the hall. She simply stared. Stared hard at her mother and her sister, her expression unreadable.

The day wore on and Bleak spotted a familiar face in the crowd. Two.

*Tilly and Bren.*

Tilly rested on one of the cots with her arm in a sling, her foot bandaged and elevated. Bruises marred the right side of her face in violent shades of blue and green. Bren sat at her bedside. He had regained some of his weight, his fair hair had been washed and cut, and he looked better, healthier. He was holding Tilly's good hand.

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat. The thoughts of the wounded were starting to take their toll on her, overpowering her own and making her head spin. Her magic rippled beneath her skin, its beat growing stronger, more insistent.

Someone took hold of her elbow and led her from the great hall. The blast of icy air outside wrenched her back from the brink.

'Gets a bit much in there, I find,' Casimir said, waiting for her to catch her breath.

'It does. What were you doing there?'

'Looking for you.'

'Oh. Why?'

Bleak crossed her arms over her chest, bracing herself against the cold. Casimir handed her a pelt.

'I've been thinking,' he said, pulling his own cloak tight around himself. 'I want to face him.'

They began walking through the grounds. As they had done before everything had changed. Snow fell in a steady sheet, catching in their eyelashes and Casimir's stubble.

'Face who?' she asked.

'Langdon.'

The name squeezed Bleak's insides. She had done her best not to think of him, locked away in the cells beneath the Wildenhaven towers. The man responsible for so much of her pain, and so much of Bren's. Who'd helped Ines nearly exterminate the reigning families of Oremere.

'Why?' she asked, her hands already clammy.

'I want to confront him. After everything he's done to me. To us. I think it'll help me move on.'

'If you think it'll help, then you should.'

Casimir stopped. 'Will you come with me?' he asked. 'I don't think I can do it alone.'

She froze. 'I ... I can't,' she stammered. The very thought made her nauseous.

'Alarise, please.'

She stared at him. It was the first time she'd heard the Ashai leader, the *Ashai prince*, ask for anything. He waited. She knew if she refused, he would not press her further.

She felt herself nod. 'Okay,' she said. 'I'll go with you.'

As BLEAK and Casimir made their way into the cold depths of the Wildenhaven dungeons, she vowed she wouldn't visit a cell again for a long while after this. The enclosed space smelled like every other prison she'd encountered: rotten, damp and heavy with despair.

He was in the furthest cell from the entrance. The darkest, iciest chamber of them all.

*Good*, Bleak thought as she approached. *No cell could ever be too dark or cold for this bastard.*

Casimir stiffened beside her; she knew he felt the same way.

Langdon was curled up on the stone floor, wearing a thin tunic and pants, which was more than he deserved. His lips were blue from the cold, and he bore the bruises of someone who had pissed off a number of guards. He looked up as they stopped at the bars of his prison.

'Look who it is,' he rasped. 'Don't tell me you missed my company, Bleak?'

'It's Alarise to you,' Bleak said.

'Probably not as much as Casimir misses *her* company, though ...'

Bleak felt Casimir's magic shudder around her, but his face remained neutral as Langdon struggled to his feet and approached the bars.

Bleak didn't think. She just *did*. Her magic blasted outward and gripped Langdon's mind, ready to exterminate the vermin once and for all. Her power was stronger than ever now, feeding off the darkness within Langdon, feeding off the retribution she was about to feel.

'Alarise,' Casimir said in her ear. 'Don't. We still need him.'

She released him and stepped back, gulping for air. Casimir's grip on her arm steadied her.

Langdon glared at them, panting.

‘Why did you do it?’ Casimir asked him.

‘Do what?’

‘Everything.’

Langdon’s eyes glazed over. ‘After all these years, Casimir, I would have thought you’d understand.’

‘Understand? I would have chosen death, rather than do the things you’ve done.’

‘That’s just it,’ Langdon said. ‘You think there was a choice.’

Casimir’s fists clenched at his sides.

‘We should go,’ Bleak said, taking a final glimpse of their captor, their torturer.

But suddenly, light shimmered inside the cell.

The sickening sound of a blade crunching through flesh, muscle and bone cut through the silence. As did Langdon’s moan of agony.

Tailor appeared behind him, blood dripping from the dagger he wrenched from Langdon’s back.

‘No!’ yelled Casimir, rattling the bars of the cell.

Bleak couldn’t move. Couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

Recognition flashed on Langdon’s face as he staggered to face his attacker.

‘After all I did for you?’ he spluttered, blood bubbling from his lips.

‘All you *did for me?*’ Tailor hissed, ramming the knife into Langdon’s side. ‘You *killed my entire family. Murdered them* in their own beds.’ He twisted the knife.

Blood flowed from Langdon’s wounds, spilling out onto the corridor path, pooling at Bleak’s boots.

‘Stop!’ Casimir cried, clawing between the bars of the cell.

Langdon’s body slumped to the stone floor, breathing in shallow gasps. ‘I told her,’ he wheezed. ‘I told her I wouldn’t kill a child ...’

*What is he talking about?*

But Bleak could only watch on in horror as Tailor dragged his blade across Langdon’s throat, more blood gushing from the jagged wound.

It was over.

Tailor stood and wiped his blood-stained hands on his trousers, his eyes glazed.

‘This is far from over,’ he said.

Light shimmered once more.

Casimir's hands dropped from the bars of the cells. He stared.  
'*Ermias?*'

The name shot through Bleak like a bolt of lightning.

But the Tailor of Heathton had vanished.

'It can't be ...' she murmured, looking to Casimir.

Casimir simply pointed. Across the floor of the cell, at Langdon's lifeless feet, small red flowers bloomed amidst the blood.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Trying to sum up my gratitude for those who've helped me along the way is incredibly hard. Especially because this book felt far more difficult than the last.

First and foremost, this book is about sisterhood, and is for one special person in particular ... My sister, Yasmin Scheuerer. She's the kind of sister every girl dreams of. A permanent cheerleader, a shoulder to cry on, someone to make you laugh. Someone who remembers the important things in life, like getting a stepladder for your new apartment because you can't reach the higher cupboards ... If everyone had a sister like you, the world would be a better place. Thank you for everything you do.

My deepest thanks to my beta team: Aleesha, Claire and Kelly. You guys know better than anyone that this book took it out of me ... But it was your support, your guidance and your encouragement that saw me through to the end. I can't thank you enough for the dedication you've shown me and this story. I couldn't do it without you.

To Lisy and Eva, my oldest friends and kindred spirits, thank you for your unconditional love and support.

To Dave, thank you for being a wonderful brainstorming partner, and for making me proud to be an indie author.

To my writing bestie, Kyra, thank you for your constant encouragement. I've lost track of how many times you've told me, 'you'll be fine'. You're always right.

To my publishing team, Alex Nahlous, Alissa Dinallo and Claire Bradshaw, this book wouldn't shine as bright without your talent and patience.

To my street team, the Mist Dwellers – I can't thank you enough for your ongoing support. Thank you for the art, the shout-outs and your enthusiasm for this story.

To Ben, my publishing bestie, thank you for your constant support, and thank you especially for all your help with the *Heart of Mist* audiobook contract.

To Mum and Dad, thank you for all the thoughtful things you do that make life easier. And for forcing my book onto unsuspecting teachers and random people from the Moto Guzzi motorbike club.

To all my incredible friends and family who showed so much support and encouragement over the last few years, I'm so grateful to have you in my life. Special shoutouts to: Lou, Annie, Nim, the Mulhollands, the O'Shea family, Gina, Ed and Sooz, Charlotte, Andrew, Jess Cooper, Liam Casey, Fay Wood, Natalia Ghosn and Mel Doncas.

Thank you to everyone who read *Heart of Mist*, attended the launch, wrote a review, shared the story. I can't even begin to tell you how much it meant to me.

And finally, thank you to YOU, my readers. Thank you for sticking with Bleak, Henri and the gang this far, for cheering them (and me) on. I hope you enjoyed this book, and that you stay with us, until the end.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Scheuerer is a YA fantasy author from Sydney, Australia. Her debut novel, *Heart of Mist*, was the bestselling first instalment in her trilogy, *The Oremere Chronicles*.

After writing literary fiction for a number of years, Helen was inspired to return to her childhood love of fantasy by reading the work of Sabaa Tahir, V.E. Schwab and Sarah J. Maas.

Helen is also the Founding Editor of Writer's Edit ([www.writersedit.com](http://www.writersedit.com)), one of the world's largest online learning platforms for emerging writers. Her love of books and writing led her to pursue a Bachelor of Creative Arts, majoring in Creative Writing, and a Master of Publishing.

She is now a full-time author living by the beach.

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