



WAR *of* MIST

BOOK III: THE OREMERE CHRONICLES



HELEN SCHEUERER

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CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Did you enjoy this book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Need more Oremere?](#)

Published by Talem Press, 2019

An imprint of Writer's Edit Press

www.talempress.com

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First printing, 2019

Print ISBN 978-0-9941655-9-6

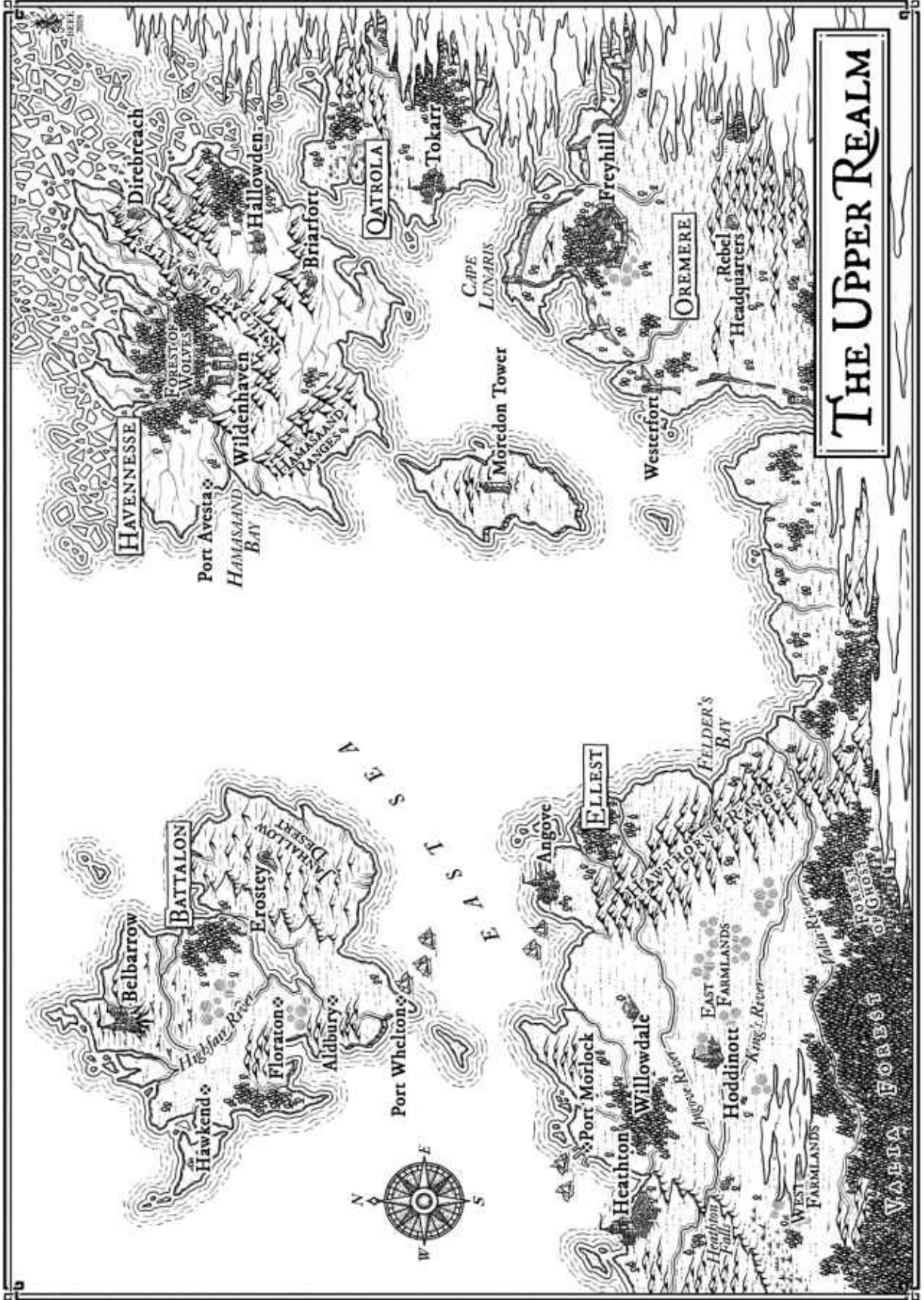
Ebook ISBN 978-0-9941655-8-9

Cover design by Alissa Dinallo

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DEDICATION

This one's for my own kindred, Lisy and Eva.



PROLOGUE

The king's suite was dark but for a beam of pale moonlight streaming through the window. King Arden lay in the canopied bed, pale-gold beard tipped to the ceiling as he snored softly. Ines gazed at him with distaste from where she stood naked by the glass. He had cost her much in recent months. The fool had failed to detain Henrietta Valia and Alarise Thornton. He'd let the prizes slip right through his manicured fingers, too concerned with boasting of his minor victories to see what was happening beneath his own nose. The woman shook her head and turned to look out onto the dark castle grounds.

'If you want something done right, do it yourself,' she muttered under her breath. Her fingers toyed with the layered necklace resting against her collarbone, a pretty gift from the infatuated king. She was fond of this piece in particular, adorned with rare jewels from lands long forgotten. It reminded her of something her mother had worn so many years before. A piece she was meant to inherit, before they'd taken her and stripped her of all her rights and belongings. The order of the high priestesses allowed no effects, no personal property, but now ... now she had many things to call her own.

Below, the castle maze sprawled across the grounds, and beyond the walls and gatehouse, the whole of Ellest bent to her will. It was all hers. She had taken it easily, as was her destiny. The instinct of the magic in her veins drove her to take and take, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to add to her kingdom, her collection. The need to do so raged within her, a demand, a drive to fill the gaping hole in her chest.

Then, there were those who threatened to take away all she held dear now. Tonight, along with all the other nights, the thought of them, and what they were searching for, kept her from sleep. She had begun her own search for the item they planned to use against her. The maze, the armoury, the jewel vault had all proved fruitless, but earlier in the week, she'd had a breakthrough. The old library. She had felt its presence. Demanding solitude, she had locked herself away and combed through every volume the damn room held. Nothing. But she *knew* it was in there. And she would find it. Rheyah help the realm when she did.

She sat at the dresser, her fingers finding the silk scarves Arden had given her on its surface. These were her favourites, imported from the dark markets in Battalon. Many of her cherished trinkets were from there, though it had been a long time since she'd visited herself. Looking up, she could make out the faint outline of her shaved head in the mirror and she set about wrapping the luxurious scarves around her scalp, ensuring that the soft fabric draped about her shoulders and framed her freckled face. Casimir used to do it for her, tying the silk so gently the wrap would slip from her head and he would have to start again. He had done many things for her, but ... he was gone now. After all she had done for him. She had shown him the light, shown him the way Oremere was meant to be ruled. She finished wrapping the scarves and stood. She would have him back soon enough.

Donning a flowing silk robe, she left the sleeping king. Arden was good for warming her bed and nothing more. A costly gamble was all he was. She would be done with him once Casimir was returned to her. Anger simmered under her skin, and her numerous powers unfurled in answer, begging to be released. Her skin crawled as they did, each type of magic at odds with the next, housed so closely together within the one host. No one knew what it was like. *No one.*

In the corridor, torchlight flickered and shadows danced across the walls. At one point in her life she would have been afraid to be alone in a silent, foreign castle, but not now. Now, *she* was the one people feared.

She walked the same path she had the night before, and the night before. Even in the corridors she could feel the presence of *it*. That godsforsaken *thing* Casimir had forged all those years ago. Something so simple and pretty, yet so full of dishonesty. She knew he'd gone to the lisloiks for help. Its quiet hum was like a song to the heirs of Oremere, and to her.

The enemies of our enemies make for strong allies, she mused. The lisloik queen, Delja, was certainly an enemy. But Ines had defeated the ruthless descendant of the water goddess with toxic mist and driven her and her people from their territory in Oremere.

Now, the *thing* called to her. Perhaps Delja had bewitched it so. It had not been a gift for her, as Casimir had told her. The *thing* was not a symbol of his love for her, it was not a measure of protection. It was a weapon *against* her. She knew that now and clenched her jaw at the thought of it, at the thought of her Casimir's betrayal. The depth of his deceit was endless. He had aligned himself with rebels, water monsters, Valians and all manner of scum. All to take her down. He would be punished for his lies. Again and again. And this time, he would not come back from it.

Yet she could not help falling into the memory of when he'd given the amulet to her. It shimmered before her, as real now as it was then ...

TANGLED in each other's limbs, behind a heavy curtain in the temple, she and Casimir whispered about their future. About Oremere's future. He was by her side now, and he would be by her side always, as she ruled the continent, the realm, as it had been destined to be ruled. As she had been destined to rule it. Though the prince was young, he was a man in ways the kings before him had never been. He saw things the way she saw them. Saw their potential.

His lips found hers again, but broke away all too soon as he pressed something cool into her palm.

'What's this?' she said, turning it over between her fingers.

'A gift. Something to keep you safe.'

It was a necklace, an amulet of sorts. Simple and elegant with a violet stone, set in a fine silver chain. It was beautiful, but he knew she could hold no possessions, so what did it mean?

She frowned. 'No one can hurt me, you know that. You know that better than anyone.'

'I thought I did.' His eyes bored into hers, his pain bright and fierce.

'What is it that you know?'

Casimir swallowed, linking his fingers through her free hand. 'There is another collector.'

'That's not true.'

'Isn't it?' The note of fear in his voice was enough to breathe life into the ember of her own terror that had been her constant companion for so long now.

She said nothing. In truth, she couldn't know, no matter how many abilities she herself collected. Other Ashai folk had the same abilities. There were many seers amongst them. Numerous energy shifters. Collectors, though ... She had always thought she was one of a kind.

'They could take your powers. All of them, if they were strong enough. This ...' he said slowly. 'This could protect you.'

CASIMIR'S VOICE echoed in her ear. She could almost feel his kisses brushing her lips. But it had been a lie.

Now, a pair of great doors greeted her. Valian oak, carved by a talented sculptor, the elaborate scrollwork and open books signposting the castle's original library. She ran her fingers across the design, tracing the detailed lines of the work. Ashai folk before her had done the same; she could feel a lingering trace of their magic in the grain of the wood. Their power tickled her fingertips, but there was not enough to collect. Not enough to sate that roaring hunger for more within her.

Beyond the doors, a different power thrummed. The power of Casimir's damned amulet. She opened the doors and entered the library. It was *somewhere* in here. She could feel it. Its magic, and a kernel of her own within it, taunted her.

With a furious flick of her hand, dozens of books shot from the shelves and scattered across the stone floor. With another sharp gesture, an entire shelf collapsed into rubble. The strange magic pulsed just out of reach, as though some sort of barrier stood right before her face.

She let out a strangled cry of rage. The amulet was here. And she would find it, long before they could use it against her.

CHAPTER 1

The morning was dark and rain hammered down as Bleak and Casimir pounded on the door of an infamous Heathton manor. With its elaborate arched windows and meticulous detailing in the stone columns, Madame Joelle Marie's pleasure house was the most impressive establishment in Ellest's capital. And despite the eerily quiet city, it was no surprise to Bleak that the brothel remained open. People sought all kinds of comfort during times like these. She raised her fist, stained from the black hair dye she'd used, and beat the door again.

'We should have sent someone else,' she hissed at Casimir, adjusting the eyepatch she wore to hide her odd-coloured irises. Her disguise was flimsy at best, but better than none at all.

Four weeks had passed since the snowslide battle in Havennesse. Four weeks since they'd begun their search for Prince Ermias Goldwell, otherwise known as the Tailor of Heathton.

'It has to be us who find him,' Casimir muttered. 'If we do, we can retrieve the amulet. The one thing that will give us a fighting chance to defeat *her*. It *has* to be all three of us.'

'Again with this amulet! Why did it take you until now to tell me about it?'

'Because I thought Ermias was dead. Without him it has no use to us. *With him* ... it could change the tide of the war.'

Bleak clicked her tongue in frustration. They'd been over this at least a dozen times on the savage journey from Havennesse. Casimir shot her a look.

‘I still don’t understand why we’re *here* of all places,’ Bleak pressed, waving to the manor before them. ‘Tailor doesn’t strike me as the type to be keen on a brothel.’

‘He trades in secrets,’ Casimir allowed. ‘Tell me, what place houses more secrets than a pleasure house?’

‘Then why *this one* in particular?’

‘Captain Murphadias said Tailor had a room here —’

Casimir’s reply was cut short as the door opened a crack and a pretty face peered out. ‘May I help you?’

‘We need to speak with Madame Joelle Marie,’ Casimir replied.

‘Do you have an appointment?’

‘No.’ Bleak glanced at Casimir. ‘We’re looking for an associate of ours.’

‘I see.’ The girl stared at her eyepatch. ‘And who is your associate? Perhaps I can help.’

Casimir looked at Bleak and then back to the girl. ‘The Tailor of —’

The young woman began to shut the door, but Bleak caught it and lunged with her magic. During the last month, she’d been practising. It was easier than ever to find herself in the upper passages of someone’s mind, and now, she focused hard. The girl – Olivia, she discovered – didn’t offer much resistance as Bleak crafted the seed of an idea, moulded it to her will and planted it amongst Olivia’s thoughts.

The bewildered expression left Olivia’s face and she let the door swing inwards. ‘Friends of Tailor’s?’ she asked pleasantly.

‘That’s right,’ Bleak replied, stepping into the warmth of the foyer and ignoring Casimir’s slack jaw. ‘We need to see his room.’

‘Of course. He mentioned he was expecting guests.’

Bleak followed her up a grand staircase, with Casimir close behind her. ‘When was the last time you saw him?’

‘Tailor? Two days ago. He stayed one night and left early the next morning.’

‘Did he say where he was going?’ Casimir interjected.

Olivia shook her head. ‘No. But then, he never does. This way, if you will.’

The decadent manor was in stark contrast with the dark, fallen capital that lay outside. Chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, and the paintings, tapestries and furniture only became more opulent as they climbed each

staircase. But Bleak remembered that it was King Arden himself who lined the madame's pockets. Apparently, no expense was too great for the woman who kept Arden's loyal followers appeased.

Tailor's room, however, was in the attic. Olivia showed them inside and closed the door behind her, leaving them to look around.

Casimir turned to Bleak. 'How did you ...?'

But Bleak's attention was on the walls. Pinned to nearly every surface were maps and charts, similar to those Sahara had at her camp in Westerfort. Coloured markers plotted the movements of the rebellion in Oremere and their underground colonies.

What has Tailor been up to?

Bleak gasped, her gaze falling on something else. Several posters. Her own face stared back at her from weathered pieces of parchment. An artist had captured her likeness, odd eyes and all.

'MASS MURDERER,' read the text beneath. 'WANTED ALIVE. ALARISE "BLEAK" THORNTON. LEADER OF INVADER CONTINENT.'

So this was how Arden was portraying her to the rest of the realm.

She scanned the other posters and choked. The bloated bodies of the guards she'd killed aboard *Arden's Fortune* had been drawn with painstaking detail. Washed up on the shore, eyes and mouths wide open in terror. She recognised Siv Lennox amongst them. The would-be rapist. In death, the man's usual sneer was gone, sketched in a way that made him look like just another blameless victim. Pinned beside these drawings were depictions of what had happened in Hoddinott. She'd locked away the events of that day in a vault in her mind.

'Bleak,' Casimir was saying. 'Bleak, look ...'

She tore her gaze away from her own face and found Casimir pressing a leather-bound notebook into her hands.

'What's this?' She turned it over and it fell open, revealing pages and pages of scratchy shorthand in blue ink. Frowning, she tried to make out the words. Her eyes snagged on one thing in particular. Her name.

Alarise. Felder's Bay.

Alarise. Angove to Port Morlock.

Alarise. Healer Ethelda.

Alarise. Port Morlock to Angove.

On and on it went, detailing her movements across weeks, months ...

‘Casimir,’ she breathed. ‘What is this?’

Casimir was staring at a shelf. Where a dozen more notebooks stood lined in a neat row. He reached out and selected one. Bleak peered over his shoulder as he opened it. There was more of the same. Dates, times, places and names. The Oremian prince’s name appeared as well.

‘He knew where we were the whole time,’ Casimir said, staring at the book in his hands.

‘Not always.’ Bleak pointed to her name and a question mark beside it. ‘But Henri did say he was a spy.’

‘What?’

‘She said he once told her that he “cuts, sews and alters stories, truth and gossip ... for a price”, or something like that.’ Bleak tried to rub the crawling sensation from her arms. ‘It’s clear he was tracking us, albeit not very well.’ She flipped the page to another listing of her whereabouts. ‘That’s wrong. I was never in Willowdale at that time. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever been to Willowdale.’

‘Strange. Why didn’t he make himself known, then? If he was always so close and he knew who you were? Leaving me where I was is understandable, but you ... you were within reach.’

Bleak had to stop herself from shuddering. Tailor had been watching her all this time. Spying on her every move. She went to the desk and, moving a pipe from a messy pile of papers, scanned over the array of documents.

‘This was reckless of him,’ she heard herself say. ‘Anyone could have found this stuff.’

Casimir paced and massaged his temples. ‘Perhaps that was the point.’

‘What?’

‘We don’t know Ermias, don’t know anything about him.’

Bleak baulked. ‘You can’t be serious! You think he’d work against us?’

‘I don’t know what to think. But he’s been watching us for years and has never said a word. He killed Langdon when we needed him, and then he fled.’

The facts churned over in Bleak’s mind. Casimir was right. Ermias hadn’t acted like an innocent man, but Bleak couldn’t help but remember ...

A MAN in the shadows watched her.

‘What are you looking at?’ she snapped, taking in his tattered clothes and the dark set of lashes framing his eyes. He pushed off from the wall he’d been leaning on and smirked. ‘You,’ he said.

Bleak rolled her eyes and adjusted the rope on her shoulder, making to leave. The man fell into step beside her, his ragged clothes billowing.

‘You can’t be serious,’ Bleak muttered.

‘I’m always serious.’

‘Piss off.’

‘I’ve got something for you.’

‘Doesn’t everyone? Nothing comes without a price in this realm. I’m not interested.’

‘First gift’s free.’

‘Sure, sure. Who the hell are you?’

‘They call me the Tailor.’

‘Oh, they do, do they?’

‘Indeed. They call you Bleak.’

Bleak forced her legs to keep moving. The beggar knew her name, so what? Anyone who frequented the docks could figure that out in a second.

‘What do you want?’

‘I told you. To give you a gift.’

‘Right. And what’s that, then?’

‘A warning.’

This time, Bleak stopped in her tracks. ‘Oh?’

He locked eyes with her, all traces of fun gone. ‘Your search. It draws attention. The wrong kind of attention. You need to stop.’

‘What? What are you —’

‘Told you,’ he cut her off, eyebrows raised. ‘First one’s free.’ She opened her mouth to argue, to deny, but as she did, the doors to the nearby temple swung open. Throngs of people flooded the street. The Tailor, whoever he was, had gone.

BLEAK DIDN’T KNOW what to make of any of it. Clear lines of trust and what was right and wrong had been blurred long ago. Only Ermias had the answers they needed, and he wasn’t here. Frustrated, she made for the door, but something stuck to the bottom of her boot. A scrap of parchment. She peeled it away from the sole and read it.

Third day. Noon. Storage shed. Heathton Stables.

She showed Casimir.

‘That’s today,’ he said.

Bleak’s heart soared. ‘We have to go. He’ll be there.’

‘We don’t know who it’s from. Or what it’s about. It might be a trap.’

Suddenly, the door swung open. Both Bleak and Casimir jumped back and unsheathed their daggers.

A woman stood in the doorway. She wore a flawlessly tailored suit. From the fine cut of material and the way she stood with her feet apart, Bleak knew she could be none other than Madame Joelle Marie herself.

‘The Tailor never hosts guests,’ Madame Joelle said softly, her words laced with an unspoken threat.

‘We are friends of his,’ Casimir said, lowering his dagger. ‘And any friend of Tailor’s is a friend of ours.’

‘Is that so?’

‘It is.’

‘Then tell me, how did you get in here?’

‘We ...’

‘None of my girls would have willingly allowed it.’

‘No,’ Bleak conceded. ‘No blame lies with them. It was me. I have certain ... methods of persuasion.’

‘Oh?’

Bleak lowered her weapon as well and took a deep breath. ‘I’m like Tailor.’

Madame Joelle narrowed her eyes and closed the gap between them. She reached for Bleak’s eyepatch and slowly removed it, taking in her odd eyes.

‘I know who you are,’ she said.

‘Then you know we are friends of Tailor’s. Can you help us?’

Madame Joelle re-positioned the material back over Bleak’s eye and stepped away to consider the pair. ‘Find the baron and you’ll find the Tailor,’ she said finally.

‘What?’

Madame Joelle was already turning to leave. ‘I’ll say no more than that. Now you need to go. You’ve put me, my girls and my business at great risk by coming here.’

‘Please —’

‘Find the baron, find the Tailor. Now get out.’

BLEAK LED Casimir from Heathton’s dark, pouring underbelly to its heart, stopping at every crossroad to check for guard patrols. Her skin grew clammy as they passed numerous posters littering the noticeboards and shopfronts. King Arden’s smear campaign against her, the Ashai folk and the Valians was vast and detailed.

They passed two of her old favourite taverns to find the windows boarded up and giant red Xs painted across the doors.

‘Plague,’ Casimir said, following her gaze.

When they reached the outskirts of the town square, Bleak grabbed Casimir’s wrist to stop him from walking out into the open. The town square had always been a hub of activity, brimming with markets and merchants. Now, the markets were gone and in their place was a small band of people chanting.

‘Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.’

‘Gods,’ Bleak murmured. Ines had taken hold here, too. She followed Casimir’s gaze to the podium in the centre of the square. Even in the downpour, crows pecked at a corpse chained to the flogging post, tearing strips of rotting flesh from the bones and squabbling amongst themselves.

Beside the body, a wooden sign was propped up against the bronze gong.

‘THE FATE AWAITING ALL THOSE IN LEAGUE WITH TRAITORS TO THE CROWN,’ it read.

Releasing her grip on Casimir, she forced her feet backwards. They gave the towering stone walls a wide berth as they drew closer to the castle grounds, eyeing the guards positioned at the gates. Finally, they reached the royal stables and took shelter under an old hay store by the corrals. From there, they could see the storage shed referenced in the note. Bleak was grateful to be under cover, but the proximity to King Arden’s keep made her skin crawl. Magic pulsed outwards from behind the thick stone walls, a foreign power Bleak had no desire to encounter again.

Noon was thirty minutes away yet, so she leaned back against a bale of hay and closed her eyes. She desperately needed sleep, but her power was restless in her veins, needled by the strange magical taint thrumming from within the castle. Her mind dragged her back to that dark power lying

dormant within her. She hadn't felt so much as a flicker of it since she'd washed up on the shores of Oremere months ago. With a heavy sigh, she opened her eyes. She would find no peace here. Instead, she removed her sopping coat, trying to wring some of the water from it.

'Stop fidgeting,' Casimir hissed, but his attention snagged on the black band around her arm. 'I thought we agreed we wouldn't wear those here?' he said quietly.

Bleak ran her fingers over the damp material. It was a memorial band for Petra and the other kindred they'd lost in the snowslide battle. A Valian custom.

She bit her lip. 'I ... I couldn't take it off.'

Casimir smiled sadly and rolled up the sleeve of his own cloak, revealing an identical band around his arm. 'Me either.'

Suddenly, Bleak heard movement from the nearby corral and straightened, scanning the wet field for Tailor. But it wasn't Tailor who appeared. The castle cook, red-faced and out of breath, arrived at the storage shed, carrying a canister of grain. *Surely not?*

Bleak decided it was worth the risk and she and Casimir approached slowly.

'You?' the cook said in disbelief, recognising Bleak instantly. 'What are you ...? I'm meant to meet —'

'The Tailor of Heathton?' Bleak finished for her.

The cook stared at her before finally saying, 'You've got some meat on your bones this time.'

They had met once before, when Bleak had been a starved prisoner of King Arden. 'What's your name?' Bleak asked, changing tact. Perhaps they needed to put in a little more groundwork before making demands.

The cook hesitated for a moment before she readjusted the canister on her hip. 'Suppose you could find out easily enough. The name's Martha.'

Bleak nodded. 'Martha, is Tailor meant to meet you here?'

Martha nodded stiffly. 'But he doesn't always show when he says he will.'

'Why?' Casimir asked.

'It's dangerous. That ... that woman has been here.'

Bleak swallowed. 'Ines? Ines has been in Heathton?'

'Yes. Tearing the place apart looking for Rheyah knows what.'

Terror crossed Casimir's face like a storm and he visibly paled.

Martha glanced around as she continued. 'She was in a rage. The whole castle heard her trashing the old library.'

An icy shiver ran down Bleak's spine and her hand went to her pocket, where she'd hidden a dose of poison she'd stolen from the groundling, Lyse. She would not be taken alive again.

Casimir cleared his throat. 'Do you have any idea where Erm— Tailor is?'

Martha shook her head and pulled a pocket watch from the folds of her apron. 'It's past noon. I should get back. As should you. And be sure to be indoors after dark. Though I'd recommend leaving Ellest entirely.'

'Indoors after dark?' Bleak prompted.

'There's a curfew in place, girl. Much has changed since you were here last.'

That much Bleak already knew. 'Do you know anyone who goes by the title "baron"? ' she asked, remembering Madame Joelle's cryptic words.

'There are no barons in Ellest. Nor any other continent I can think of,' Martha said.

'Didn't think so.' Bleak shook her head at the useless information. 'Thank you anyway.'

'One thing.' Martha paused, gripping Bleak's arm with a chilled hand. 'You know the boy, don't you?'

'Boy?'

'The blasted stable boy who wreaked havoc on my kitchen. The one Tailor took from here not long ago. If you know Tailor, you might know him.'

'Dash?'

Martha nodded eagerly. 'That's the one.'

'We know him,' Casimir confirmed, colour coming back into his cheeks.

Relief washed over the cook's face. She took a crumpled piece of parchment from her apron and pressed it into Bleak's hand. 'Give this to him?'

'What is it?'

'He'll know what it's for.'

Bleak froze as she was tucking the paper into her cloak. 'Did you see that?' She squinted beyond the corral.

'See what?' Casimir looked around wildly.

But the flicker of a tattered tailcoat was gone. She could have sworn she'd seen a flash of the Tailor of Heathton, but all she could see now was an empty training ring through the downpour.

'Nothing.' Prince Ermias Goldwell didn't want to be found, it seemed.

'Bleak.' Casimir gripped her arm.

'It was nothi—'

'Not that,' he said, pointing towards the stables.

She heard them before she saw them.

'Our queen. Our goddess. Our life. Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.'

Only this wasn't the small band of followers they'd seen in the town square. This was a group, three dozen strong, marching towards them. Their hot pokers hissing in the rain as they brandished them.

'Run!' Martha cried, shoving Bleak into motion.

The crowd of fanatics broke into a run. *'Our queen. Our goddess. Our life. Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.'*

Bleak snatched Casimir's sleeve and dragged him with her. Together, the three of them sprinted. There was no taking careful cover, no time to check for guards. Mud splattered as they ran and adrenaline roared between Bleak's ears.

'Faster,' she panted to the others.

But Martha paused as they reached the outskirts of the city, glancing behind them. 'The two of you go. I'll lead them away.'

The chant echoed up the narrow passage, even amidst the downpour. *'Our queen. Our goddess. Our life. Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.'*

Bleak gaped. 'You can't —'

On the stone wall behind Martha, a single red flower bloomed.

Martha pushed her. 'Go!'

'But what about you?'

Casimir was already wrenching her down another laneway. 'Move,' he hissed.

There was nothing for it. The fanatics were closing in. Bleak looked to Martha in desperation, but the cook had already turned to face Ines' followers.

Bleak and Casimir sprinted downhill through the darkening, soaked capital, darting through the twisting avenues and passing more buildings bearing giant red Xs across their storefronts. Bleak's heart was in her throat, and as if in answer to her panic, the magic surrounding the city fluttered and

Bleak's own power tingled. Not just her power, but her scar, the scar from the plague over a decade ago.

The docks were in sight now and the chanting had faded. Whatever Martha had done had bought them time.

They slipped onto *Rheyah's Prize*, mere shadows in the grey afternoon. Safe in their cabin, Bleak waited for relief to wash over her, but it didn't. The scarred skin on her thigh still prickled intensely, as though the plague lingered in the underbelly of the city and recognised someone it had touched once before. She slung her dripping coat over the back of a chair and rubbed her leg.

'You feel it, too?' Casimir asked between ragged breaths.

Bleak nodded but didn't trust herself to speak. Tailor's tattered coat flashed in her mind, along with the single blood bloom flowering on the stone wall.

'What is it?' Casimir pressed.

Bleak swallowed. 'I think we just got a glimpse of how powerful Ines really is.' She looked down to find her hands trembling. 'And what will happen if she gets her hands on that amulet first.'

CHAPTER 2

The Janhallow Desert was an unforgiving stretch of fiery sand dunes and little else. Dimitri Swinton's face was already tight with burn as the searing red Battalonian sun blazed down relentlessly. Swinton looked across to Princess Olena. The girl's pale complexion was covered by a blue veil, and the fabric clung to her skin, damp with perspiration. But she had not uttered a single complaint. Beside her, Prince Nazuri was also stoic in the saddle.

The betrothed royal couple looked like any other ragged vagabonds lost in the desert. Their lips were chapped, their exposed skin was coated in a layer of dust, sand and sweat, and the usual finery they wore had been exchanged for well-worn riding gear.

Swinton knew that he, too, was unrecognisable. His shoulder-length, coal-coloured hair had been sheared close to his skull, the dark beard he usually kept trimmed and tidy had grown, and the signature battleaxes he wore strapped across his back were gone. No doubt he'd look like a common street beggar were it not for Xander, the majestic horse he rode. His only reminder of his former life.

Fiore Murphadias, the ex-Ellestian captain, nudged his horse alongside Swinton's.

'Dimi,' he said. 'We won't last much longer without shelter.' Fi, who was usually impervious to the continent's heat, was also drenched in sweat.

'I know,' Swinton said, squinting into the distance. He winced as his magic tugged beneath his skin. He'd been without his protective talisman for about four weeks and he still wasn't used to his powers' constant whispering, or the full-fledged visions that sent him reeling.

He lifted his near-empty canteen to his lips. A trickle of tepid water hit his swollen, parched tongue and he caught Fi's concerned gaze. His Battalionian friend gave a single, confirming nod. They were in trouble. There were no sources of fresh water out here within a day's ride, and without water ... Well, Swinton didn't want to think about it.

They passed masses of tracks in the sand. Horses, people on foot, remnants of a gigantic horde.

'Army?' Swinton asked Fi, nodding to the trails.

Fi shook his head, gazing ahead. 'Refugees.'

As the red orb of the sun dipped closer to the horizon, the heat of the desert finally began to abate. Cool evening air settled over Swinton's flushed skin, and in the orange glow of dusk, he realised just how far behind the prince and princess had fallen. He brought Xander to a stop.

'We camp here for tonight,' he announced, dismounting.

Prince Nazuri swung down from his own horse and helped Olena. She landed deftly on her feet and brushed the sweaty hair from her brow, sagging with relief as she peeled the damp fabric of her veil away from her face. Swinton had to admire her. A lone young girl, on the cusp of adulthood, in the company of strange men, travelling across blistering, foreign lands. It wasn't easy, especially with no ladies' maids to assist her with her more delicate needs. But she handled herself with the utmost grace. He left her and the prince to walk off their saddle stiffness in peace.

Swinton and Fi unsaddled the horses and fed them quarter rations. Both guards and royals ate another cold meal of bread and cheese side by side, though Swinton didn't know how much longer their fare would keep in this heat. Supplies on all fronts were dwindling.

They slept beneath an infinity of stars. Millions dotted the vast black canvas. Burning bright, their beauty, their occasional graceful fall towards the realm, offered a glimmer of hope in an otherwise desolate place.

On the edge of sleep, magic wrenched Swinton below the surface of the present. A vision emerged before him.

WATER. A fine vein of fresh water coursed through the red desert. A narrow brook wet the scorched earth and beckoned him to follow. He started after it, the stream's source and destination utterly unknown. The hot wind of the Janhallow Desert kissed his clammy brow as he continued to follow the

path the water cut through the sand. On and on it went. There was a dip in the terrain, and Swinton followed the trickle up over a crest. There, just beyond, lay a village, torchlight flickering within. But it wasn't just any village. Swinton had been there before.

THE NEXT MORNING, as they saddled their horses and readied themselves for another parched journey, Swinton turned to Fi.

'Erostey village,' he said. 'They have water.'

Fi's brows shot up. 'No.'

'Fi, we're desperate.'

'Do you know what they'd do to us? To *you*?'

'We helped them.'

'*Helped* them? You mean *after* we flung sacks of desert vipers into their stronghold and shot their men down with fire arrows?'

'This is different,' Swinton argued.

'Yes, it's different. *They* have the power this time.'

'Soon, the only ones with power will be Arden and Ines.'

'What are you saying?'

'We don't just need their water, we need their men.'

Fiore gaped at him. 'Have you lost your senses?'

Swinton shook his head. 'Tell me I'm wrong, Fi. But we need all the able bodies we can muster. War is coming. We cannot fight it alone.' He considered the vast desert plains that sprawled before them and glanced at the princess.

'It's our only hope.' As he muttered the words, the truth of them sank like a heavy stone in the pit of his gut. Much longer and they would die. All of them. Traitors side by side with the prince and princess. It didn't matter out here. The scorching sand and dry, hot winds would claim them all the same.

Swinton watched as that realisation dawned on Fi, the kiss of defeat dragging the light from his golden eyes.

'Is there something we should know, Commander?' Despite her fatigue, Princess Olena's voice was as sharp as ever.

'The captain and I were just debating the best course of action from here, Your Highness.'

'And what is the best course of action?' Prince Nazuri asked.

Princess Olena turned to them, clearly noting the edge to the prince's tone. A week on the road had taught Swinton that Olena didn't need her eyes to read the tensions between the men.

'I believe we should seek shelter and assistance from a nearby village,' he told the royals.

'The village of Erostei?' Olena asked.

'Yes.'

'The same village the two of you obliterated during the Janhallow rebellion?'

Swinton's response died on his lips. It wasn't the first time that the extent of Princess Olena's knowledge of history had caught him off guard.

'The very one,' Fi answered. 'I advise against it, Your Highnesses.'

Prince Nazuri shifted uncomfortably.

Fiore continued. 'Your father —'

'Treated them harshly,' the prince said. 'I know.'

With a glance in Swinton's direction, Princess Olena reached out for Prince Nazuri, and Nazuri closed the gap between them. He took her gloved hand.

'Maybe it's time we changed that?' she said.

ANOTHER NIGHT FELL as they approached the village of Erostei. Swinton had argued that the prince and princess stay behind, hidden by the crest in the dunes. But Princess Olena was stubborn. She refused to part from them, no matter how many times Swinton and Fi detailed the dangers to her.

'We are bound together now,' she said. 'It's not up for debate.'

As much as Swinton wanted to protest the matter, Princess Olena was his monarch, the one he had *chosen*. Not the one he'd served out of fear and guilt. He bit back another retort. He would do as she commanded.

Fear licked up the column of his throat as they approached the village. He'd insisted that they approach the gates openly, as trying to sneak inside would only put them in more danger. However, they were not to announce the presence of the prince or princess until they knew more about the loyalties of the Erostei clans. For now, they were nought but weary travellers looking for shelter. The princess tugged her veil across her face again, shielding her clouded eyes as much as possible.

‘No doubt word will have spread that the blind Princess of Ellest is on the run,’ she explained. ‘Best if we can hide my ... ailment, I think?’

‘As you say, Your Highness,’ Swinton replied, bowing his head.

The guards at the gates were simple foot soldiers, but upon seeing Swinton and the others with their horses, more men arrived, holding gleaming scythes and swords.

‘Who goes there?’ a voice boomed from within.

‘Four travellers,’ Fiore called back. ‘We need fresh water, old friend. The road has been long. Can you help?’

‘Where do you hail from?’

Fiore stepped forward. ‘I am from Belbarrow originally, though I have travelled far in recent years. My good companions are from all around the realm.’

The guards eyed the group suspiciously, but their attention to Fi was different. Scrutiny sought recognition, and Swinton didn’t miss his friend tugging his sleeve firmly over the tattoo on his forearm before their critical gazes fell to the flames inked there.

The guards glared at Swinton, making him all too aware that he did not share the bulky physique of a native Battalonian like Fi. Although, nor did the prince, and yet the guards paid him no heed.

‘Leave your weapons at the entrance,’ the voice finally said.

Swinton unbuckled his sword belt as he approached the gate with Fi. All his instincts were screaming *run*, and his magic churned like a storm within. A guard took his sword and patted him down for more weapons, swiping the dagger Swinton kept in his boot. They were ushered inside, where torchlight illuminated a sprawling, low-lying village and a dozen or so curious faces.

‘My name is Taakeem,’ said the guard holding Swinton’s sword. ‘Follow me.’

They had no choice but to do as he bid. Swinton stayed by Princess Olena’s side, hoping that his close proximity offered some semblance of reassurance. Taakeem led them down a narrow passageway, taking them deeper into the village. It was hard to attain the scope of the community in the flickering torchlight, but from what Swinton could see as he squinted past curious clan members, it was vast. Dwellings, shops and archways had been built into the rockface, with the whole village sitting low in the earth, likely to escape some of the desert’s unforgiving heat.

Clansmen and women stared at them as they passed, taking in their ragged clothes and dust-covered faces. Unease squirmed in Swinton's gut, and one glance at Fi told him that he was right to be worried. His brawny friend's usually relaxed demeanour seemed strained, as though he expected the worst to happen here. As though he knew something Swinton did not.

Taakeem led them down yet another path, their figures casting long shadows across the sand. Swinton could still feel the heat of the day pulsing up from the ground, but knew it was only a matter of hours before the night's chill gripped the plains. He mopped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, and at last followed Taakeem into a large hut in the heart of the village.

'Wait here,' Taakeem told them.

Swinton shifted from foot to foot, stealing another glance at Fiore. His friend's expression was unreadable. Swinton wondered if he was thinking of the last time they'd come here. They'd been under the orders of King Arden and King Roswall to bring the rebels to heel. It had been Fi's plan that had won them the victory.

'Never underestimate the hardiness of those who live in the Janhallow Desert,' Fi had once said. *'It takes a certain kind of people to flourish out here.'*

Prince Nazuri eyed the guards blocking the exit, while Princess Olena remained still at his side.

'What is the meaning of this?' a rich voice boomed. An enormous man entered the hut, his frame taking up the entirety of the doorway. Taakeem was right behind him.

'These are the travellers, Chief Yaridha,' he explained to the man.

Chief Yaridha scrutinised their tattered appearances. His eyes narrowed as he spotted Fi, but didn't linger as he surveyed the rest of them. Surely they simply looked like a handful of weary vagabonds and nothing more? Swinton struggled to keep still, his stomach in knots as the chief took a step closer. There was something familiar about him. The sheer size of him was one thing, but his stance was different to that of the other clan guards. His was one of training, of discipline, someone who was once perhaps a trained champion. Someone whom Swinton had crossed paths with before.

'Take the youths to the elder tent,' Chief Yaridha ordered.

Before Swinton could protest, Prince Nazuri and Princess Olena were whisked away by the strangers. Then, Chief Yaridha's gaze met his, and slid

to the thick scar that ran from Swinton's cheek to chin, and his newly shaved head.

A pair of ornate fighting knives flashed in Swinton's memory.

'That is no traveller,' Yaridha growled, his eyes not leaving Swinton. '*That is the former Commander of King Arden's Army. Seize him.*'

Panic swarmed as half a dozen hands grabbed him, and half a dozen more restrained Fi. Their grip was bruising, and Swinton felt his face flush as he was dragged out of the hut and into the orange glow of the village square. Onlookers gawked as he was forced to his knees before Chief Yaridha. He could hear Fi's desperate protests, but the sounds faded as he locked eyes with the clan leader. Swinton remembered how his axe had hurtled across the sand, how the chief's blade had sunk into his face, causing his blood to spurt and gush down his neck, before the chief had toppled over with a cry, the point of a sword protruding from his middle. Stefan, Swinton's young squire, standing behind him, grinning roguishly. Now, the two men stared at each other. No doubt both recalling the events that had led them, angry and scarred, to this very moment.

'I thought you were dead,' Swinton managed.

Around them, the guards and villagers looked to Yaridha for answers, unaware of what had transpired between chief and commander all those years ago.

'I very nearly was dead, thanks to you.' He lifted his shirt, revealing a jagged scar through his middle. 'I was fortunate enough that a great healer had been amongst us. Ethelda is known for her talents all over the realm.'

Ethelda? The same healer who'd stitched Fi only weeks ago? Knees aching, Swinton steadied himself. He needed to divert the chief's attention well away from the elder tent where Olena and Nazuri were being held. Who knew what he'd do with such valuable captives were he to become aware of their status. The longer Swinton could give them, the better; perhaps they'd have a chance to escape.

Swinton lifted his chin in defiance. 'It was thanks to my squire, actually,' he said. 'He was promoted shortly after.'

Chief Yaridha's nostrils flared and he turned to face his people. '*Commander Swinton* was the one who led the viper attack against us over a decade past,' he told them.

Swinton didn't see the blow coming. Yaridha's fist smashed into his face in a blink. His nose cracked as pain exploded across his vision, and hot

blood gushed.

‘No! Stop!’ Fi somehow broke free of his captors and rushed to Swinton’s side.

‘Leave it, Fi,’ Swinton hissed under his breath, spitting the blood that had leaked into his mouth. ‘There’s no need for both of us —’

‘But —’

‘Take him to the others,’ Yaridha snapped. ‘The commander will be punished for his misdeeds by the clan. The traditional Erostei way.’

Swinton clenched his jaw as Fi was also hauled out of sight. But he felt a flicker of relief. Whatever awaited him now would not be pleasant, but Fi would be with the royals and he was grateful that none of them would be here to witness —

Without warning, the wind was knocked out of him with a fist to his gut. He doubled over, wheezing. He looked up, eyes watering, and staggered to his feet. Gloved knuckles smashed into his nose again and he saw stars as pain burned across his whole face. He swung back blindly, but another fist collided with his lip, his teeth grinding. All there was now was the cold, brutal deliverance of the clan’s retribution. A kick to the ribs sent Swinton sprawling across the dust with a moan. The blows kept coming and he spat blood into the dirt, dry-retching on all fours. His eyes were already swelling, making it hard to judge the blurry shapes of his attackers. Dizziness already had a hold on him and his defence was sloppy. It didn’t matter. There were too many of them. Too many seeking vengeance for the horror he had wreaked on their village.

The whispers of the villagers around him sounded like the hiss of desert vipers.

‘It’s him ... He’s here ... I saw him with my own eyes ...’

He gasped, fresh pain rippling through him as a boot connected with his kidney. He’d sworn to protect Olena, to protect them. He couldn’t let them down. He couldn’t ... He couldn’t breathe. He was —

‘Enough!’ someone roared. The word rang in Swinton’s spinning head. He tried to crane his neck to see, but his eyes were too swollen, his vision too blurred. He rested his forehead in the sand, panting.

‘This will stop at once. Unhand him.’

There was a collective intake of breath from around Swinton. The onlookers muttered a title he didn’t recognise, and he squinted from where he lay in the dirt. The entire clan had bowed their heads.

It was Fi who stood before them, his sleeve rolled up, revealing the lick of fire tattooed on his forearm.

What? How could he have any say here?

Prince Nazuri came into view as well, having been released. 'Clean up the commander at once,' he ordered. 'We have much to discuss.'

Swinton was too dizzy to understand what was going on. Why had the royals been released? Who had authority here, in a village that had been in open rebellion against the crown? Why hadn't they said sooner? The questions pummelled his rattled mind. Fi appeared at his side, and lifted him to his feet.

'Can you stand, brother?' he asked quietly.

Swinton swayed.

'I've got you,' Fi said, allowing Swinton to lean into him, supporting most of his weight.

The whispers started again as his Battalonian friend carried him, but Swinton was too battered and bruised to care.

LATER, seated at a round table inside the main hut, Swinton gulped down his second goblet of wine to ease his pain and humiliation. Everything hurt. Dry blood caked his face, and his skin was stretched tight over all the swelling. Sitting rigid in his chair, he was covered in dirt and sand from head to toe. They'd provided Fi with a basin of water and a washcloth to clean him up, but Swinton needed a healer more than anything. Wiping the grime from his face would only reveal the extent of the damage the clansmen had done, so he had left it. Fi wouldn't look at him now. The guilt he felt for Swinton's beating was written plainly on his face.

Prince Nazuri, however, had somehow managed to get cleaned up and appear presentable in front of the clan. He wore the stern expression of a disappointed king-to-be, and was staring down everyone at the table.

'He's been in talks with them for months,' Fi whispered in his ear, following his gaze.

'So he just *let them* carry out a beating?' Swinton muttered.

'He didn't know if he should reveal himself, didn't know if he could trust them.'

'Well, I wish he'd had his realisation a little sooner.'

Fi grimaced. 'It wasn't just that.'

‘What, then?’

‘Nazuri knew people killed in the viper attack. In Battalon, even allies accept punishment for their actions. Justice always prevails.’

‘Does it?’

Princess Olena sat beside Prince Nazuri. She’d washed the dirt from her face, but the rest of her remained unkempt. Swinton had to hide his anger at their treatment of her. She deserved just as much respect as the prince. He made a mental note to talk to Nazuri about it. Later. Tensions were already high; he wouldn’t risk fracturing the fragile truce between them now. He downed the rest of his wine, wincing at the pain that throbbed at his broken nose. He’d lost count of how many blows had found their mark on him.

Clearing his throat, Chief Yaridha bore down on the table surface. ‘Your Highness. Respected guests,’ he addressed the prince and then Fi and Olena. ‘Your arrival is unexpected, to say the least.’

‘Did our correspondence lead you to think that we’d abandoned our people?’

Swinton stared. He still couldn’t get his head around the fact that the prince had been in contact with Yaridha. And that *Fi* had some kind of sway with the villagers.

‘Of course not, Your Highness. At your request, the refugees from the capital have been accepted with open arms here in Erostei, despite the strain it’s put on our resources.’

‘The refugees are here?’ Fi’s deep voice carried across the table. All eyes snapped to him.

Yaridha nodded. ‘Yes. King Roswall has forsaken the old gods and has declared a new goddess for Battalon. Ines, Rheyah incarnate. The refugees have fled the clutches of those who are under the false queen’s trance in Belbarrow. Tomorrow we will gather them and the clan together for a formal address, if His Highness agrees?’

‘Yes,’ Nazuri said. ‘We have much to tell the people.’

Swinton suppressed a shudder; the statue in the maze at Heatton was seared onto his mind. He had only heard her name in whispers, but he knew her, knew of her treachery and influence. He also recalled the mosaic mural from Olena’s chambers in the shiprock palace. The witch had sunk her talons into both monarchs, it seemed.

‘Your Highness,’ Yaridha addressed the prince. ‘I would ask that the princess leaves before we delve further into the delicate matters at hand.’

‘Princess Olena is your *future queen*.’ The thick words had left Swinton’s mouth before he could stop himself.

Yaridha glared at him. ‘Get the commander out of here —’

‘The commander is right,’ Prince Nazuri interjected, standing to full height, anger flashing across his face. ‘Princess Olena is my betrothed, my equal, *your* future queen.’

His words hung heavily over the clan leaders, each one turning to Olena and sizing her up. The princess didn’t squirm under their scrutiny; she simply waited, as though inviting a challenge. None came.

‘What’s more,’ the prince continued, ‘the commander is our most trusted adviser. Brother-in-arms to your kinsman. We owe him our lives. Now that Erostei justice has been served for his past misdeeds, he will be treated with respect. You have had your retribution.’ Prince Nazuri sat back down. ‘Now, if we may proceed?’

‘We should speak to the refugees first,’ Princess Olena said, her voice soft but firm.

Swinton noted the shock wave that rippled across the table of men. These clansmen were certainly not used to the inclusion of women, let alone their orders. Swinton found his mind wandering to Henrietta Valia, knowing she would have a thing or two to say about that. Although, Henri was more of a *strike first, ask questions later* sort of woman.

To his credit, Chief Yaridha took a long swig of wine and said, ‘Her Highness is right. You need to understand what’s happening in the capital before we can move forward. Taakeem, bring them in.’

‘Yes, Chief.’

Swinton leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes momentarily as exhaustion tugged at him, the pain of his injuries a constant throb. Spots danced in the darkness behind his lids.

‘Hang in there, old friend,’ Fi murmured beside him.

He nodded. He had to. However hard it was right now to stay upright, the princess needed him here. And he wouldn’t let her down.

Taakeem re-entered the hut, followed by an elderly man and —

‘*There*?’ Swinton gaped.

The redheaded castle maid looked different in a plain tunic and pants rather than her smock and apron. Her hair was in two braids down either side of her face, and she bore a blooming purple bruise over one eye. She locked eyes with Swinton and gave an awkward curtsy.

‘Commander,’ she said, her voice strained. Her eyes bulged at the sight of his injuries. ‘How ...?’

Chief Yaridha beckoned them forward, where they bowed to the royal couple. ‘Therese and her father, Heylin here, escaped the capital some days before you did. They came with perhaps three hundred or so others. And they bring troubling news.’

‘Therese,’ Olena said. ‘You worked for my household in Heathton, and travelled with our entourage to Belbarrow?’

Therese nodded, before realising Olena couldn’t see her confirmation. ‘Yes, Your Highness,’ she said quickly.

‘Will you tell us what you know?’ Olena asked gently.

‘As you wish, Your Highness,’ Therese said, her voice wavering. ‘A number of weeks ago, I heard rumours within the palace that the king intended to change the crown’s faith. There were small changes, in the temples, in the chatter amongst the other servants, and I knew we needed to leave. I told my father, who came with me from Ellest, and we hid in the slums. A group of fanatics started patrolling the streets. They were ...’ She faltered.

‘Go on, if you can,’ the princess said.

Therese swallowed. ‘They were branding people with her face. Those who are loyal to the old gods are being punished, and slaughtered. The city is overrun with these ... new believers. We fled here before King Roswall made the official announcement declaring the goddess Ines as the living incarnation of the huntress, Rheyah, denouncing all other gods.’

There was silence around the room. Therese wrung her hands, not meeting Swinton’s gaze. The bruise marring her face was a week or so old, a ring of fading yellow surrounding it. Swinton realised he was clenching his fists beneath the table as he imagined what horrors the young woman had faced hiding in the slums of the searing capital.

‘Show them,’ Heylin muttered.

Therese’s answering expression was one of terror. ‘I can’t!’

‘I want them to see what they did to you. What they’re dealing with.’

‘Father, no.’

‘They have to know.’

A tear escaped and tracked down Therese’s face. It took all of Swinton’s surviving willpower to remain in his chair and not go to her. She reached for the laces at the front of her shirt and pulled, the fabric slipping from her

shoulder. She turned her back to them, revealing her pale, freckled skin and

Swinton's hand went to his mouth.

A horrific burn – no, not a burn, a *brand* – festered across the delicate point of Therese's shoulderblade. A woman's face.

'Tell me,' said Olena.

'She's been branded,' Prince Nazuri explained, gritting his teeth. 'It appears to be the face of Ines.'

Openly crying now, Therese pulled her shirt back over her shoulder. Her father took her hand in his.

'I'm sorry that happened to you,' Princess Olena said softly, but behind her clouded eyes, fury burned.

'I tried to fight them,' Therese sniffed. 'But there were too many.'

'You did well, Therese,' Olena told her. 'And you're safe now. Chief Yaridha, I want anyone who has been marked in this way to be seen to by your best healer. We cannot have wounds festering, as Therese's is. I can smell it.'

'Of course, Your Highness,' Yaridha said. He nodded to Taakeem, who motioned for Therese and Heylin to follow him.

Without a glance at Swinton, Therese and her father left.

'How many more refugees?' Prince Nazuri asked.

'The three hundred who came with Heylin. There are another seven hundred and fifty at least who have come in the past few days. I expect there will be more before the week's end, now that the new faith has been made official. We are a large and generous village, Highness, but we were not built for sustaining these sorts of additional numbers.'

The prince nodded. 'It is as I feared. My father is under the control of Ines.'

'It would seem so.'

'Then we must act immediately.'

'I agree, Highness. But we are already in open rebellion against the crown.'

'My father's crown. Not mine.'

'We stand behind you, Prince. And your court,' he added, with a glance towards Fi.

The prince rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'I have been visiting villages all around the country for months. I know we have loyal subjects in each of

them ... Commander Swinton?’

‘Yes, Your Highness?’

‘You are acting adviser to both Her Highness and myself. What are we to do?’

Ignoring the protests of pain, Swinton stood. ‘War is here, Your Highness. We can no longer deny it, or try to change it. There is only one thing we can do. We need to call to arms.’

CHAPTER 3

Freezing winds whipped snow across the desolate valleys and jagged mountain peaks surrounding Dash, Luka and Jarel. The icy conditions of the Kildaholm Alps had not been kind to the trio these past few weeks – or was it a month now? Dash’s mind, along with the rest of him, was numb from the cold, and their travels through the hinterlands had begun to blur into one endless cascade of white. Fighting the constant barrage of fresh snowfall, they were tracking the traitor, Mariette from Wildenhaven. The former kennel master stood accused of releasing toxic mist, with the intent to wipe out Queen Eydis’ forces, amongst other things.

Dash gritted his teeth against the cold and squeezed his horse’s sides with his heels. Though their thoroughbreds knew the perilous ridges and slopes well, the descent into the depths of Havennesse was no less terrifying. Continuous snowstorms had forced them to travel slowly, stopping at safe villages to rest and wait out the worst of the conditions. But they were gaining on Mariette, and once they had her, they were to bring her back to Wildenhaven to face the queen’s justice. Dash relished the idea, especially as he looked to Luka, who rode beside him, a black ribbon braided through her long, fiery red hair. He knew she also wore a black band around her arm, beneath the many layers of palma furs. Her usual wicked grin and teasing banter had been replaced with a faraway look and a grim line at her mouth. It hurt Dash to see her like this. He leaned across and tugged her sleeve.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

Luka's friend Petra had died in the snowslide battle four weeks ago. The entirety of her people, the Valia kindred, were in mourning.

'Not really,' she said. 'I keep forgetting she's gone. We're all getting on with our days, as we always do, because there's nothing else we can do, and I forget. I expect her to sit down to dinner with us, you know? Then it hits me, and I remember she's dead. One minute I'm alright, and then ...' Luka's voice broke. 'Then suddenly I'm the furthest thing from alright.'

Dash wished there was something he could do. The young Valian had been nothing but kind to him, and had become a close friend since ... since everything had changed. He wanted to comfort her, to offer her some sense of peace, but there was nothing he could say, nothing he could do to ease her pain.

She sighed. 'I just want ... I want to stop feeling like this. I want to move on. It's what Petra would have wanted.'

Dash had had limited experience with death. He'd certainly never lost someone close and he knew he was lucky for it. Words failing, he squeezed Luka's arm gently.

Luka gave him a sad smile before nodding to Jarel ahead. 'Come on. We're falling behind.'

DESPITE HIS OBSESSION with catching Mariette, Jarel insisted that they take shelter and set up camp for the night. A harsh snowstorm had set in and their trio could barely push through the savage tunnel of wind blasting through the valley.

'At least we know the bitch won't be moving far either,' Jarel said, leading them to an alcove.

Where Luka had quietened in her grief, Jarel's had manifested in vocal anger. He was prone to long, colourful rants about how his sister would punish Mariette. How the traitor had shamed the whole of Havennesse. Now, as he went about pitching their tent, he muttered all manner of curses to himself.

'He knew Petra well, didn't he?' Dash asked Luka quietly.

She nudged a flask into his hand. 'Yes,' she replied. 'Better than most. The worst part, though, is that Mariette was his friend. They've known each other since childhood. She was the kennel master's daughter, and as all Havennesse royals are guarded by the wolfdogs, Jarel and Eydis grew up

with her. From what I've heard, Eydis always kept her at arm's length. She suspected Mariette had feelings for Nicolai, but Jarel ... Mariette and Jarel were close. I think he's taking her betrayal personally.'

'It would be hard not to,' said Dash, taking a sip of water. He'd only met the traitor in passing a few times before the snow battle, but since then, he'd heard whispers of her misdeeds and the depths of her treachery. In Wildenhaven, the kennel master was considered a position of great influence and respect. Mariette had taken over from her father a number of years earlier and had benefitted significantly under Eydis' reign. However, her crush on the winter queen's lover was no secret, nor was the tension between the two women.

'It's always the people we know best who can hurt us the most,' Luka replied, watching Jarel, her expression once again faraway.

Dash got the feeling that Luka wasn't just talking about Jarel and Mariette anymore, but he didn't press her for an explanation. She'd tell him when she was ready.

Inside their tent was slightly warmer, and the three of them huddled together over a lamp and map, nibbling on stale grain bars, three of Eydis' dogs warming their feet. The map showed the dangerous path they'd taken through the alps, avoiding a number of villages that had succumbed to Ines' madness. Stories of the horrors there had started to rival even those of Moredon Tower, and Dash was keen to avoid them, as was Mariette, it seemed.

Luka sighed heavily. 'I don't understand,' she said. It was not the first time the Valian had voiced her confusion. 'She helped Ines, so doesn't it make sense that she'd join her forces now? Why avoid the villages?'

'She saw what they did to Nicolai with that brand,' Jarel said. 'She likely doesn't want to meet the same fate. Those people were insane.'

'Maybe she realised she made a mistake?' Dash offered. As soon as the words had left his mouth, he knew they were the wrong ones.

'A mistake is putting sugar on your dinner instead of salt,' Jarel snapped. 'Releasing toxic mist to eradicate your own people? There's no word for what that is.'

'Sorry,' Dash mumbled. 'I didn't mean —'

'He knows you didn't mean that,' Luka said.

Dash gave her a grateful look. He was still learning how to be this new person, to think before he opened his mouth. It was difficult at the best of

times, but when tensions were high and he was trapped in a tent ... He was glad for Luka's presence.

Jarel volunteered for first watch and writing the latest report for Eydis. Dash did his best to hide his relief. Although he knew deep down that the queen's brother's fury was not really aimed at him, sometimes Jarel's words still stung. He felt Luka's eyes on him as he pulled out the tome from Olena he'd brought with him.

'Reading again?' Luka asked.

Dash nodded. 'I didn't realise how important these books were,' he admitted. 'The more we know about the realm's hidden history, the more we might be able to help in the upcoming conflict. Don't you think?'

'I suppose so.' Luka shrugged. 'You're still the only person I know who brings books on a manhunt. What's this one?'

'It doesn't have a title. And it feels different to the others, as though the quaveer was done by hand. There are blank pages at the end, too. As though it's a personal account of the recent history of Oremere, one that didn't get finished.' Dash offered the leather-bound book to Luka.

She turned it over in her hands, and opened it to the first page. 'So you run your fingers down the bumps, like this?'

Dash scooted over to sit beside her and took her hand in his, guiding it. 'You have to go across the page. Each letter of the alphabet has its own pattern.'

'It's like another language.'

'It is.' He ran his and Luka's fingers over the first sentence. '*For generations, the existence of the Ashai continent of Oremere has been hidden from the inhabitants of the Upper Realm,*' he said aloud.

'I don't know how you manage that,' Luka told him, pushing the book back to him.

'I'm very slow still.'

Luka settled herself in her bedroll and curled up on her side. 'That doesn't matter.'

Dash organised his own sleeping arrangements, and after nestling under his blanket, blew out the lone candle. Reading quaveer in the dark rather than seeing the punctured dots on the page actually strengthened his reading ability.

'Dash?' Luka asked quietly as he opened the book.

'Yes?'

‘Will you read to me?’

The request surprised Dash, but he found his place and began to read aloud.

‘For generations, the existence of the Ashai continent of Oremere has been hidden from the inhabitants of the Upper Realm. A treaty involving the monarchs of each continent was signed, ensuring that the concealment of Oremere be maintained for the sake of all races. Upon the coming of age of the various heirs, the record of the treaty is passed down to the next king (or queen), as has been tradition for over a hundred and fifty years.

‘Due to the secretive nature of the fifth continent, any records of its laws and government have been difficult to obtain. It is believed that in addition to the unique multi-monarch rule, the continent was also heavily influenced by the high priestesses of Oremere. The Oremian order worshipped Rheyah the Huntress, mother of all gods, and were known to recruit seers into their midst. Over the decades, the order became renowned for delivering prophecies and visions to the royal and mediating families to great success. Their simple temple life and lack of material possessions ensured the accuracy of these premonitions, as the priestesses’ motives were pure and they were not driven by the greed and desire of so many others.

‘The hierarchy within the high priestess order is least documented of all, though it has been noted that some were prone to more visions and therefore had more influence within the monarchy. The rule of the Goldwells and the Ashdowns was one particularly dependent on the wisdom of Rheyah’s followers, with the kings and queens known to hold fortnightly council meetings in the temple. Over time, these were increased to weekly, and several occasions where individual rulers sought private counsel are noted among records ...’

Dash fell asleep with the heavy tome still in his hands, the hardships of life on the road finally dragging him into a deep slumber. Quaveer swam before his eyes. Patterns of dots from Olena’s letters, from the books he’d been devouring as a means of escape, danced to a soundless rhythm. Sleep pulled him under further, like a current sweeping him away from the troubles of their quest. Instead of crystals of snow, he dreamed of raging fire and black vipers snaking through red sand. He dreamed of running, running so fast he thought he’d lift off the ground.

THE SNOWSTORM from the night before had left them half buried, and the horses weren't happy. Dash did his best to warm them up and ease their discomfort, but even Kildaholm thoroughbreds would only stand for so much without complaint.

'What's this?' Luka picked up a scrap of fabric from the ground and turned it over in her hands.

Dash went to her and saw the embroidery work. It must have fallen out of Olena's book. 'That's mine.'

Luka ran her fingers across the crossed battleaxes. 'I wouldn't be showing this around back at the towers.'

'It's not the Ellestian sigil.'

'No?'

'No. It's the house sigil of my favourite knight.'

Luka frowned.

'A friend made it for me,' Dash said, taking it from her.

'Then keep it safe,' Luka said, mounting her horse.

Dash nodded, tucking it into his cloak. 'I will.' He tied his bedroll to his saddle, glad to be back on the move despite leaving the relative warmth of the tent and alcove. It didn't do well to linger amidst the icy shadows of the mountains.

There was a sharp bark. Eydis' dogs were restless, too.

'Enough dawdling,' Jarel said, already on his horse.

Dash swung himself up onto his own thoroughbred. 'We'll find her, Jarel. We won't stop until we do.'

'You have our word,' Luka added. 'No matter how damn frozen we are.'

The mountain passages were formidable: narrow, icy paths between craggy peaks and dense pine forests. While their mounts were surefooted, Dash gripped the reins tightly and leaned back in the saddle as they navigated the winding trail. Blistering winds tore through his layers like knives and he tucked his woollen scarf across the lower half of his face, his exposed skin burning from the cold. Despite the discomfort, he couldn't help but marvel at the breathtakingly desolate summits. He still couldn't quite believe he was here, not back in Heatton mucking out stables with Pa.

Ahead, a bark sounded again.

‘We must be getting close,’ Jarel called over the wind. ‘Let’s pick up the pace.’

The thought of quickening their stride in this terrain made Dash anxious, but he did as the queen’s brother bid. He would not rob Jarel of his victory.

Dash sank into the rhythmic movement of the horse beneath him and followed after the others in contemplative quiet. Much had changed for him in the past few months, and he was still coming to terms with it all, forever learning new things about himself. Though he’d not said it aloud, he missed Mama and Pa. Ma’s constant prattling and hearty cooking, and Pa’s annoyed, stop-pestering-me-with-questions look. But perhaps more than anyone, he missed Olena. Her witty remarks and wise observations about the workings of the realm always made him see things more clearly, always put things into perspective. He hadn’t received a reply to the letter he’d sent just before the battle. Dash tried not to worry about it. Olena had just lost her mother, she was still in the throes of her grief, and she was far away from her home and her brother, but ... Dash’s mind couldn’t help taking him somewhere selfish. What if she’d forgotten him? What if the prince had replaced —

‘There!’ Jarel cried.

Dash jolted, and spotted the blur of palma furs ahead.

Both Luka and Jarel bolted towards Mariette on horseback, hooves kicking up snow in their wake. Dash urged his horse after them. They galloped across a flat stretch of white, the wind roaring in Dash’s ears as they pummelled the fresh snow into the ground. It was Luka who reached her first. With no hesitation, the Valian leaped from her horse and flung herself at Mariette, tackling the traitor from the saddle and landing on her in the wet snow. Luka’s fist flew at the traitor’s face, a loud crack and strangled cry sounding from Mariette. But Luka wasn’t done. She drew her hand back and punched Mariette again. The woman squirmed and threw her hands up, attempting to protect her face.

‘You!’ Luka said, landing another blow.

Mariette spluttered blood. ‘Please! No!’

‘What did you think would happen?’ Luka yelled. ‘Did you think you’d get away with it? Did you think —’ She hit her again. Mariette moaned in agony.

‘Luka,’ Dash cried, jumping down from his own horse. ‘Luka, stop!’

‘No. This *bitch* is the reason Petra is dead. Why *so many people* are dead.’

‘Jarel,’ Dash implored. He couldn’t watch someone being beaten to death. But Jarel remained atop his horse. He’d let Luka kill her, Dash realised. For Petra, for Havennesse.

Dash made to wrench Luka off the bleeding Mariette. ‘Luka —’

She threw him off, her fist slamming into Mariette’s cheekbone. The former kennel master went limp.

Dash wouldn’t stand for this. He wouldn’t let his friend become a murderer. Panic rising in his chest, he drew his sword. The one Luka herself had given him. He pointed it at her.

Luka froze, shock etched on her face.

‘Mariette will face the queen’s justice,’ he said. ‘Not yours.’

The Valian locked eyes with Dash, the traitor’s blood dripping from her leather gloves. A quiet sob escaped her, and she fell back into the snow.

Sheathing his blade, Dash went to her. He knelt beside her, and with an arm around her, brought her close to him. She turned into his embrace, her arms clinging to him, her tears wetting his cloak. Dash couldn’t remember the last time someone had touched him like this, if ever. Luka’s grief poured out in silent cries against the hollow of his neck, raw and uncontained. All Dash could do was hold her.

At some point, he heard Jarel jump down from his horse to bind Mariette with rope. The queen’s brother went about his tasks silently, leaving them in the snow.

After a time, Luka pulled back from Dash, her eyes red and swollen. She wiped her nose on her sleeve.

‘I’m sorry,’ she murmured, fresh tears breaking free.

Dash squeezed her hand. ‘Don’t be.’

Luka sniffed and looked to Jarel, who had hauled Mariette’s unconscious body up onto the saddle in front of him. Gathering herself, Luka cleaned the blood from her gloves in the snow and got to her feet.

MARIETTE WOKE a few hours into their return journey through the alps. She swayed in the saddle, clearly feeling the full extent of the injuries Luka had inflicted. Jarel’s face was screwed up in distaste at sharing the saddle with her.

‘What will happen to me?’ she asked, looking to Dash.

He knew better than to answer. The uncertainty of her fate would be another element to her punishment, and after everything, Mariette deserved to squirm with the possibilities.

‘I had no choice, you know,’ she muttered. ‘He told me if I didn’t —’

‘That’s enough,’ Jarel snapped.

He told me? Dash lingered on her words. *Who’s he?* But he kept his mouth shut. Jarel clearly wasn’t ready to listen. And for that, Dash didn’t blame him. They trudged on, the icy wind battering into them with brutal force. Dash couldn’t stop his teeth from chattering and his whole body ached from shivering. He longed for the blazing hearths of the great hall in Wildenhaven and a hot meal in his belly. Lately, no matter how much he ate, he never seemed to feel completely full. The Tailor had laughed when he’d told him.

‘That’s normal, little brother,’ he’d said. ‘When I was your age, I was *always* eating.’

But the Tailor had vanished shortly after the battle, and Dash had been left amidst the snow and strangers once more.

Three sharp barks from the foothills ahead jolted Dash from his thoughts and sent his hand to his sword hilt. Beside him, Luka’s sword was already drawn, her eyes bright and alert.

‘What is it?’ he hissed.

Luka and Jarel exchanged a worried glance.

Luka nodded to Mariette. ‘Gag her,’ she told Jarel. ‘We can’t have her giving us away.’

Against Mariette’s protests, Jarel did as Luka bid.

‘What’s going on?’ Dash asked, scanning the snow-covered rocks before them, searching for any sign of what had triggered the dogs.

‘We need to take cover,’ Luka said, as the largest of Eydis’ canines came bounding back towards them with another bark. Luka urged her horse towards the trees on their right. ‘Quickly.’

Dash followed nervously.

They rode into the forest, weaving through the trees until the dark branches were dense enough to hide the horses. Luka dismounted, landing with a soft crunch atop the freshly fallen snow.

‘Wait here,’ she said.

But Dash jumped down from his horse. ‘You don’t go alone,’ he said, surprised at the authority in his voice.

Luka opened her mouth to argue, but Jarel cut in.

‘Dash is right. I’ll stay here with the horses and the traitor, you scout ahead.’

Luka gave a reluctant nod. She sheathed her sword and instead palmed a pair of daggers. ‘Come on, then.’

Dash started after her, clutching his sword, now drawn. He tried to mimic the way Luka moved through the undergrowth, fluid and graceful like water, with the stealth of a panther. Together, they followed the lead dog uphill, their boots sinking deep.

Fear fluttered in Dash’s gut as they pushed on, finally reaching a crest in the icy terrain. Luka signalled for him to stop. They dropped to their bellies, and inched forward on their elbows.

Dash gasped.

In the middle of the valley was a massive, unlit pyre. Dozens and dozens of villagers encircled it, adding dead branches and straw to its structure. Dash squinted and, to his horror, realised that there were people trapped beneath the pyre. Their cries for mercy were drowned out by the chanting of their captors. They were chanting as one, their words carrying across the gorge to where Dash and Luka hid.

Our queen. Our goddess. Our life.

Luka swore. ‘Thank the gods for the dogs.’

Dash couldn’t take his eyes off the scene before them, heart racing. There was something crazed about the way the villagers went about their task, obsessive, as though they were in a trance.

‘Luka,’ Dash murmured, eyes on the trapped people. ‘What can we —’

The villagers lit the pyre.

Bloodcurdling screams echoed between the mountains, and Dash’s stomach lurched. He began to move, but Luka grabbed his arm and yanked him back down. ‘There’s nothing we can do,’ she hissed.

He struggled against her. They couldn’t hide here and watch innocent people being burned alive. But Luka held him firm, her grip near bruising.

‘We can’t,’ she implored. ‘There are too many of them.’

Dash tasted bile at the back of his throat. She was right. There was nothing they could do but listen to the screams.

Long after the piercing shrieks of agony ended, long after the flames burned through the last of the fuel, Dash and Luka peeled themselves off the snow. A column of black smoke still rose into the sky, the smell of seared flesh thick in the mountain air.

Jarel's entire body sagged with relief when they emerged from the undergrowth.

'I heard the screams,' he said. 'Saw the smoke. I had no idea what had happened to you, but I couldn't move.' He gestured to the horses and Mariette, whom he'd tied, still gagged, to a nearby tree. 'Are you alright?'

Dash nodded, though he felt far from it; his hands trembled at his sides. The chanting of the villagers played over in his mind as he went to his horse. Both he and Luka wanted to put as much distance as they could between them and the fanatics. They decided to take the longer route through the forest back to Wildenhaven, rather than the shorter journey across the valley, which had far less cover. They couldn't risk stumbling upon another ceremony like that. No matter how skilled Luka and Jarel were as warriors, and how much Dash had trained, they were still no match for a horde like the one they'd just witnessed.

'Nicolai and I were caught unawares once,' Jarel told him. 'I'll do anything to avoid that happening again.'

AS THE DAYS WORE ON, Dash couldn't shake the screams from his thoughts, nor the memory of what burning flesh smelled like. It was as though the scent was trapped in his nostrils. Jarel didn't question them too thoroughly about it – whether to spare himself the details or spare them reliving the experience, it didn't matter. Dash couldn't speak of it anymore.

One night, when they'd removed Mariette's gag to feed her, she locked eyes with Dash over the fluttering flame of the oil lamp.

'We're better off dead, you know,' she muttered. 'Better off dead than being there for what she has planned for the realm.'

'Shut it,' Jarel snarled. 'Or you'll go hungry another night.'

But she continued to stare at Dash, as though she knew what he'd seen, as though she knew how deep his fear of helplessness ran.

'Why do you think I did it?' she pressed. 'There's no hope —'

Jarel gagged her, leaving her eyes streaming.

Dash glanced at Luka, but the young Valian's eyes had glazed over as she picked at her food. He looked down at his own meal of stale bread and cheese. Was Mariette right? Was there no hope for them? They'd won the snowslide battle – just. And that had been only the beginning. The war was yet to come. And at what cost? They had already lost Petra and so many others. The Tailor had vanished. Bleak and Casimir had raced off to Ellest without a word, and Langdon, their only prisoner, their one piece of leverage against Ines, had been found dead in his cell, a gaping cut across his throat and eerie red flowers blooming around his body. Perhaps Mariette had a point. Perhaps their destruction was imminent.

As much as he tried, Dash couldn't sleep that night. His thoughts were addled with despair. He hated the impotence of it all, that Ines had somehow gained so much power over them, that they had nothing to match her forces, or her ever-growing supply of Ashai magic. As quietly as he could, Dash pulled the handwritten quaveer book from his pack and drew it into his lap. In the pitch black, he fumbled through the pages until he found the fabric bookmark his friend had made him. Realising he was nearing the end of the tome, he ran his fingers across the perforated markings, and began to read.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT, the great stone walls of Oremere's Westerfort were breached. Qatrolan ships surrounded the northern shores of Cape Lunaris, flying a foreign flag, while masked warriors spilled from their decks and barrelled across the lands like a disease. The mist that once had kept Oremere safe became the continent's undoing, sweeping through the capital, devouring those in its path. In the wake of the death of the ruling families, a high priestess came forward, proclaiming herself the one true queen, not just of Oremere, but of the entire realm. Surviving civilians fled Freyhill, with all hope for the Ashai folk, and Oremere itself, lost.

DASH TURNED THE PAGE, desperate to know more, but there was nothing else.

No. He flipped the page back and forth, as though he could somehow will there to be more pages in history. It couldn't end there. He needed to

know how, needed to —

Something fell from the back of the book; he felt it graze his leg. Carefully, he patted blindly around himself, trying to find whatever it was that had escaped the folds of the pages. He found it by his feet. An envelope. He could feel the wax seal, which was already broken. Slowly, he opened it, sliding out the letter within. It wasn't written in quaveer, he realised as he ran his fingers across the smooth parchment.

Dash cursed under his breath, the profanity sounding odd on his lips. Ma would clip him around the ears if she heard him talk like that. Jarel's colourful language was rubbing off on him, it seemed. All the same, he quietly cursed again as he peeled himself away from the warmth of his bedroll and braved the icy wind to read the letter by the dying fire.

FRIEND,

The colonies are slowly adjusting to the underground life, though it has been far from easy. Our understanding of what transpired in Freyhill is limited to conflicting experiences, but we know that our kings and queens were murdered, and that the usurper Ashai, Ines, now rules from the gated city.

However, our organisation here is sound, thanks to the meticulous planning of our prince. He has not left us without hope. A rumour has been circling our ranks now of a weapon, forged in the face of all this. A possible key to the defeat of the mad priestess. It is said to be hidden in the heart of Ellest, where the collector is yet to sink her talons in. We will need our prince back, we will need the rebels of Oremere to stand strong, but with him, and with it, we have a chance of winning the war of mist.

TEETH CHATTERING, Dash clutched the stranger's letter to his chest and took a deep breath. He returned to the tent, and in the complete and utter darkness, an ember of hope flared.

CHAPTER 4

In the frozen training ground of Wildenhaven, Henri's katar struck Sahara's blade with a piercing clang. She drove forward, her attack precise and lethal – to most. Henri marvelled at the way her twin moved, with the honed skills of a Valian warrior, but the creativity and daring of a rebel. It gave Sahara an edge that Henri knew she herself lacked. It was with a mixture of pride and envy that she had realised her sister was the stronger fighter.

Despite the icy gale of the winter continent and the fresh snow falling about them, Henri's body was damp with sweat. The kindred had been sparring since dawn and it was now almost noon. They needed the distraction. Henri looked to where Tilly, Marvel and Athene were running through a series of drills, working to rebuild the strength in Tilly's injured arm and leg. The kindred performed each exercise dutifully, but Henri knew from the strokes of their swords that their hearts just weren't in it. That they, too, felt Petra's absence as though a part of them had been stolen away.

Henri flicked her braid over her shoulder. The black ribbon woven through it shone, as did the one tied around Sahara's bicep.

'Again,' Henri told her sister.

Sahara gave an exasperated smile and lunged.

Henri relished the physical exertion. The dull ache in her muscles, the weight of her katars across her fists, and most of all, the trance-like state she sank into as the rhythm of sparring took hold. Strike, parry, block, strike. The impact of each blow reverberated up her arms as she drove forward.

'Enough now, Henri,' Sahara said, pulling back.

Henri shook her head and made to strike again.

Sahara sidestepped. '*Enough*. Tilly needs rest. We *all* need rest. Including you. Plus, we have the meeting.'

Henri looked to her kindred, the perspiration wetting their brows, the dark circles beneath their eyes. Her gaze fell upon Athene, her first-in-command, her lover. She held a dagger between her teeth, chest heaving as she re-braided the black ribbon through her red hair.

'Fine.' Henri nodded to a nearby young Valian, who rang the gong at her signal.

Henri didn't wait. She strode from the training ground back towards the Wildenhaven towers. Sahara fell into step beside her and they walked in silence until they reached the gates of the keep, where six teerah panthers prowled the perimeter. The great beasts eyed them warily.

'They've been restless since Bleak left,' Henri heard herself say. She nodded to Rion, the leader, as they passed into the courtyard.

'I know,' Sahara said. 'They make Geraad nervous.'

In the mudroom of the middle tower, Henri knocked the clumps of snow from her boots. 'Can't say I blame him. Is there any more news of his son?'

Geraad's son, Kyden, had been missing since the battle. It was feared that he'd been buried in the snowslide, but they were yet to recover his body.

Sahara shook her head. 'Each day that passes makes his return less likely.'

'There's still hope. Others have returned since.'

'It's been a month, Henri.' Her sister rubbed the bridge of her nose before sighing. 'Gods ... I can't imagine the pain of losing a child.'

'I can,' said a soft voice from the corridor. Their mother, Allehra, appeared from the shadows.

'Mother.' Sahara greeted her with a gentle embrace.

Henri surveyed the Mother Matriarch of Valia. 'You've recovered well,' she said.

Allehra's horrific burns were now fresh pink scars that covered much of her side and face, but she moved with the same grace she always had.

Allehra gave a sad smile. 'You'd know if you'd come to visit me at all.'

'We're at war. I don't have time to be sitting by someone's bedside.'

'Henri!' Sahara said.

Henri cut her a glare. Sahara had missed ten years of what Allehra deemed 'parenting'. Her reprimands counted for nothing.

Her expression unreadable, Allehra clasped her hands together. 'The council meeting starts in fifteen minutes. I came to find you.'

'Then let's walk together,' Sahara said, looping her arm through their mother's.

Henri followed them through the lower floor of the tower, remaining a few steps behind. She felt at odds about Allehra's recovery and return to them, and she couldn't help the hurt that festered inside her. Their mother had answered Sahara's call, but not Henri's. Henri knew the circumstances were different, yet it didn't stop the squirm of envy in her gut. Over the past two weeks, Sahara had spent nearly every mealtime with the Mother Matriarch. They were always huddled together, close like they never had been before Sahara's absence. The decade apart had somehow reunited them with a new sense of appreciation for one another. Something Henri couldn't compete with.

They walked through the medic hall. Much of it had been cleared away, although a few seriously injured Wildenhaven soldiers and one mad Ashai remained. Henri nodded to the groundlings who were helping to pack away the linens and remedies that were no longer needed. One groundling, Bleak's friend, Lyse, gave a hearty wave. Henri forced a smile. It wasn't that she didn't appreciate all that the groundlings had done; she did. It was that this place, this hall, now reminded her of the days after Petra's death. Of Tilly's slow recovery. Of the smell of rotting flesh and moans of pain, and seeing the extent of Allehra's raw, angry burns for the first time. It was not a place in which Henri cared to linger.

Her skin prickled. She turned to see the mad Ashai staring at them from the corner of the hall. The bedraggled woman was murmuring something inaudible, her fixation on them utterly unnerving.

Allehra frowned and turned to Henri. 'Where are Bleak and Casimir? She's one of their people, isn't she?'

Sahara opened her mouth to respond, but Henri cut her off.

'They didn't say where they were going. Only that it was important.'

'Shouldn't they be here, leading the Oremian Ashai?'

'Nothing has been decided.' Henri didn't know what had prompted the lie, but she ignored Sahara's flash of anger in her direction. Her sister, however, remained quiet.

Allehra pursed her lips. 'Come on, we'll be late.'

Queen Eydis had moved the Wildenhaven war-council chamber. The original had been too small to hold so many different groups and big personalities. This meeting was the first official one since before the snowslide battle, since they had been cut off from Port Avesta and some of their key villages. They had spent the last four weeks tending to their wounded and burying their dead, but now ... now it was time for details and strategy. And Allehra, who had been in Ellest, who had come face to face with King Arden's treachery, could surely offer that to them.

They entered the new chamber: a library. Eydis had ordered the bookshelves pushed to one side, and a large oak table to be brought in and placed atop the palma-fur rugs. Queen Eydis and her general and lover, Nicolai, were already seated at the head, with the rebel Geraad to their right. He looked gaunt, his anguish over his son's disappearance plain to see. Sahara went straight for him.

A hand clapped Henri's shoulder, and relief swelled as Athene, Marvel and Tilly entered and sought their places beside her, their faces still flushed from training. Athene squeezed Henri's knee beneath the table, and she was grateful for the small comfort. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Once everyone was settled, Queen Eydis stood.

'Thank you all for coming. Although horrific circumstances bring us here today, it's warming to see so many allies in one place,' she said. 'I know we are all under a lot of pressure, with many of us having suffered terrible losses in the recent battle, but we need each other now more than ever.'

Murmurs of agreement sounded around the table.

'Now, the first thing we need is some insight as to what Arden has done, and is planning. Allehra, I believe you're in the best position to fill us in?'

Allehra nodded. 'As some of our kindred would have informed you, King Arden released modified mist in our Forest of Ghosts and it spread into main Valia. I ... I tried to contain it with Ashai fire, but ... Arden learned from his previous mistakes. The blaze was uncontrollable this time. It destroyed our keep.'

While Henri had already heard this from her kindred, hearing it from Allehra's own lips was a different story. Her magic trembled restlessly in her veins as she pictured the charred remains of her home, her legacy.

‘What do you know of his plans? His numbers? The general state of Ellest?’ Henri pushed.

Allehra touched the scar on her face. ‘I haven’t been to Heathton myself, but Ellest ... Since Queen Vera’s death, and the recent bout of plague, King Arden has proclaimed the false queen Ines as Rheyah incarnate.’

‘So it’s as we expected,’ Queen Eydis said. ‘What of his numbers, his plans? Have you heard anything?’

‘With all due respect, Eydis, I’ve been in recovery. I have not had my ear to the ground in some time. People are not rushing to alert the Valians of anything these days. Arden has vilified us with his claim that my daughter assassinated his wife.’

Henri rubbed her temples. ‘So you have no new information for us?’

Sahara kicked her under the table.

Allehra said nothing.

‘Then we will move on,’ Eydis said. ‘As most of you are aware, Henri and her kindred brought us back a great prize from their venture to Moredon Tower: the capture of Langdon, one of Ines’ trusted ... advisers. However, come the end of the snowslide battle, we returned to Wildenhaven to find him murdered in his cell. Run through with a dagger. We are yet to find the culprit. I know this man represented everything we are fighting against, I know he hurt many people, but that does not excuse the actions of the individual who did this. Langdon was our only leverage against Ines. We were going to use him for information, for anything we could. Now all that remains are those blasted flowers.’

‘They are the same flowers that grow in the fields of Oremere, and the capital, Freyhill,’ Sahara said.

‘Why are they growing in my dungeons?’ Eydis snapped. ‘I don’t want a trace of that murderous bitch on my continent.’

Geraad cleared his throat. ‘I’m afraid it’s too late for that, Majesty. Those flowers ... I’ve seen them overtake the greatest fortress in the Upper Realm – Westerfort. It’s as though they have a mind of their own. Like the mist, they are linked to Ines, but we don’t know how.’

‘So you’re saying they’ll spread?’

‘I cannot say for sure,’ Geraad told her. ‘All I know is what I’ve seen.’

Henri watched Eydis’ nostrils flare. Clearly, this meeting wasn’t going the way she had planned.

Nicolai placed a hand on the queen's forearm. 'One of my rangers has just returned from Qatrola. He might be able to shed some light. I'll send for him.'

'You've done enough,' Eydis said, shaking off his touch.

Nicolai fell silent.

'Has there been any word on the whereabouts of Mariette?' Sahara asked.

It was the wrong question.

Eydis' glare looked like it would melt Nicolai to a puddle. 'Well?' she said.

What's that about? Henri wondered. Athene shot her a glance that told Henri she was thinking much the same.

Nicolai composed himself and faced the council. 'I received a raven this morning. Jarel, Luka and Dash have found her and are bringing her back to face the queen's justice.'

At last, a small victory.

Relief shone in Athene's eyes, and Henri gave her a gentle nudge. No matter how much she'd reassured her lover over the past month, Athene had remained anxious about Luka's return.

'Did the message say anything else?' Allehra asked.

'Only that they have much to tell us. They were right not to put it in writing, though. I have also received word from a source in Belbarrow.'

'And?' Henri pressed.

'Prince Nazuri and Princess Olena have vanished from the shiprock palace. No one has seen or heard from them in weeks. The city of Belbarrow has fallen to Ines. Many of the locals have fled the capital to the desert. It is said there are camps all over the Janhallow Desert overflowing with refugees.'

'And we've heard nothing from Captain Murphadias?' Henri asked. 'It was my understanding that he intended to go back to Belbarrow.'

Nicolai shook his head. 'I'm afraid we've received no word.'

'Will Ines be able to hold Belbarrow?' Sahara questioned. 'Qatrola is small and close to her stronghold, so that's easy enough to maintain, but with her claws in Ellest as well, isn't Belbarrow too far away, too vast for her to manage? Geraad, have you heard anything from Oremere?'

Geraad swept his unkempt hair from his brow. 'Fletch, our spymaster, is there now, gathering information. We won't hear back for a number of days.'

It's dangerous work, and sending missives like that across such vast channels is a big risk. When my clan left Oremere, the underground rebel clans were in a strong position. We have been preparing for this for years. But ... Daleren is seeing what can be done about ... Kyden. He is, or was, the face of our movement. Our people have been united through him; we don't know how the loss will affect them.'

Henri didn't miss the pain that crossed Sahara's face, or the way Geraad wouldn't look at her. She'd have to ask her twin about it later.

'So in short,' Eydis said abruptly, 'no one has any figures for me? No one can tell me what forces are at our disposal, what leverage we have against this insane tyrant?' Anger laced her words, but Henri knew it was desperation at their heart.

Henri stood. 'Give us three days, Eydis,' she said. 'Everyone can regroup —'

'*Regroup?* That's what we've been doing for a month. We need to *act*.'

'And *we will*. But let us wait until the counts come in from Oremere, wait until Luka and the others return. There is no use in strategising if the facts we have aren't accurate.'

Eydis locked eyes with her, jaw clenched, and finally, nodded.

'What of the Ashai?' Allehra asked. 'It's a blessing from Rheyah we have so many magic wielders at our disposal. We can utilise them in the fight to come. We just need to know how.'

There was another murmur of agreement from the leaders.

But Henri stepped in. 'That is a question for Bleak and Casimir. It, too, will have to wait.'

As the council dispersed from the chamber, Sahara cornered Henri in the passageway.

'Why are you keeping things from Allehra?' she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest.

'Sahara —'

'No. She's our mother, Henri.'

'I know who she is. Better than you.'

'Can you *for once* not make this about me leaving?'

Henri sighed. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'But please. Please just follow my lead on this, Sahara. We won't keep secrets forever, alright? Just for the moment.'

Sahara's face softened. 'Why?'

‘Sahara, please. Just trust me.’

Her twin opened her mouth as though to continue protesting, but stopped herself. They locked eyes, Henri trying to implore her sister, before Sahara gave a single nod and left.

DINNER FELT like a quiet affair without Petra, Luka, and dare Henri think it, *Bleak*. She retired to her private quarters earlier than usual, and closed the door with a soft click. Inside, she breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Here, she could stare blankly into the fire without someone asking if she was alright. Here, she could grieve Petra without being monitored, without having to be strong for everyone else. She could mull over her nagging distrust of Allehra, and her mounting anxiety about the war to come. She sat on the lounge with her legs tucked under her, the blaze in the hearth soaking into her skin.

She needed more moments like these. More moments alone.

A knock on the door sounded. It opened a crack, and Athene’s face peered in.

‘Want company?’

Henri smiled. Athene was the exception.

Athene unlaced her boots and sat down on the lounge beside Henri.

‘Long day, wasn’t it?’ she said.

Henri laughed. ‘You’re not wrong.’

After easing the boots off her feet, Athene let herself fall back into the cushions with a sigh. ‘The others know I come here every night, you know.’

‘I know.’

‘So why the pretence of me going to my own room?’

Henri shrugged. ‘I don’t mind that everyone suspects. I just ... I’m just not ready for it to be ...’

‘In the public forum?’

‘Something like that,’ she allowed. ‘Is that alright?’

‘If you’re not ready, you’re not ready,’ Athene said, pulling Henri’s legs, her boots still laced up to the calves, onto her lap. ‘Besides, I think there are bigger concerns at the moment.’

Henri gave a hollow laugh. ‘Agreed.’

‘I spoke to Nicolai after the meeting.’

‘And?’

‘Luka should be back the day after tomorrow.’

‘That’s good news.’ Henri smiled.

‘Yes. *Finally* some good news.’

Henri stifled a moan as Athene pulled the boots from her feet. She’d been in them all day, and she was sore and tired. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with Athene and forget about the problems of the realm. But Athene was restless.

‘What is it?’ Henri asked.

‘Is it that obvious?’

‘To me? Always. Are you still worried about Luka?’

‘I am, but that’s not it.’

‘Well?’

Athene grimaced. ‘I’m worried about you.’

‘Me? Why?’

‘I know it’s difficult, between you and Sahara. And now Allehra.’

‘Hmm,’ Henri allowed.

‘You need unity among the Valians, now more than ever. You need to stop being so ... combative ...’

Henri bit back her retort. Her first instinct was to argue. It was no one’s place to tell her what to do, especially not how to treat her own family. But ...

‘I know,’ she said slowly. ‘You’re right.’

Athene raised her eyebrows.

‘Oh, don’t look so surprised.’

Athene smiled and leaned in close. ‘I feel like I should get that in writing.’

Henri rolled her eyes and brought Athene’s face to hers. ‘Don’t count on it,’ she said, and kissed her, long and deep and slow. Athene’s hands went to her waist, pulling her on top. Sitting astride her lover, Henri deepened the kiss further, her tongue brushing against Athene’s as their hands —

In the near distance, the roar of a teerah panther echoed through the grounds.

Henri muttered a curse against Athene’s lips before breaking away. She made to go to the window, but Athene pulled her back to the lounge.

‘Ignore it.’

Every fibre of Henri’s body wanted to do exactly that. But ... the pride of panthers had made themselves scarce since Bleak’s departure, hunting

caribou and awaiting the mist dweller's return. *Something's happening out there.* Henri strapped on her katars and reluctantly pulled her boots back on, turning to Athene. 'We should go.'

They hurried to the keep, the sound of commotion drawing them to the courtyard. Guards were scattered. Gripping spears and war hammers, they argued between themselves, pointing to the giant gates of the keep.

'What is the meaning of this?' Henri demanded.

One of the guards blanched at the sight of them still in their leathers. 'We —'

But the gates swung inwards, and two teerah panthers prowled into the courtyard, with Bleak and Casimir on their backs.

CHAPTER 5

‘Hello, Henri, Athene,’ Bleak said, as she jumped down from Rion’s back. The teerah panther snarled softly in Athene’s direction, but Bleak silenced him with a look. Granted, he wasn’t all that familiar with the Valian yet and tended to be prickly around strangers. But she also knew he sensed her discomfort at the lies between them. With a sigh, she dismissed Rion with a final scratch behind the ears. He and Maala, the beast who had borne Casimir, stalked out of the keep, likely to hunt for their supper.

‘Welcome back,’ Henri said upon approach, offering to take Bleak’s pack. ‘You must be tired.’

Bleak waved her away. ‘Exhausted, but we’ve got to visit the Moredon Ashai before we rest.’

Henri frowned. ‘Now? Isn’t it a bit late?’

Casimir had left and was already walking towards the stables. Her mouth in a grim line, Bleak said, ‘It can’t wait.’

‘Is he alright?’ Athene asked, gazing across the courtyard.

Bleak also stared after the Oremian prince. ‘Don’t mind him,’ she said. ‘He hasn’t been too talkative since we left Heathton.’

It was true. Casimir had barely said two words since their failed attempt to find Tailor. Bleak was just as frustrated as he was – more so, even. She hadn’t told him about the glimpse she’d had of Tailor there. Casimir already wasn’t taking it well, to say the least. A detail like that would only add fuel to the fire. She didn’t blame him. They’d gone all the way to Heathton, they’d risked everything, for nothing.

‘I’d better catch up,’ she told Henri, whose brow was furrowed with concern.

Bleak left the two Valians in the courtyard and found Casimir and a stable hand saddling two Kildaholm thoroughbreds in the warmth of the stables. How she longed to flee to the towers, to curl up in front of a fire and let her body defrost after hours of being exposed to the winds of this godsforsaken continent. She wouldn’t be able to do that for some time now.

As she placed her foot in the stirrup, she heard something.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...

‘Casimir?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

‘The counting?’

Sitting in the saddle and straining to hear, Casimir frowned. ‘I don’t hear anything.’

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...

‘That!’

He clicked his tongue, his horse starting forward. ‘Bleak, no. I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Frustrated, Bleak waited for a third time. She was met with silence, and then the impatient whinny of her horse. She cursed herself under her breath and followed Casimir out into the snow.

They had opted to house the Moredon Ashai folk in Wildenhaven’s closest village. Though in this climate, it felt like the ride took forever.

They galloped through the snow-covered fields and woodlands at breakneck pace, their horses’ hooves kicking up white powder in their wake. Only when Bleak’s face was stinging once more with the cold did they arrive.

Their people had been temporarily placed in one of the town taverns. With no money of their own, Eydis had offered to rent out the accommodations for the time being. Gratefully, Bleak and Casimir had accepted. The reality of funding a war, and the victims of war, was certainly not lost on Bleak. But as she told Casimir, they’d have to concern themselves with those matters after the war was won, *if* it was won. And that was a big *if*.

‘Prince Casimir,’ an elderly woman said as they dismounted and approached the building. It was one of the energy shifters who’d helped Henri at the snowslide battle. She had become the unofficial spokesperson for the Moredon Ashai.

‘Agnes,’ Casimir greeted her with a tight smile.

‘Your Highness. Good of you and Lady Thornton to come.’

Bleak had to stop herself from flinching. *Lady Thornton* ... Her mother’s title was now her own, and it felt ... surreal. She’d never allowed herself a moment to think of what it would be like to be anything other than Bleak the pickpocket, or Bleak the town drunk of Angove. Yet here she was.

‘Of course,’ Casimir was saying to Agnes. ‘How are the recoveries going?’

‘As well as can be expected, Your Highness. Though the physical wounds are the least of our concerns, I’m afraid.’

Bleak found herself nodding. She knew that well enough herself.

‘Please,’ Agnes said. ‘Come in from the cold.’ She led them into the taproom of the tavern. Relieved, Bleak followed her, with Casimir close behind. A wave of warmth hit her face and she felt her frozen skin slowly start to defrost as the glow of the fire inched towards her. Peeling off her gloves so the heat could relieve her achingly cold fingers, she looked around. Numerous Ashai folk were seated at tables and booths, talking quietly amongst themselves or staring out the windows. Agnes led them to the bar.

‘Would you care for a drink?’

Bleak was already eyeing the bottles of amber liquid behind the counter. What she wouldn’t give to feel the comforting burn of liquor down her throat.

‘No, thank you,’ Casimir answered for them, not even glancing at Bleak.

She suppressed a sigh. She was grateful, yes, but at the same time, she quietly resented how the Oremian prince and the kindred had joined forces to keep her on the straight and narrow. She took a steady breath. Now was not the time for that, anyway. They had come here for answers.

‘Agnes?’ she asked.

‘Yes, my lady?’

‘Do you know anything of the red flowers? The ones that bloom of their own accord?’

Agnes’ skin visibly paled. ‘What ... what do you need to know?’

‘What do they mean? What causes them to bloom?’

The Ashai glanced from Bleak to Casimir, her eyes bright with fear.

‘We wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important,’ Casimir said gently.

Agnes nodded slowly and motioned for them to move to a more private corner of the bar. They slid into a vacant booth, and Agnes clasped her hands together on the table in front of her.

‘The red flowers,’ she started, clearing her throat. ‘In the beginning, they bloomed every time an Ashai passed away.’

Bleak’s blood turned cold.

‘At first there was nothing sinister about it. It was as natural as death itself. Almost as though in death, an Ashai gave his or her magic back to the realm.’

‘And now?’ Bleak pressed.

‘Now ... we believe they bloom whenever Ines grows stronger. It’s as though they signify whenever she collects new power from an Ashai.’

The fields of red blooms in Oremere flashed before Bleak’s eyes. And the flower appearing behind Martha in Heathton. And the blood petals that had unfolded before their eyes in the dungeon cell near Langdon’s body.

‘That’s a lot of power.’

Agnes met her gaze. ‘She has taken a great many things from the Ashai folk,’ she said. ‘Magic being the least of it.’

WITH THE NUMEROUS WILDENHAVEN NATIVES, Queen Eydis’ soldiers, the Valians *and* the rebels, dinner in the dining hall the following evening was an elbow-to-elbow situation. Bleak made her way through the crowd with a plate of roast beef balanced precariously in her hands as the chatter buzzed around her. She tried to focus on keeping the dozens of thoughts at bay, but they pummelled into her like a great wave out at sea. She was so busy concentrating on shielding herself from the voices that she didn’t realise where she was heading. She saw Bren and Tilly seated at the table before her and stopped in her tracks. At that moment, Bren looked up, his wintry-blue eyes locked with hers.

There was nothing for it. With her stomach churning, she approached them.

‘Hello,’ she said, holding her plate awkwardly.

‘Bleak!’ Tilly smiled. ‘How are you? When did you get back?’

Bleak returned the Valian’s demeanour. ‘Got back last night. I’m alright. Tired. What about you? Are you recovered?’

The last time she’d seen Tilly, she’d been in bandages, with purple bruising marring her face. It hadn’t looked good.

‘Getting there, though it’s not been easy. Not without ...’

Bleak nodded. ‘I’m so sorry, Tilly. About Petra.’

Tilly gave a sad smile, her eyes falling on the black band around Bleak’s arm. ‘Thank you.’

Bleak turned to Bren, who was watching her warily. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine,’ he said.

He looked much more like his old self, though still a little on the lean side. But the way he looked *at her* had changed. There was no light in his eyes.

‘I was at the docks,’ she found herself telling him.

‘Yeah?’

She nodded. ‘Chaos. Senior would’ve had a fit.’

A flicker of a smile crossed Bren’s face. ‘I’ll bet. He always did pride himself on how he managed the wharves, eh?’

Bleak didn’t trust the smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. ‘He did.’

Bren fell quiet again and Tilly elbowed him under the table. ‘Do you want to join us, Bleak?’ she asked.

With a final glance at Bren, Bleak shook her head. ‘No thanks, I’m on the lookout for Dash.’

‘Dash, Luka and Jarel arrived this morning, so they should be around here somewhere.’

Bleak edged away with a final goodbye. She had to stop herself from bolting straight for the door. Her underarms were damp with sweat, and her heart ... Her heart hurt. Bren would barely look at her. She nearly collided with Sahara.

‘Something on your mind, mist dweller?’ Sahara teased. But then the smile vanished from her face. Bleak followed her gaze across the hall, to where it landed on Henri and Athene. Beneath the table, Henri had her hand on Athene’s thigh, their heads huddled together.

‘I know what happened,’ Bleak ventured, turning back to Sahara.

‘What?’

‘That she didn’t stop you ... before you ...’

Sahara stared. ‘How do you know?’

Bleak sighed and slid into the nearest seat.

Sahara pulled up a chair beside her. ‘Bleak, how?’

‘She wasn’t wearing her talisman on the way back from Moredon. She must have given it to Luka. I saw her memories. I heard the conversation you had. She watched you walk into the mist.’

Sahara rested her head in her hands. ‘I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what it would change if Henri knew. And she’s happy, Bleak. Somehow in the middle of this nightmare, my little sister has found happiness. And Athene does love her.’

‘She knows something went wrong between you two,’ Bleak told her, pushing her food around with her fork, her appetite gone. ‘She tried to get me to tell her.’

‘And you didn’t?’

Bleak shook her head. ‘Wasn’t my place. It’s between you and Henri. And Athene.’

Sahara gave a grim smile. ‘And now you. What do you think?’

‘I think she has a right to know.’

‘It’s in the past.’

‘But it’s not, is it? It’s here. Hanging between you. Sahara, if she asks me again, I won’t lie to her.’

The Valian rebel rubbed the back of her neck before standing. ‘Your food’s getting cold,’ was all she said.

AFTER DINNER, Bleak still hadn’t found Dash when she received a note from Allehra, asking Bleak to join her in one of Eydis’ studies. They hadn’t spoken since the Mother Matriarch’s arrival after the snow battle, but Bleak had often found herself longing for the woman’s reassuring presence. It had been thanks to her and Luka’s training sessions that Bleak had known how to wield her magic. Without those lessons, Bleak didn’t know where she would have ended up. As she followed the attendant, she glanced at the markings on her wrist. The pattern that had somehow bled from a leather

cuff onto her skin, now a permanent feature. Yes, there were some questions she hoped to have answered as well.

She was led to a small, well-lit room off the main corridor, a cosy fire burning steadily in the hearth. Allehra stood before it, a thick, woollen gown pooling at her feet.

‘Bleak,’ she greeted her warmly.

‘It’s so good to see you,’ Bleak replied, closing the door behind her. She tried not to focus on the scars marring Allehra’s face, how her hair was singed away in some places, revealing more scars across her scalp.

‘And you, mist dweller,’ she said. ‘We have much to catch up on, it seems.’

Bleak nodded, not sure where to start. ‘How ... how are you?’

Allehra gave a weak smile and lowered herself into an armchair. ‘I’ve had worse days,’ she said with a sigh.

‘And better, no doubt.’

‘And better.’ Allehra gave a hollow laugh. ‘You’re right about that. Come, sit.’

Bleak did as she bid, sinking into the chair opposite the Mother Matriarch.

Allehra studied her, taking in her weary odd eyes. ‘How are *you*, Bleak? Or should I call you Alarise now?’ There was no anger in her voice, only concern.

‘Call me Bleak. Bleak is fine. I’m ...’ She trailed off. In truth, she didn’t know how she was. The notion of summing it all up made her want a drink; made her crave a big goblet of wine to soothe her anxieties. ‘It’s been hard,’ she managed, trying to push the last thought from her mind.

Allehra nodded. ‘That doesn’t surprise me. You’ve had a lot to deal with. Being taken prisoner, not once, but twice. Learning of your place in Oremere, your duties to your people ...’

‘It’s not been easy for anyone.’

‘No. It hasn’t.’

‘But I’ve been wanting to tell you, I’m grateful.’

‘Grateful?’

‘Yes. For the training you gave me.’

‘The training? In Valia?’

Bleak nodded.

‘It worked, then?’

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’ Bleak said. ‘And I don’t know what magic you did on that cuff –’ she held up her wrist – ‘but this saved my life more than once. Sahara thought it had some sort of enchantment? To help unleash my power?’

Allehra’s eyes fell to the dark swirls on her wrist. ‘What happened when it was in the presence of King Arden?’

‘Nothing. Not right away. But it somehow transferred onto me. Was that your intention?’

Allehra’s eyes were fixed on the markings

‘Allehra?’

‘Yes,’ she said, shaking herself out of her reverie. ‘Though I wasn’t sure it would work. It had been a long time since I’d attempted that sort of magic.’

Bleak remembered the markings Sahara had shown her on her ankle. An early experiment to coax magic out of Allehra’s non-Ashai heir.

‘What do you feel now?’ Allehra asked. ‘With the markings? What is the effect they have?’

‘I’m not sure. When it first happened, it felt as though ... as though it fed a darker part of my magic. Things ... I did things when I was wearing it.’

Allehra leaned forward and reached for Bleak’s arm. ‘May I?’

Bleak shrugged and offered her wrist. Any light the Mother Matriarch could shed on the situation would be more than welcome.

Suddenly, the door swung inwards.

‘There you are,’ Henri said, her grey eyes pausing on Bleak’s outstretched arm. ‘I found out where the Carlinton boy is staying, as you requested.’ Her voice was cold as she offered a note in Bleak’s direction.

‘Oh, thank you.’ Bleak took the note and got to her feet. She’d never been comfortable with the tension between mother and daughter. It was best she made herself scarce.

‘Why are you seeking him out?’ Allehra asked.

‘I have something of his,’ Bleak replied, making for the door.

‘Don’t cut your meeting short on account of me,’ Henri said. ‘I have to speak to Sahara anyway.’

‘I think she’s on sentry duty, up on the gatehouse wall,’ Allehra offered. ‘I’ll come with you.’

Henri shook her head. 'Sahara doesn't do sentry duty up there.' Her tone was icy, accusatory. 'She hates heights.'

Bleak shot Henri a glare. Surely she couldn't blame Allehra for not remembering a detail like that? Ten years had passed. She'd never admit it aloud, but Henri was being rather cruel. With a final nod to both Valians, Bleak left. She wasn't about to get in the middle of a warrior-family squabble.

She followed Henri's directions to Dash's room. It felt odd seeking him out, especially because she had to venture to the third Wildenhaven tower to do so. As she braced herself against the freezing night, the old scar on her thigh prickled. The cold always affected old wounds like that. She made a run for the entrance, and as she entered the mudroom, she realised how different it was. This mudroom was not the organised system of shelving and hooks for boots and coats. This reminded Bleak of the mudroom at the Claytons' house back in Angove – a mess. Except in this case, it was more than seven unruly boys who'd kicked off their shoes without a thought.

Looping her cloak over an already overburdened peg, Bleak entered the main hall. It was an unusual space, an informal entertainment hall of sorts. Queen Eydis' household sat around tables playing cards and drinking, with some sitting on lounges before the fire, chatting. She left the locals to their downtime and found the chilly hallway. Following a series of spiralling staircases lit by flickering torchlight, she finally reached Dash's door and knocked.

A dishevelled Dash greeted her. His dark hair was mussed and he wore a loose-fitting shirt, laces half undone, pants and no shoes.

'Sorry,' he mumbled. 'I fell asleep reading.'

'Reading?' Bleak said, pushing past him and entering the warm chambers. She let out a low whistle. 'Nice rooms.'

Dash's quarters were indeed lavish. A four-poster bed, a lounge, and what Bleak assumed to be a bathing room.

Dash pushed his dark hair from his eyes. 'Yeah, not sure how I managed it.'

Bleak glanced at him, taking in his umber eyes and dark features. She had a feeling she knew how, but said nothing on the subject. It was none of her business.

'I have something for you,' she said, rummaging through her pockets. Locating it, she held out the piece of parchment to Dash.

‘What’s this?’ he asked, turning it over.

Bleak shrugged. ‘Martha said to give it to you. That’d you’d know what it was for.’

‘Martha? Who’s —’ Dash opened the folded parchment and froze.

‘Are you alright?’

A smile broke out across his face and he nodded.

‘What is it?’ Bleak asked, trying to make out the messy handwriting.

‘A recipe.’

‘A what?’

‘Recipe.’

‘You mean to say that I risked my life crossing the East Sea for a bloody recipe?’

‘Yep.’

Bleak burst out laughing. ‘Well, it better be good.’

‘It is. It’s for sugar-oat biscuits.’

The way Dash said it made Bleak think there was more to it than just some baked goods, but she didn’t push. It was the happiest she’d seen him.

Not yet ready to brave the icy wind between towers, she dropped down onto the lounge and pulled the length of rope she always carried from her belt. She began threading it through her fingers; the methodical rhythm of tying knots always soothed her weary mind. She worked through some of her favourites, the ones Senior had taught her. A king sling. A bimini twist. A spider hitch.

‘So what are you reading, then?’ she asked.

Still smiling at the parchment, Dash waved vaguely at the heavy tome at her feet. It wasn’t an ordinary book. There were no words printed across the cover, nor inside the pages for that matter, Bleak realised as she paused her knot-tying and heaved the book into her lap. Instead, tiny punctures perforated the parchment.

‘It’s written in quaveer,’ Dash explained, standing in front of the fire. ‘That one’s about the lost mythical creatures of Oremere.’

‘Really? Anything about teerah panthers in there?’

Dash shook his head. ‘Not yet, I’m only halfway through.’

It struck Bleak then how little she knew of her homeland. At this rate, Dash probably knew more than she did. Given that the realm still thought teerah panthers were extinct, who knew what other magical beasts stalked the lands beyond the mist?

‘What about sea serpents?’ she asked.

‘They must be in a later chapter as well.’

‘Do you think ...?’ Bleak hesitated.

‘Do I think what?’

‘Do you think you could read me some?’

‘I ...’

‘You don’t have to.’

Dash considered this. ‘Well, what do you want to hear about?’

‘What’s been your favourite part so far? Read me that.’

‘There’s a really interesting section about these water creatures.’

‘Oh?’

‘Lisloiks.’

The term was familiar, as Henri had travelled beneath the East Sea to meet her kindred months before. She had told Bleak of the lisloiks that roamed the tunnels of the Underpass. Bleak knew no more than that, though. ‘What are they?’ she asked, frowning.

‘Here.’ Dash went to the book and flipped it open. Bleak watched as he closed his eyes and ran his fingers along the strange dots across the pages. He read aloud to her:

‘Oremere was once made up of several territories. The largest of these, with the exception of the capital, Freyhill, was the territory of the lisloiks. With the great lake, Lamaka’s Basin, at its heart, this territory was one of the most prosperous in all of Oremere. Surrounded by mountains and forests, the lisloiks had held Lamaka’s Basin for hundreds of years, and had lived a peaceful existence alongside the monarchies of Oremere.’

Dash looked up from the page, but Bleak waved him on keenly. She needed to hear this.

‘Like Oremere itself, the lisloiks had a unique ruling system: a council of seven elders and a queen. It was said that the lisloiks were the water sisters of the Valian kindred, direct descendants of the water goddess, and that their queen, Queen Delja, was the most powerful in history.’

Bleak approached Dash and peered over his shoulder. ‘What’s that?’ She pointed to lines of faint ink in between the rows of punctured marks.

Dash opened his eyes and squinted. ‘It looks like someone’s written notes.’

‘What’s it say?’

‘It’s too small to read, and the ink has faded.’

Bleak took the book from him and lay it on the carpet before the fire. She settled herself on her stomach and, resting on her elbows, she pored over the tiny, messy script.

'It was during her reign that the mist descended on Lamaka's Basin,' she read to Dash. 'The surrounding mountains and forests were encompassed by the toxic haze, slaughtering many, and forcing those who remained permanently below the lake. Queen Delja was enraged. No one in history had dared attack the lisloiks, no one had dared take from them. But the mist lingered at the surface and slowly filtered down into the water, driving the people from their homes. Queen Delja had no choice but to retreat. Using secret passages from beneath the lake out to the East Sea, the lisloiks escaped to a deadly lair built long ago in the depths of the East Sea Underpass ...'

'I don't understand.' Dash lay on his stomach beside her, frowning at the text.

'Someone wrote this in later,' Bleak muttered. 'But who? Dash, where did you get these books from?'

'They're Olena's. She sent them to me.'

'Olena? As in Princess Olena of Ellest?'

'Yes.'

Bleak ran her fingers across the title of the book. 'You're full of surprises, aren't you?'

Dash shrugged.

'Do you know where she got them from? Does it say on the cover who wrote it?'

'No, sorry. And it just says *Mythical Creatures of Oremere* on the front.'

Bleak rested her head against her arms. Was there no end to the mystery of her homeland?

FINALLY BACK IN her own chambers, Bleak paced in front of the fire, her teeth chattering as she tried to rub the warmth back into her limbs. She couldn't shake the cold from her skin. It prickled all over, concentrated on one spot in particular – the scar on her thigh.

That's odd, she thought, rubbing her thigh through her pants. The old scar did sometimes react to the weather, as though the memory of the pain

she'd experienced lurked just below the surface, but this ... The realisation sent a wave of unease through her. Something wasn't right.

Hands trembling, she reached for the buttons of her pants. Her fingers were numb, making her fumble before finally sliding the fabric over her hips and down her legs.

She gasped. Where the skin was usually marred by a map of faded pink scarring, black markings now swirled. *A tattoo*. Much like the one Queen Eydis wore so proudly.

'What in the realm ...?' Bleak muttered, running her hands across the intricate pattern. It covered her scar entirely.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Beneath her skin, her magic thrummed, and suddenly, a familiar voice filled her mind.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...

CHAPTER 6

Swinton gripped the hilt of his sword tightly as he trailed Princess Olena and Prince Nazuri through the refugee camp. With Fi on alert to his right, his eyes darted from one sorry Battalionian to the next, assessing any potential threats. The refugees were being housed in the outskirts of the village, and the harsh midday sun blazed down on the hundreds of grey tents pitched in rows. Chief Yaridha had ordered tables and benches brought out to create a communal area. But the people looked dazed, with many lined up outside the medic tent, clutching festering brands on their skin. The wounds he saw here made the brand on Therese's shoulder look like child's play. Many had gone untreated, and Swinton wondered exactly how long fanatics had been terrorising the streets of Belbarrow. He took a deep breath. It had been a long time since he'd seen so many displaced civilians.

He frowned. A tattered tailcoat caught his eye; it was out of place here. He started forward, craning his neck to see the face of the man who wore it. But as he did, the betrothed royal couple moved deeper into the crowd. Swinton couldn't leave their sides. Cursing silently, he followed, having to stop himself from recoiling at the stench of unwashed bodies in the heat. He'd have to speak to Yaridha about organising more sanitary conditions, though from what the chief had said, resources were already stretched thin.

The refugees surged, gathering around Olena and Nazuri. Their proximity made Swinton uneasy.

'I don't like this,' he muttered to Fi.

Was he the only one who saw the potential danger here? Who knew how the Belbarrow natives would receive their prince after what his father

had done to them? To their home? Who could blame them for wanting to express their anger, their hurt? All it took was the slip of a hidden dagger ...

‘Can’t like everything, old friend,’ Fi quipped. He said it casually, but Swinton knew when his friend was on edge. Although it wasn’t for the same reason. Swinton hadn’t failed to notice the way the people were gazing at Fi, their faces slack in wonder as they eyed the tattooed flames on his forearm.

Swinton raised his brows in his friend’s direction. Fi gave a slight shrug, as though he didn’t know what the fuss was about. Swinton didn’t buy that story for a second. He had heard the murmurs since they’d arrived. And that one word that had cropped up too often now to be insignificant.

As he opened his mouth to demand answers, a woman grabbed Princess Olena by the arm. Swinton charged forward, positioning himself between them.

‘It’s alright, Commander,’ Olena said. ‘Let her through.’

Swinton bit back his objection as the princess offered her hand.

‘Tell me,’ she said simply. Olena waited for the stranger’s tale, her face full of patience and kindness. The woman didn’t hide her surprise, but took the princess’ hand in her own trembling fingers.

Swinton glanced up at Fi, but his Battalonian friend had slipped away, and was now speaking with Prince Nazuri in hushed tones.

Olena’s quiet yet sturdy voice drew Swinton back.

‘We will not let this false queen rule us,’ she was saying. ‘We will find a way to take back what is ours. Together.’

To Swinton’s astonishment, the woman smiled. ‘King Arden has no idea what he lost when he sent you to Belbarrow, Princess. What we gained,’ she said.

Swinton stepped back to allow them their moment, his chest swelling with pride for the young royal. Olena was doing well here. Her sharp thinking and sincerity were recognised by those who mattered most – the people. He turned his attention back to the sound of Fi’s deep, melodic voice coming from where he and the prince had slipped into the shadows.

‘— no word from my Ashai contact as yet, Highness.’

Swinton started. Was this the same Ashai who, weeks ago, had sent them news of the plague hitting Ellest?

‘Do you have cause for concern?’ Nazuri asked.

‘There is always cause for concern with him. His particular ability has got me out of my fair share of scrapes, but also into more trouble than I’d care to admit.’

‘We will need him in the upcoming war, though?’

‘We will. I’m doing my best to locate him, Your Highness.’

‘I will also do what I can, Bar—’

‘I would advise caution,’ Fi said quickly. ‘He travels a lot. We cannot ask around in every pocket of the realm without drawing attention to his value.’

Swinton was holding his breath. *What in Rheyah’s name is Fi keeping from me?*

‘I understand,’ Prince Nazuri said with a nod. ‘We had best return to Chief Yaridha.’

The two Battalionians made to leave.

‘Fi!’ Swinton called.

‘Not now, old friend.’

‘Fi. You *must* tell me —’

‘Commander,’ the prince interjected. ‘I think it’s best we see Chief Yaridha alone. I’m afraid he’s not all that fond of you.’

Swinton ground his teeth. ‘No, I can’t say that he is, Your Highness.’

Prince Nazuri approached Olena, whispering something to her, before turning back to Swinton. ‘One day, I hope to hear that particular tale.’

‘Perhaps. If we live through the war, Your Highness.’ He ran a finger down the scar on his swollen face. ‘There are certain tales I’d like to hear myself,’ he said, with a pointed look at Fiore.

SWINTON HAD NEVER FELT like more of an outsider. He made his way through the low-lying network of carved archways and structures built into the desert rock, towards the only place that could offer him comfort. The stables were at the southern end of the village. Here, the man-made fields and corrals were covered with large sheets of cloth, to protect the horses from the heat. Swinton was glad for it. Xander had enjoyed the trek across the Janhallow Desert even less than he had.

His majestic stallion now grazed in the centre of one of the plains; his ears pricked upon Swinton’s approach. He trotted over to the fence and greeted his master with a soft whinny.

‘Hello, comrade,’ Swinton breathed, stroking Xander’s nose and immediately feeling more at ease. Xander had been his constant companion for the past decade, his confidant, his secret keeper, all the while reminding Swinton of a simpler, happier life.

‘What do you care for the name of some stable girl?’

Muddied skirts and a scowl on her face hadn’t stopped Swinton from falling deeply in love with Eliza Carlington. It had been a simpler, happier time indeed. The unknown had been filled with rich possibility then, of hidden whispers and giddy promises. Now, he watched Xander toss his head and canter across the corral, remembering him as the wobbly foal he’d once been. Much had changed since then, and the present troubles dragged Swinton reluctantly from his reverie. One image in particular had haunted him for weeks on end, snatching away already limited hours of sleep and peace. The vision of Princess Olena he’d had. He shuddered as it filled his mind anew: her lifeless body, being slowly swallowed by blooming red flowers, with King Arden gloating at her feet ...

Swinton gripped the fence as a spell of dizziness descended. The realm swayed as a familiar voice filled his head.

‘Both of you, and your bastard son, will die ...’

Swinton whirled around. What was it? *Who* was it?

It was a like a throaty whisper in his ear. An eyepatch and a sneer flashed before him. Siv Lennox. A former soldier of the King’s Army, one whom Swinton had loathed from the first time they’d met. A man full of jealousy and contempt. His words echoed in Swinton’s mind. Words he’d never said. Lennox hadn’t known about Dash. Hadn’t known Swinton well at all. This was no memory, but ... Lennox was long dead. Killed by Bleak on the ship to Moredon Tower.

‘Commander?’ a soft voice interrupted his thoughts. Therese. She looked younger, he realised, in her plain clothes, her red hair loose around her face and her sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

‘I’m not Commander anymore, Therese,’ he sighed, suddenly tired. ‘Just Dimitri.’

She hesitated, before resting her arms on the fence alongside his. ‘Dimitri, then.’

He forced a smile, trying to forget the last time they’d been alone together. The almost-kiss on his part. A moment that had sent the poor woman running for the hills. ‘Can I help you with something?’ he asked.

‘It’s my father,’ she said reluctantly. ‘He wants us to return to Ellest. He says it’ll be safer under King Arden than out here with the “desert vipers”, as he calls them.’

Swinton raised a brow. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think he’s wrong. That Ellest is where all this started. That Heathton is probably one of the most dangerous places in the entire Upper Realm now. But I also think his desire to return is in part because it’s where my mother was buried. He feels too far from her.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Swinton said. ‘About your mother.’

‘Thank you. I thought you should know ... there are others whispering such ideas about returning to Heathton.’

Swinton nodded slowly. He should have expected as much. War never offered a clean line down the middle. Conflict bubbled and festered between allies as much as it did between foes.

‘I have faith,’ she told him, ‘faith that you and Captain Murphadias will not lead us astray.’

He didn’t trust himself to speak. His words were bound to be of his fear of letting her down, of his gratitude for her blind loyalty. And perhaps ... of that day in his chambers.

‘He’s yours, isn’t he?’ she asked, nodding to Xander.

Swinton reached out, inviting Xander closer once more. ‘He is, yes. A gift from my late wife.’

‘Oh,’ Therese said. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had been married.’

‘No one did. I told Fiore only a little while ago. And now you.’

She didn’t press him; she merely waited.

‘I’m trying something new.’ He exhaled. ‘Honesty.’

Therese smiled kindly. ‘Sometimes it’s easier to tell secrets to a stranger, Dimitri.’

It had been a long time since anyone other than Fiore had called him by his first name like that. He liked the way it sounded.

AS THE SUN set over the Janhallow Desert, dousing it with a fiery orange glow, Swinton made his way back to the tent he shared with Fi. Though the torches were lit within, it was empty, and two half-full mugs of sweet Battalonian tea were on the table. Swinton cupped his hands around one – it was still warm.

Odd. Where's Fi? And the prince? Massaging his temples, Swinton looked to the maps he and Fi had pored over the night before, with Fi explaining which clans to the west were likely to unite with them against the capital. It was such a vast continent, and the terrain ... Swinton didn't want to think about it. He couldn't stomach the idea of another trek across the desert just yet.

Swinton froze. His gaze snagged on something at the end of the table.

A furling piece of parchment. And ... a pipe.

He glanced around the tent, and then once again to the second mug of tea. He'd never seen Prince Nazuri smoke a pipe. Nor any of the villagers, for that matter. Body tensing, he picked up the piece of parchment, scanning the words scrawled in an unfamiliar hand.

B,

I had to depart while you were with the clan council. My magic needs restoration before I can assist your travel.

Meet me in three days' time at the most eastern point of the coast of the Janhallow Desert. I will manage the journey to Havenness from there.

T

'WHAT ARE YOU DOING, DIMI?' Fi's voice sounded from the tent's flap.

Swinton didn't respond. Instead, he scanned the letter again, his eyes hovering on the 'B' the author had addressed. He shook his head.

'No, brother. It is time *you* answered that question. What are *you* doing? Who are *you*? Who is this note from?'

'Dimi ...'

Swinton stepped forward and took Fi by the elbow, pulling him inside the tent. 'You asked me to trust you with everything, *and I did*. Yet you offer no trust in return. We're not leaving here until you tell me who you are. Who you *really* are. And who you've been dealing with.'

Fi took a deep breath, picking up the pipe and taking the letter from Swinton's outstretched hand. 'It's from a man known as the Tailor of Heathton.'

The name was familiar. A title whispered in the back alleys of Ellest's capital. Though Swinton was sure he'd never crossed paths with the infamous tinkerer of tales.

'And "B"?' he demanded. 'Who's the letter addressed to?'

'Me,' Fi said. 'It's for me. The Baron of Battalon.'

Swinton blinked. 'There is no *Baron* of Battalon.'

'No. Not officially.'

Swinton crossed his arms over his chest, staring daggers. 'Fi, I swear by all the gods, if you don't start —'

'It's not an official title appointed by the king. It's ... more of a family tradition. You know I come from a big family?'

'I do.'

'We came from nothing, brother. Less than nothing. All of us. My great-great-grandmother, Grandmother Usha, hailed from a land long forgotten now. She emigrated to Battalon with a group of paupers, and they journeyed through the desert to the capital, where she met her husband. There, they made what they could in the underbelly of Belbarrow.'

'How?'

'The Murphadias family has always had a knack for talk.'

'So I've noticed.'

'Well, we've always been open to strangers, too. In a way that many families on the fire continent didn't used to be. Grandmother Usha accepted anyone from any walk of life into our clan. She started a network, an underground community. And then, a market of sorts.'

Swinton raised a brow. 'What sort of market?'

Fi gave him a pointed look. 'The sort where you find what you need. Whatever you need.'

'I see.'

'Grandmother Usha was at the helm, a formidable woman. She created the markets from nothing, and as the network grew, the Murphadias family rose to prominence. My forebears presented themselves as wealthy foreign Battalonians, and took up residence in the jewellery quarter of Belbarrow, where they quickly rose in status. All the while, the dark markets thrived. And the people began to call Usha *the Baron of Battalon*.'

Swinton frowned. 'Not Baroness?'

'No.' Fi shook his head. 'Titles gifted by the people rarely care for gender. She led a sprawling family of wanderers, dreamers and underdogs.'

Which was why the market did so well – all were loyal to her. And she repaid that loyalty in kind. Whatever you needed, she could get it. Whatever deed needed doing, she would get it done.’

‘She sounds like quite a woman.’

‘She was. As were all the women in the Murphadias family. The position fell to her daughter, Baron Jabbareh. She had no children of her own, and so adopted many. Healer Ethelda, who you met in Belbarrow, was one of those children. Her brother was the next baron, my grandfather, then his son, my father. My parents were very involved in the running of the markets – my mother dwelled underground for the better part of my childhood, while my father dealt with the family’s influence in the Belbarrow court. Even as a boy I knew that we were an unusual clan, privy to the inner workings of both the elite and the underdogs. It put us in a position of great power.’

‘I’m surprised King Roswall stood for it,’ Swinton muttered.

‘He didn’t.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why do you think the whole Murphadias family was moved to Ellest? We were political hostages, Dimi. Given no choice in the matter.’

‘But ...’ Swinton faltered. ‘You did so well in Ellest. I didn’t think you were there against your will. You were made captain so soon after your arrival.’

‘Dimi.’ Fiore smiled sadly. ‘What do you do when you’re thrown to the wolves?’

Swinton frowned. ‘Run?’

‘You come back the leader of the pack, old friend.’

Fi’s words hung heavily between them, and Swinton realised just how resilient his Battalonian brother was. All these years, he’d been waging a war Swinton had no idea about. He’d been taken from his people, his family, and placed in the wolves’ den, only to return as the alpha.

‘And what of the Tailor?’ he asked.

Fiore gave a laugh. ‘Tailor ... I met him when I was but a boy myself. He was a scared Ashai orphan, darting around the markets, causing havoc. A scrawny little thing who would disappear and reappear any matter of time later.’

Swinton gaped. ‘A traveller?’

‘Yes, a traveller. The only one I’ve ever come across. And we dealt with our fair share of Ashai in the dark markets. I brought him to Healer Ethelda, and he was raised alongside my brothers, sisters and me.’

‘And now?’

‘Now, he is part of our clan. For most of his life, he has worked for us. With his abilities, he has a particular proclivity for imports and exports, you see. He also helps us communicate across the Upper Realm in a matter of moments.’

Swinton stared at his friend as the pieces of the puzzle knitted together. He remembered the parchment that had appeared on the platter in the Murphadias apartments all those weeks ago.

‘It was him,’ he found himself saying. ‘He helped you get Dash out of Heathton?’

Fi nodded, picking up the Tailor’s pipe and pocketing it.

‘Then I owe him a debt,’ Swinton said. The man had helped save his son’s life. Nothing could ever repay that.

Fi scoffed. ‘He has all sorts of notions on debts and duties, old friend. Don’t start him on them while I’m around.’

‘Fi, there is still so much I don’t know.’

‘I know, old friend. It seems we have much to learn of each other. That is a gift of life, no? A friendship that endures is never short of surprises.’

Swinton barked a laugh. ‘That’s one way to look at it.’

Fi crossed the tent and returned with a flask. He poured amber liquid into two cups and pushed one towards Swinton.

‘To enduring friendship,’ he toasted.

Still reeling from Fi’s revelations, yet feeling the surreal warmth of contentment, Swinton met his friend’s gaze. ‘To brotherhood.’

He bumped his cup against Fi’s, before raising it to his lips.

Chief Yaridha burst into their tent, panting. ‘There’s been an attack,’ he wheezed.

Swinton and Fi were already moving.

‘You need to leave,’ Yaridha told them. ‘Take the prince and princess, and go. Now.’

CHAPTER 7

Dash jolted awake with a gasp. The memory of the nightmare was already ebbing away. All that remained now was the pounding in his chest and the prickling sensation across his skin. What had he been dreaming of?

He looked across the room at Bryson, the stuffed bear Mama had insisted Tailor take with them. The orange glow of the dying fire illuminated the threadbare child's toy. It had been his father's before his, Mama was always reminding him.

They won't even recognise me, Dash thought as he kicked his covers back and swung his long legs from the bed. He went to Bryson, brought the stuffed animal to his face and inhaled. The smell of their cottage back home was faint but still there, and he was hit with a pang of homesickness. It didn't matter that he was grown now – gods, he missed them. But he had been forbidden by Tailor and Queen Eydis from writing to them. It could put them in danger. So Emmett and Dorothy Carlington remained ignorant of just how much their son had changed.

The room was chilly, and he went to the fire, feeding it more logs as Pa had once shown him, careful not to smother the existing embers. Once the flames had crackled back to life, Dash picked up Olena's history book and stood with his back to the hearth, savouring the warmth that spread across his shoulderblades. He opened the tome to find the letter he'd discovered at the back. The letter he'd read and re-read a hundred times now ...

WE WILL NEED our prince back, we will need the rebels of Oremere to stand strong, but with him, and with it, we have a chance of winning the war of mist.

THE HOPE the words offered was cruel; the kind that made a man's heart soar before sending it plummeting into the ground. Dash let his fingertips linger over the messy penmanship. Who was the letter from? Who was it to? And how had it found its place in Olena's book? There was only one person who could possibly know the answer. But Tailor was still missing. And they'd not heard from Captain Murphadias either.

Resigned to the fact that he'd get no more sleep tonight, Dash went to the bedside table and picked up the folded piece of parchment Bleak had given him. It was still the early hours of the morning, but his head was brimming with questions, and his stomach was still queasy from the nightmare he couldn't quite remember. Making up his mind, he pocketed the parchment and went to layer up.

THANKFULLY, on the lowest level of the tower, the kitchens had been in use for hours, and the ovens kept the rooms warmer than any other part of Wildenhaven. It was bustling, with servants carrying steaming pots, kneading dough and scouring pans on nearly every surface.

Perhaps this isn't a good idea – I'll get underfoot, Dash thought, backing away.

'Master Zachary,' someone said.

Dash whirled around to find the head cook standing behind him. How did she know who he was?

'What can we do for you?' she said.

'I ... um ...'

'Are you hungry?'

Dash shook his head. 'I was hoping to bake something.'

The cook's brow furrowed as he handed her Martha's recipe. She read over it. 'Simple enough. We can make these for you, no problem.'

'No, I ...' Dash stammered. 'I wanted to bake them myself. If it's not too much trouble.'

‘Nothing’s too much trouble, Master Zachary.’

She was a far cry from Martha back at Heathton Castle, that was for sure.

‘You can just call me Dash,’ he told her. ‘What’s your name?’

The cook smiled. ‘Abigail,’ she replied, dusting her hands on her apron. ‘Let’s find you a bench space, and I’ll show you where the pantry is.’

‘I won’t be in the way?’

‘Nonsense. Friends of Queen Eydis are always welcome in this kitchen.’

Abigail gave him a corner bench of his own and showed him where the butter, sugar and flour were kept. ‘You come anytime you like, Dash. This bench is yours now. And if you need help, just ask one of the servants. They’re always happy to see a fresh face down here.’

Dash grinned. A bench of his own? ‘Thank you. Truly.’

With a nod, Abigail left him to it, and Dash smoothed out Martha’s recipe. He could do this. He rolled up his sleeves and set to work finding a mixing bowl and sifting the flour. There was something soothing about working with his hands, and he loved the aroma of freshly baked bread wafting around him. He measured each ingredient with a precision that would make Ma proud, and tipped the cup of oats in with a great sense of satisfaction. He was just cracking the eggs when he heard a familiar voice.

‘Abi? Abi, there you are. I just came to tell you, the teerahs killed some caribou. Did you want me to have it sent to the butchers for skinning and carving?’

Dash couldn’t see her, but it was definitely Bleak.

‘Rheyah bless you and your beasts, child,’ Abigail said, coming into view from the larder. ‘We need the extra help in these troubled times. I’ll send some of the lads up to fetch them. We can carve them down here. Dennis has enough on his hands.’

‘Alright, then.’

‘What were you doing out at this hour, eh?’

‘Couldn’t sleep.’

Dash craned his neck and spotted Bleak. Thick clumps of snow clung to her boots, fresh powder dusted her hood and her shoulders, and her face was flushed from the cold.

She spotted him. ‘What are you doing here?’ she asked, approaching him.

‘I couldn’t sleep either,’ he replied.

‘I see you’ve discovered my hiding spot.’ She gestured to the bustling kitchen.

Dash simply shrugged and continued to stir the mixture.

Bleak peered at the recipe on the bench and then began to peel off her outer layers, looping them over a nearby peg on the wall. ‘I can’t cook.’

Dash turned the bowl upside down, allowing the dough to roll onto the floured bench. ‘Ma and I used to bake a lot,’ he told her.

‘I know how to gut a fish,’ Bleak offered. She dragged over a stool and sat down to watch.

‘Well, that’s useful, too.’ He rolled the dough beneath the heels of his hands.

Bleak huffed a laugh. ‘Who are they for, anyway?’

‘These? No one. These are for practice.’

The Angovian swiped a chunk of batter and popped it into her mouth. ‘And the real thing?’

Dash did the same. *Too sweet.* He added more flour. ‘They’re for Princess Olena.’ And then, feeling bold, he said, ‘I’ve seen her. Running through the desert.’

‘A vision?’

Dash nodded. ‘I see her all the time.’

Bleak chewed thoughtfully. ‘Do you want to show me?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Mind to mind,’ she said, reaching across the bench, palm upturned.

Dash hesitated for a second, before placing his flour-covered hand in hers.

RAGING vertical tunnels of flame whipped across the desert sand, the heat searing skin even from a distance. They fled. All of them, the ground shifting beneath their boots as they sprinted for their lives. Smoke and terror laced together to clog their throats and sting their eyes. Captain Murphadias and Princess Olena staggered, the firestorm nearly upon them.

The thunder of horses’ hooves sounded.

‘Get down!’ a deep voice boomed over the roar of the blaze.

The captain threw the princess to the ground, shielding her body with his.

A blanket of black fell over them, and then there was nothing but the howl of the firestorm beyond ...

IT WAS his nightmare from this morning, Dash remembered now. Only it wasn't a nightmare. It was a premonition. He almost could taste the smoke.

He was still holding Bleak's hand, knuckles white, and Bleak was staring at him with her odd eyes.

'I ...' He couldn't find the words.

Bleak squeezed his hand. 'If she's with Fi, he'll keep her safe.'

'Didn't you see —'

'I saw what you saw. But what we see isn't always the whole story, is it?'

As he turned back to his baking, he almost missed Bleak's wince of pain as she hopped down from the stool.

'Are you hurt?'

Bleak grimaced. 'Not exactly,' she admitted.

'What do you mean?'

She considered him, and then glanced around nervously. Her hands went to her belt buckle.

Dash baulked. 'What are you doing?'

'Shhh,' she hissed, as she began to unbutton her pants.

Dash blushed furiously. 'Bleak ...' He backed away. This was completely inappropriate. A girl disrobing in front of him in the kitchens? If someone should see — he'd never —

But the marred skin on Bleak's thigh silenced his inner protests.

'What ...?' He stared, closing the gap between them without thinking. Across brutally scarred flesh, dark markings had been tattooed.

'When did you get that?' he breathed. 'It's like Eydis' ...'

'It is and it isn't,' said a soft voice from behind him. Casimir lowered his snow-dusted hood, his gaze on Bleak's leg. 'And I'm guessing she didn't get it on purpose.'

Bleak locked eyes with the Ashai leader. 'How do you know?' she demanded.

Dash watched as Casimir shoved his sleeve up, revealing similarly marked skin on his forearm. 'It started when we got back from Heathton,' he told them.

Goosebumps rushed over Dash, and the hair on the nape of his neck stood up.

‘Started?’ Dash found his voice.

Casimir nodded. ‘It spreads a little more each day. It was only on my shoulder at first, but now ...’ He turned his arm over. The markings had wrapped around his arm all the way to his wrist.

Bleak was buckling her belt. ‘The pattern stretches down to my knee. It starts where I was first affected by the plague.’

Dash flinched. *The plague*. The memory of the all-consuming pain was still fresh in his mind. He hadn’t known Bleak had been affected, too.

‘It was the same for me,’ Casimir was saying.

Casimir had had the plague as well?

Bleak must have seen his confusion. ‘Casimir and I were infected during the plague ten years ago.’

Oh.

‘Told you she had something worse planned,’ Bleak muttered, turning Casimir’s arm over in her hands and studying the markings. ‘The plague was only the beginning.’

At the mention of the disease, Dash felt a sharp twinge of pain along his ribs and gasped.

‘What is it?’ Bleak asked, her eyes full of concern. She noted his hand clutching his side.

She approached him and slowly untucked his shirt, lifting the fabric. She swore.

Along Dash’s side, running from his ribs and down beyond the waistline of his pants, were the same dark markings. The breath left his lungs.

‘She’s had this up her sleeve the whole time,’ Casimir murmured, taking in the swirls across Dash’s pale skin. ‘This is her ultimate revenge.’

CHAPTER 8

Henri took a deep breath. ‘So you’re saying that you, Bleak and the Carlington boy are all affected?’

Casimir rolled down his sleeve and looked to the chaos unfolding in the hall below. ‘Yes.’

From a viewing balcony high above the middle tower’s great hall, Henri, Casimir, Eydis and Bleak watched as dozens of people lined up to be examined by Wildenhaven’s best healers. Henri noticed the groundling healer, Lyse, among them.

‘The Carlington boy has a name,’ Bleak muttered, not taking her eyes from the growing crowd.

‘Dash,’ Eydis murmured in agreement.

Henri waved them off. She was in no mood to be chastised. ‘Yes, yes. In any case. What does this mean for us? What have the healers said?’

‘It affects Ashai folk who were infected by the plague,’ Bleak replied. ‘The markings appear where the plague first festered, and then spread slowly but steadily. We found one Ashai dead in his rooms, every inch of his body covered with the markings. It’s only one case, but the healers have assumed it’s the fate that awaits all of those affected.’

Henri stared at Bleak. The girl stated the facts without feeling. Even though her own life hung in the balance.

‘It doesn’t make sense to me,’ Casimir said, frowning. ‘Initially, the plagues were a way for her to weed out the weak and shed a light on those most powerful so she could take their magic for herself. It’s not like Ines to waste Ashai magic by killing us off like that.’

‘Can we stop it?’ Eydis asked, adjusting her furs across her shoulders. ‘Allehra mentioned some herbs?’

‘Herbs that are grown *in Valia*,’ Henri replied. ‘Which, for the most part, is in cinders thanks to —’

‘She said some of Valia remains untouched,’ Casimir interjected.

‘So what do you suggest? That we go back to Valia to find some herbs that may or may not help us? What about what’s happening *here*? The new villages being taken over? And the fact that Wildenhaven is now cut off from Port Avesta?’ Henri’s patience was wearing thin. It was just one thing after another.

‘Henri,’ Eydis said, resting a hand on her shoulder. ‘This is unlike you. There is an answer here, I know it.’ The winter queen pulled her aside and waited.

‘I’m sorry,’ Henri told her once they were out of earshot of the others.

Eydis smiled kindly. ‘You owe me no apologies, my friend. War is hard on us all.’

‘Yes, *on us all*. Not just me. My temper has seen better days.’

‘So has everyone’s, Henri. Better to voice your doubts and worries now than on the battlefield.’

Henri couldn’t argue with that.

Eydis turned back to the group. ‘I want to address some of Henri’s concerns. She’s right. The snowslide and battle have caused some issues. But Bleak has her panthers helping to clear a new path to allow us and the villagers to regain access to Port Avesta. I am told it’s only a matter of days until this is resolved. As for the cults spreading, Briarfort, Direbreach and Hallowden had already fallen to Ines before the snowslide battle. Now there are five, maybe six cults from those that have taken over other villages. But I’ve read the report from Dash, Jarel and Luka. Things are getting worse in the more rural areas.’

There was a creak from the stairs. Eydis’ dog, Bear, pushed his way through the group and settled himself at his master’s feet, eyes bright and alert. Eydis rubbed the top of his head.

‘We found Kyden,’ she said.

Henri looked up. *Is that why I couldn’t find Sahara this morning? She must be with Geraad.*

‘When?’ Bleak blurted.

Henri kept forgetting that the mist dweller had journeyed with the rebels from Oremere and likely knew them much better than she did.

‘Last night.’

‘Is he alive?’

Eydis nodded. ‘He did a very noble thing for us. After being separated from us during the snowslide battle, he infiltrated one of Ines’ cults.’

‘What do you mean?’ Bleak said sharply.

Eydis gave her a grim look. ‘He posed as a villager and accepted the branding. As an insider, he listened. Ines is targeting the villages along the Kildaholm Alps, and cutting off our supply to livestock and produce. She hopes to weaken us by using our own people against us, but from what Kyden understood, the real fight will not be in Havennesse.’

‘Oremere,’ Casimir said, his face fallen.

‘What?’ Henri said. ‘Why would she do that?’

Casimir put his head in his hands. ‘To punish me.’

‘Perhaps,’ Bleak allowed. ‘But she wants power. She thinks she has us backed into a corner and likely feels the same about Battalon and Ellest. What she doesn’t have are the underground rebel colonies on her own continent. The ones that are probably brimming with untapped Ashai potential.’

Henri’s eyebrows shot up. When had Bleak become so calculated? The Angovian was much changed since they’d first met, and the odd-eyed orphan continued to surprise her.

Bleak’s gaze locked onto Eydis’. ‘The rebels want to return to Oremere?’

Eydis nodded.

‘What?’ Henri interjected. ‘We cannot have our forces split up all over the damn realm. We need to be united. We need to make a stand. That is how wars are won.’ And what of Sahara? Would her twin stand with her, or with her rebel clan? The questions reopened old wounds.

Eydis’ expression was one of pity, which only aggravated Henri more. So much for keeping her temper in check.

‘The war will be fought in Oremere,’ Eydis told her. ‘I have seen it.’

‘You said yourself your visions aren’t always set in stone.’

‘I also told you that sometimes you just know how deep the fate runs.’

Henri threw her hands up. ‘This is ridiculous.’ She had never felt so frustrated, so helpless in her entire life. Nothing in her Valian training had

prepared her for this.

Someone cleared his throat from the entrance to the gallery.

Eydis looked relieved. 'Yes?'

The Carlington boy – *Dash* – entered, a heavy tome tucked under one arm. 'Your Majesty, I was hoping we might speak?'

'You're always welcome,' Eydis said. 'What do you have there?'

Dash heaved the book up in plain sight, his hands trailing absentmindedly across the cover. 'It's one of Princess Olena's books. I wasn't sure whether to mention it. I don't even know if matters without ...' He trailed off.

The young man was clearly still coming to terms with his new self. He spent too long formulating his words, and fidgeted under their gaze. Henri softened. She'd not been cruel to him, but she'd been far from kind. Her dislike for his father had clouded her judgement, which surprised her. She had never believed in holding a child responsible for the crimes of their parents.

'Tell us,' Bleak was saying. 'You've been wanting to since you got back. That means it's important.'

This was also news to Henri, that Bleak and Swinton's – *Dash* – were so well acquainted.

The boy nodded. 'This book is a firsthand account of the recent history of the Upper Realm. It wasn't destroyed like other books because it's in quaveer and it's handmade. No one knew what it was about. But I've been reading about how Ines came to power and ... Well, I found something in it. I don't know who it's to, or who it's from, but ... can I read it to you?'

'By all means, Dash,' Eydis answered.

The boy opened the book and took out a weathered-looking envelope. Dash inhaled deeply and began to read.

'A rumour has been circling our ranks now of a weapon, forged in the face of all this. A possible key to the defeat of the mad priestess. It is said to be hidden in the heart of Ellest, where the collector is yet to sink her talons in. We will need our prince back, we will need the rebels of Oremere to stand strong, but with him, and with it, we have a chance of winning the war of mist ...'

Casimir swore, and Dash flinched.

'That means nothing to us now,' Casimir said, eyes stormy.

‘It’s not up to you to determine what means nothing,’ Henri told him.
‘You know what it refers to. Tell us. Now.’

He clenched and unclenched his fists. ‘It’s hopeless without Ermias.’

‘The third ruler? The Goldwell heir?’

Casimir nodded.

‘And he’s dead?’ Henri asked.

‘Yes,’ Casimir ground out.

Bleak shot him a look. ‘*Presumed* dead.’

‘You have a theory?’ Eydis pressed.

‘Casimir thinks —’

‘*Bleak*,’ Casimir warned.

Bleak shook her head at him. ‘Casimir *thinks* Tailor might ... know where to find answers.’

Henri was *done*. Absolutely *done* working with rebels, Oremians and supposed princes. ‘How fucking long have you been harbouring this life-changing information?’ she snapped. There were too many secrets afoot here.

‘*This*,’ Casimir said, with a glare in Bleak’s direction, ‘was what I was worried about. There is no proof, no guarantee, nothing that tells us he’s alive, or that he can help us! The deadliest thing in war is quashed hope.’

‘The deadliest thing in war is *death*,’ Henri said. ‘Which we *may* be able to avoid if you start sharing your gods-damned information with us.’

LATER THAT NIGHT, Henri and Athene took sentry duty at one of the outer watchtowers. Up high, the icy wind blasted them as they looked out onto the dark winterland.

Athene cursed into her scarves. ‘Remind me again why you volunteered us for this?’

‘It’s good to remain part of the unit, show these duties aren’t beneath us.’

‘Uh-huh. And the real reason?’

Henri shot her a look.

Athene simply cocked an eyebrow in response.

Henri sighed, rubbing her hands together for warmth. ‘It’s not going well. With the others, with the planning. The rebels want to return to Oremere.’

‘What?’

Henri nodded. ‘I haven’t seen Sahara yet.’

‘She’ll go with them?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Maybe it’s best if she does?’

‘Don’t start —’

‘Henri, listen to me. I only want what’s best for you.’

‘How is my sister leaving me, best for me?’

‘She’s not happy.’

She’s. Not. Happy. Henri let the words sink in. The brutal, painful truth of them reverberated through her like a blow.

‘I’m sorry, Henri,’ Athene said softly.

Suddenly, it was hard for Henri to swallow. ‘She wasn’t happy last time ...’

‘No, she wasn’t. And look what she did. What she did *to you*.’

‘You think I should encourage her to go with them? Go with Geraad?’

‘She’s in love with him.’

‘We don’t know that.’

‘Don’t we?’

Henri pulled her hood tighter around her face and tucked her hands under her arms. It didn’t matter how close to the fire she stood, or how many layers she wore, the cold had begun to seep into her heart, and there was no way to stop it.

THAT NIGHT, Henri couldn’t sleep. Each and every problem felt more impossible than ever, and the weight of them was like a boulder pressing on her chest. She slipped out of bed with an envious glance at Athene, who had fallen into a deep slumber the moment her head had hit the pillow. She looked at peace – gods knew how, with all that was happening. But Henri wouldn’t rob her of that now. Instead, she donned her palma furs and boots, and headed out into the corridor, the door clicking closed behind her.

She didn’t know where she was going, exactly. Only that she needed to move. Thoughts of Ines’ plague markings, the potential cure in Valia, not to mention Sahara’s possible departure, were wrapping around her mind to the point of suffocation. If what they suspected about the markings that had spread across numerous Ashai was true ...

Flickering candlelight from inside the council room caught Henri's eye. Curious, she pushed open the door to find Sahara sitting inside. On the table before her was the letter Dash had read to them hours ago.

Without looking up, Sahara smoothed the parchment over. 'Eydis showed it to me,' she said.

Henri took a seat opposite her. 'And?'

'And I recognised the writing.'

Henri's stomach swooped. She waited.

'It's Geraad's,' her sister said. 'I'd know it anywhere.' Sahara still hadn't looked up; instead, she smoothed the parchment across the table again.

Henri knew she had to tread lightly. 'Do you know who it's to?'

'I can't know for sure.' Sahara chewed her lip. 'But I suspect ... I suspect it was to Captain Murphadias.'

'What? What's he got to do with anything?'

Sahara shrugged. 'I don't know, exactly. And now's not the best time to be interrogating Geraad, so don't get any ideas.'

Henri threw her hands up in mock disbelief. 'I wouldn't dream —'

'I'm serious, Henri. Not tonight.' Sahara's gaze finally met hers.

'You have my word I won't, if it means that much to you.'

'It does.'

Henri heard the words that Sahara really meant: *he does*.

She sighed, taking the letter and examining it herself. 'The captain is full of surprises, it seems.'

'We all are.'

Henri looked at her sister once more, noting the shadows beneath her eyes and her unwashed cropped hair. 'You might be right there.'

It was the dark hours of early morning when Henri left Sahara to rest. Her sister hadn't said much more about Geraad and Kyden, only that Kyden was recovering and would be for some time. Henri was still reeling over the connection between the rebel leader and the former Ellestian captain. They had spun some dangerous webs, and now somehow, she and her kindred were trapped in the middle. As if she didn't have enough responsibilities to concern herself with. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she walked. Her mind wandered to Valia ... How much of the forest had been destroyed? How would it impact them when they returned? *If* they returned. And what of after? If there was, in fact, an after. Would Luka make the most

suitable heir? Henri had put off naming one for far too long already, and it was vital, given their current situation. If something should happen to her ... An heir was needed. Luka had always made the most sense. The girl was a talented warrior, no doubt; one of the best.

Henri slammed into someone. 'Watch where you're —' She met the odd-eyed stare of Bleak, who was holding a massive tray of raw meat.

'I could use a hand,' the girl said, and continued down the passageway.

Henri had little choice in the matter; she followed after her. The icy wind outside took Henri's breath away as Bleak led her through the darkness of the surrounding grounds without another word, to a large warehouse.

Inside, four of Bleak's teerah panthers waited. Rion, the largest one, and three slightly smaller beasts.

'I thought they caught their own game?'

'They do. They've been supplying the kitchen with caribou.'

'So what's this?'

'Abigail, the cook, said they might appreciate a little diversity in their diet. This is goat from the Hamasaand Ranges.'

'We're giving our best meat to —'

Rion cut Henri off with an impatient growl. Bleak huffed a laugh, and held out the tray to Henri.

'What do you think I'm going to do with that?' Henri scoffed.

'Give him a piece.'

'You're mad.'

'Am I? Henri, you want to be on the battlefield with him. He needs to know you. They all do.'

Damn this girl, Henri thought. *She has a point.* She tugged off her gloves, shoving them in her pocket, before taking a chunk of meat from the tray.

'Just hold it out in your palms,' Bleak told her. 'He won't hurt you.'

'Easy for you to say,' Henri muttered, following Bleak's instructions.

The giant panther stepped forward and sniffed the freshly carved meat, before with a firm lick, he swiped it from Henri's hands.

'Here,' Bleak said, handing her a rag.

Henri wiped her hands and watched Bleak feed the others, marvelling at the strange bond the girl seemed to have with the beasts.

‘How are you feeling?’ Henri heard herself ask. She nodded to Bleak’s leg, where she knew the markings spread more and more each day.

‘Honestly? I don’t know. It’s not overly painful, but I’m aware of it. It’s like it’s alive.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you think we should go to Valia? For the herbs Allehra talked about.’

Henri noted the surprise on Bleak’s face, as though the mist dweller was shocked she’d been asked to contribute her opinion. But she composed herself and sighed, taking the rag from Henri and wiping her own hands. ‘We don’t know they’ll help.’

‘No.’

‘We don’t know exactly where they are. If they even survived the fire.’

‘No.’

Bleak nodded. ‘Sounds like our usual odds.’

Henri gave a hollow laugh.

‘Have you talked to Sahara?’ Bleak asked, stroking Rion’s nose.

Outside, the soft light of dawn began to glow, sending the first golden beams of the day through the windows.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because of what Eydis said about the rebels leaving. Do you think she’ll go with them?’

‘I’m not sure. Athene says —’

Bleak looked up sharply. ‘What does Athene have to do with it?’

‘What happened between you on the way back from Moredon? You used to be close with her, and since then, you’ve barely spoken.’

Bleak’s shoulders sagged, and she motioned for Henri to sit beside her on a nearby bale of hay. ‘It should have been one of them telling you this. But they had their chance.’ Bleak brushed the loose hair from her eyes and looked straight at Henri.

‘Telling me what?’ Henri’s heart was in her throat. Whatever she was about to learn was going to hurt, she knew that much.

‘I have to show you ...’ Bleak offered her hand.

After a moment’s hesitation, Henri took it.

DAYLIGHT BROKE FULLY upon the winter continent as Henri stormed towards the training arena. Her magic was on fire in her veins, searing through her like a poison. Tears of rage stung her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. There would be no tears today, only pain, only retribution.

'Henri,' Bleak called from behind her. The girl was chasing her. 'Henri, wait, this isn't the way.'

But her words fell on deaf ears. Henri wouldn't hear it. Not now. The one person in the realm she'd trusted, the one person she'd let —

She burst into the training arena. Her kindred were there, sparring. She spotted Athene's fierce red braid and moved.

'Tell me it's not true,' she said.

Athene whirled around. 'What?'

'Don't. Lie. To. Me.'

Around them, the kindred fell silent.

Athene's eyes went to Bleak, who'd just caught up, and then back to Henri. 'I can explain ...' she stammered.

'I said, tell me it's not true.' Henri's magic coursed through her like a raging river, begging to be released from its banks. She felt Tilly and Marvel come to stand either side of her. Their presence gave her a different kind of strength.

'I can't ...' Athene's voice broke.

There it was. The sound of the bond between them cleaving in two.

'Leave.'

'Henri, no!' Athene reached for her.

'You betrayed not only me, but our *entire kindred*. I want you gone from here. And when we return to Ellest, you're no longer welcome in Valia.'

As Henri said the words, they tore her open. It took every fibre of her willpower to remain upright and not double over into the sorrow, into the gaping wound in her heart.

She held Athene's gaze. 'As of this moment, you are stripped of your rank, and your heritage. You are no longer one of us.'

'Henri —' Tears tracked down the sides of Athene's face as she tried to close the gap between them.

Marvel and Tilly stepped in front of Henri. 'You heard our queen,' Tilly said.

Henri knew the orders were breaking their hearts as much as hers.

Athene nodded, palming her tears away. As Henri expected, she turned to Luka.

‘Luka,’ she said, her voice raw. ‘Are you coming?’

But the young Valian visibly steeled herself. ‘No.’

Athene stared. ‘What?’

Luka looked to Henri and bowed her head before turning back to her mother. ‘You once told me that who my father was wasn’t important. That the only important thing in life was the Valian Way. I have lived by that ever since. So now, it’s who my mother is that isn’t important. I stand for the Valian Way, and for Henri, my queen. I will serve her until I die.’

‘Luka ...’ Athene implored her.

‘Our queen gave you an order,’ Luka said, her voice as hard as iron. ‘I suggest you follow it before we have to enforce it.’

Henri refused to look away as Athene gazed at her one last time. There was nothing left to say. The Queen of Valia watched as her lover, her friend, her right-hand woman, strapped her sword to her back and left the Wildenhaven training arena. Only when Athene’s red hair had disappeared did Henri realise she was clenching her fists so hard she’d drawn blood.

CHAPTER 9

‘*H*enri,’ Bleak called out, following the Valian matriarch up into the stands of the Wildenhaven training arena. ‘Henri.’

‘Not now,’ she answered, reaching the top.

Below, the kindred had resumed sparring, but the shock lingered throughout the ranks. Bleak continued after the warrior queen.

‘Henri, I’m sorry,’ she said, catching her breath. They stood at the railing, looking out onto the frozen grounds.

‘What do *you* have to be sorry for?’

Bleak had never seen Henri so shaken. The warrior’s face was pale, her grey-green eyes unfocused.

‘Apparently, you’re the only one who tells me the truth around here,’ she said.

‘Everyone has their own version. You should ask Sahara about it.’

A muscle in Henri’s jaw twitched. ‘They never liked each other, you know. I should have realised.’

‘You couldn’t have known —’

‘Yes, she could have,’ said another voice. Luka. The young Valian’s eyes were glassy, her mouth set in a grim line. ‘Henri,’ she started. ‘I should have come to you. I should have —’

‘Luka.’ Henri shook her head. ‘She’s your mother.’

‘And you are my queen.’

‘I will not hold a daughter responsible for the actions of her parent.’

‘I should be punished.’

What? Bleak turned to Henri, poised for a fight. There was no way Luka deserved to be reprimanded – she had only been a child.

‘No,’ Henri said, meeting Bleak’s gaze knowingly. ‘Bleak showed me what happened. None of it was your fault.’

Luka bowed her head. ‘I should have done more. I let you down. I’m so sorry.’

‘I’m sorry too,’ Henri said. ‘Now, let this be the end of it. I want you at the next council meeting.’

‘What?’

‘You will fill Petra’s position in my elite kindred.’

Both Bleak and Luka stared.

Henri cocked an eyebrow. ‘I see you for your own merit, Luka. You deserve to be amongst the best, regardless of your mother’s choices. I made the decision a week ago.’

‘Th-thank you. It would be an honour.’

‘Then do me another honour and get back to training.’

Once Luka had left, Bleak glanced at Henri. An unnerving calm had settled over the Valian.

‘Are you ... Are you alright?’ she asked. But as the words left her lips, a twinge of pain shot up her side. She hissed, and lifted her many layers to reveal her abdomen. The markings had spread further. The dark swirls now reached her lower ribs.

‘None of us are alright,’ Henri said, following her gaze.

Bleak covered up. ‘I know.’

Someone cleared their throat from the stairs. Bleak whirled around.

Dash pushed his hood back, his cheeks pink from the cold. ‘Mariette’s sentencing is about to begin.’

FROM WHAT BLEAK COULD SEE, the rumours of Mariette’s treachery had spread far and wide. People from all over Wildenhaven were packed into the formal great hall of the middle tower, and by the looks of things, they were thirsty for blood. The actions of this woman had not only threatened their homeland and their very existence, but she had also insulted the generosity of their queen. Years ago, Eydis had supported Mariette’s petition for the kennel-master position over that of her older brother, deeming the former more capable, and more hardworking. Now ... now she might as well have spat in their monarch’s face.

Wringing her hands, Bleak followed Henri and Dash upstairs to one of the viewing galleries. Casimir, Allehra, Sahara and Geraad were already waiting, their faces grave. She had no idea what to expect from all of this. Mariette had been a part of Eydis' household for decades. Part of her family. And now ... now Eydis was to deliver Havennesse justice to her? Just as Henri had done with Athene. It felt as though the foundations of their realm were cracking under pressure.

Bleak stood beside Casimir, noting that his Ashai markings now peeked from beneath his collar. Her own skin seemed to prickle in response. They were running out of time. Casimir met her gaze and Bleak didn't need her magic to know he was thinking the same thing. He reached out, the weight of his arm draped across her as he squeezed her shoulder. But the touch was gone as quickly as it had come. A moment's comfort, that was all. *Wasn't it?*

She reached for her rope, longing to feel the reassurance of the knots coming together between her fingers. But it wasn't tied to her belt. *Damn*, she cursed. *I must have left it somewhere*. She wrung her hands again instead, now agitated.

Down in the hall, a bell rang. The crowd burst into nervous chatter, and then shouts of outrage, as Mariette was escorted in wearing heavy chains, a guard on either side of her. People hurled abuse at her, some going as far as to throw rotten fruit. Something red hit the side of Mariette's face with a splat. Bleak gripped the balcony railing as the raging thoughts of Eydis' people below swelled to breaking point. Perhaps this wasn't the best place for her. There was so much anger. It stirred that sleeping beast of darkness within her, but Casimir placed a warm hand over the top of hers. It was like a blanket over her bursting mind. Yet another thing she didn't understand.

The bell rang again as Mariette was seated on a single chair before the dais, her head hanging in shame.

'Mariette Clarence of Briarfort, you stand accused of treason of the highest order,' called a herald.

Bleak glanced at Eydis. The winter queen wore no splendid gown today. Instead, she had donned a tailored black tunic and pants, with a dagger strapped to each thigh. Her expression was stormy, and Bleak could have sworn she felt a glimmer of Eydis' magic pouring off her. Beside the queen, her wolfdog Bear's teeth were bared at the traitor before them.

The herald cleared his throat. 'Mariette Clarence, you are here to answer for the following crimes: theft of crown property, namely a jar of toxic mist seized from Moredon Tower, and releasing this mist south of Wildenhaven, where it threatened to destroy our capital and its people. You are also charged with sedition, for selling our council's secrets to the enemy, the false queen Ines.'

As the herald listed Mariette's crimes, Bleak watched the traitor closely. Her head was not hung in shame anymore, nor was she looking at Queen Eydis. Mariette had eyes for only one person in the hall: Nicolai, the queen's lover. Was it in Bleak's head? Was she reading into something that wasn't there? Whatever it was made her uncomfortable, more uncomfortable than the trial panning out before her now.

'Your crimes directly correlated with the events of the snowslide battle, where numerous lives were lost from Havennesse forces and allied forces alike. Three hundred and forty-two souls left this realm as a result of your actions. There is no telling what damage your treachery will cost us in the months to come.' The herald stared Mariette down, and Bleak wondered whom he had lost in the battle. Wildenhaven was small enough that everyone had known someone who hadn't returned that day. A wave of sadness washed over Bleak as Petra's warrior cry echoed in her mind.

'How do you plead?'

Mariette looked around the hall and then back to the dais, her gaze falling once more on Nicolai. 'Guilty,' she said.

The crowd roared, stomping their boots against the ground. But Bleak caught Eydis' subtle glance between her lover and the traitor. She had noticed it, too. Were the rumours true? Did the kennel master have feelings for the stoic Havennesse general? Or was it more than that?

'Do you wish to explain your actions to our queen?'

'Not to our queen.'

Eydis' expression didn't change. 'Since you won't deign to speak to me, why not explain to the court, then? They have the power to vote against my sentencing. Perhaps they wish to hear your story? Tell them what led you to make your ... choices.'

'I ...' Mariette looked at her feet. 'I thought I could be more. More than a kennel master. More than just a servant.'

'Servant? You were part of this family, part of this court. Don't you ever tell me you were treated like a mere servant,' Eydis said coldly.

Tears tracked down Mariette's face. 'She ... Ines ... She offered a way to make things different.'

'She makes things different, alright,' Eydis sneered. 'She wants to slaughter thousands of people. She wants to rob them of their free will. Is that what you wanted?'

Mariette fell silent.

'When were you last in contact with the false queen?' Eydis demanded. 'Should you provide us with information on her whereabouts, her numbers, her intentions, this may make your sentence more favourable.'

It was clear Eydis wanted the traitor gone, but for a chance in this war, for any sort of edge, she would put her own feelings aside – that much Bleak knew about the winter monarch.

Mariette lifted her chin. 'I have nothing for you.'

Eydis took a steadying breath. Bleak heard the threats of torture and imprisonment cross the queen's mind. That there were numerous ways information could be pried from an unwilling person. They were strong thoughts to reach Bleak in the gallery, strong enough to penetrate the protective talisman Eydis was no doubt wearing. However, Eydis didn't voice these notions. Perhaps she was different, or perhaps she wished to keep that side of her reign in the dark – there was no way of knowing. Instead, she clasped her hands in front of her.

'Then you are nothing to us, Mariette. You have betrayed your people, your home and your queen. You are the reason loyal Havennessians, Valians and Oremians lost their lives. You are the reason we almost didn't survive.'

'You *won't* survive. Not now, Eydis. She's too powerful. She's —'

'I hereby sentence you to death.' Eydis' voice rang out across the hall and was greeted with a thunderous cheer. 'You will be taken to the highest peak of the Kildaholm Ranges. You will be tied down and left to die. You will receive no burial honours. No last rites. You will leave this realm a traitor, alone and reviled.'

The crowd was insatiable.

'Get her out of my sight,' Eydis said, and left the dais.

LATER, when the hall had emptied out and the long tables had been returned to their usual places, Bleak found a quiet corner. She tried to shrink into the wall so no one would pay her any heed as she observed. She longed to

practise her knots, but her rope was still missing. A decanter of wine sat nearby, but she gritted her teeth. There was so much else to think about: the markings spreading across so many of them, the red flowers that seemed to follow her across continents, and now Mariette's death sentence. And then there were the other matters ... Casimir and their people, Bren ... and of course, Athene's departure from the kindred. Bleak had the sinking feeling that one more thing might send them all toppling over to their doom.

'There you are,' Sahara said by way of greeting, sliding onto the bench opposite Bleak.

'We've been trying to find you,' Geraad added, sitting beside Sahara.

'Well, here I am.' Bleak eyed the rebel suspiciously. 'Does this have anything to do with you wanting to return to Oremere?'

'Eydis told you?' Sahara asked.

Bleak shrugged. 'Mentioned it.'

'It's true.' Geraad clasped his hands together before him. 'The time has come for us to return. Our people – *your* people need you.'

'Oh? Since when?'

'Look,' he said. 'I'm sorry for being a grumpy bastard when we met. I didn't know who you were. Not until I saw you with the panthers did I even imagine ...'

Bleak sighed and waved Casimir over. 'This is new to me,' she told them. 'But my understanding of Oremere's ruling system was that it was done as a team. So whatever you need to tell me, or ask me, it should be done with Casimir here, too. He is, after all, a Prince of Oremere.'

'King, if we win,' Geraad interjected.

'That's a big *if*,' Casimir said, approaching the head of the table.

Bleak turned to Geraad and Sahara. 'Well?'

'The rebels mean to go back,' Sahara allowed. 'We have to unite the clans and make a stand against her. Every day she gets closer to discovering the colonies and exterminating all surviving Oremians.'

Geraad cleared his throat. 'We want you to come with us. Both of you.'

Casimir gave Bleak a quick glance before answering. 'That's not possible.'

'What?'

'Not right now.' Casimir pulled the neck of his shirt down to reveal the dark whorls inked across his skin. 'There are other matters we need to attend to first.'

‘But —’

‘There is no but, Geraad,’ Casimir said. ‘No doubt there will be hundreds, if not thousands of Ashai affected by the same affliction in Oremere, not to mention the Ashai folk here suffering. We cannot come to them empty-handed.’

Sahara looked from Casimir to Bleak, frowning. ‘If that’s your decision ...’

Bleak sighed. She missed the days when it was just her and Sahara trekking across Oremere. She missed that friendship, and the Valian’s sense of humour. Since they’d reached Wildenhaven, there was nothing but talk of war and destruction, and it had sapped the life out of everything.

But she met Sahara’s gaze. ‘Casimir is right,’ she said. ‘These markings are part of a larger plan, I know it. And it ... it’s too simple that we’d just die once they cover our skin. There’s something more to it, I feel it. And we have to know what that is before we face her.’

‘But you will join us there once you do?’ Geraad pressed.

A mop of fair hair caught Bleak’s eye and she stopped listening. Bren stood at the far end of their table, waiting.

Casimir got to his feet. ‘The rest of this discussion can wait,’ he told them.

Sahara frowned but followed suit, nudging Geraad to do the same, then left.

Bren approached Bleak, hesitating before sitting down beside her. He looked like the Bren she used to know: tall and muscular, his wintry-blue eyes boring into hers. But he didn’t smile when he looked at her. Those days were over.

‘Are ya going to leave?’ he asked.

The word he didn’t say was the loudest of all: *again*.

Bleak bit her lip. He was here. Talking to her. ‘I don’t know,’ she said finally.

‘Has it happened to ya?’

‘Has what happened?’

‘What they’re all talking about – the markings on the Ashai.’

She nodded.

His expression didn’t change.

‘Will you and Casimir find a cure?’

‘We’re trying.’

‘Try harder.’

Bleak’s head snapped up. ‘Bren ...’

‘I saw something.’

‘What?’

‘I saw something happen to one of the Ashai who had those markings.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was in the village with Tilly.’

The mention of Tilly’s name stung, but Bleak swallowed her hurt. She nodded and waited for Bren to continue.

‘Tilly went to check on something at the armoury and I wandered down to the stables. I saw someone on the ground. I tried to call for help, but no one could hear through the wind. She was in so much pain, Bleak. And the markings had spread all over, even her face. Then she stopped. It was as though she was under a spell. The markings moved, they came together, right here.’ He put a hand on the centre of his chest. ‘It was her face ... The one we saw that day all those years ago in the northern waters, the one that she brands people with.’

Bleak realised she’d been holding her breath. She exhaled shakily. ‘Then what happened?’

‘Something left her body.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know what it was. It looked like mist shot out of her chest and disappeared into the air. I can’t explain it more than that.’

‘Gods,’ Bleak muttered. ‘When did this happen?’

‘An hour or so ago. I tried to tell ya sooner, but the sentencing ... I couldn’t get inside.’

Bleak nodded. ‘Where is the Ashai now?’

‘Tilly and I moved her to one of the villagers’ homes for the time being. Tilly is still there. I said I’d come and find ya.’

BLEAK STOOD WITH CASIMIR, Henri, Dash and Eydis in the villager’s cottage. The sight before them chilled Bleak to the bone, more than all the ice in Havennesse. The body of the Ashai woman was laid out on a wooden table, her shirt unbuttoned enough to reveal the face of Ines inked into her skin. The rest of her was now free of the markings, as though they had formed together to create the one horrific image on her chest.

Bleak stepped closer. It was worse than that. Because around the woman's lifeless frame, the now infamous red flowers bloomed. She plucked one from the table and twisted it between her fingers.

'They bloom whenever Ines gains power,' she murmured.

Casimir took the flower from her, shaking his head. 'There are *thousands* of these in Oremere. Tens of thousands.'

'These flowers,' Dash murmured beside Eydis. 'They ... they grow in the maze at Heathton Castle. When I was a boy, they led me to the heart of the maze. I didn't realise it at the time, but there's a statue of *her* there.'

Eydis pinched the bridge of her nose. 'The bitch is everywhere.'

'And what about what Bren said? About the mist coming out of her?'

'I'll wager that wasn't mist,' Casimir replied. 'My guess is that it's Ashai magic. And Ines has taken it for herself.'

Suddenly, the body on the table convulsed. The woman's eyes flew open and she gasped for air. Bleak jumped back, heart hammering, gripping Casimir's arm in shock. But the woman sat up and looked right at her, her eyes glazed over. She swung her legs over the side of the table and reached for Bleak.

'Are you alright?' Bleak asked, stepping forward.

The woman peered at her intently and Bleak took another step towards her. Bleak's heart ached for her. What had Ines done to her? The woman looked down at the face inked onto her chest and gave a quiet moan of pain.

'Here,' Bleak said. 'Let me help —'

The woman launched herself at Bleak, her hands gripping the column of her throat. Bleak gasped as the woman tried to squeeze the life out of her.

A splintering noise sounded and the woman suddenly crumpled to the floor. Henri stood behind her, holding a broken ceramic bowl. 'What in Rheyah's name was that about?'

Hand massaging her throat, Bleak stared at the Valian.

'What happened to her?' Eydis addressed Casimir as he crouched beside the now lifeless woman.

The Ashai prince peered at Ines' face inked onto the woman's skin. 'She's dead. I think that was the last of the Ashai magic leaving her and trying to find its new host ... Ines,' Casimir replied.

Bleak shook her head. 'That can't be right.'

'There's no other explanation, Bleak.'

'But that means ...'

Casimir was nodding. He looked from her to Dash. ‘That means those affected by these markings await the same fate.’

Bleak gave a hollow laugh as she surveyed the red blooms. ‘Tens of thousands of them, Casimir. We’re doomed.’

‘Not if we find the herbs to stop the markings spreading,’ Henri said with a glance at the dark swirls on Casimir’s neck.

‘You said you don’t even know where they are.’

‘Then it’s time we spoke to Allehra. Properly.’

THEY FOUND the Mother Matriarch bearing down on her palms at the oak table in the council room, poring over a map of Valia.

Bleak followed Henri and the others into the room and took her usual place standing by the window. She could feel Henri’s magic surging, her own prickling in response, but thankfully, all those here wore talismans.

Henri stood opposite her mother. ‘We need to know more about the Valian herbs. The ones we could use to treat the plague markings.’ It wasn’t a request. The warrior queen’s voice was steely. Bleak didn’t blame her; her own patience was wearing thin, too.

‘I told you, the herbs didn’t survive the fire,’ Allehra said.

‘And I told you, you *don’t know that*. You were so badly burned, it’s possible that you’re wrong,’ Henri retorted.

‘Henri, for once in your —’

‘Get Lyse,’ Bleak interjected. ‘The groundling? And maybe Maman as well. They know the gardens of Valia better than anyone.’

‘We don’t need groundlings,’ Allehra said. ‘I’m perfectly capable of remembering where these herbs are. And I know that they were destroyed.’ She pointed to a section of Valia on the map. ‘Right there, that’s where they grew. And that part of Valia is gone.’

Bleak watched Henri. The Valian queen was frowning at her mother. And Bleak knew why. Something was off about Allehra.

‘Send for the groundlings,’ Henri allowed.

Allehra glared at her, while Eydis rang a bell and sent a servant to find Lyse and Maman. Over the last few days, Henri had lost her grip on her temper. Her usually calculated words were now full of raw rage, coming down on those around her like a hot whip.

‘I don’t see why you won’t take my word for it,’ Allehra pressed. ‘I was queen of our lands once. You don’t think I know every inch of that forest?’

Glass shattered.

Henri’s magic had shot out and knocked several goblets from the table. ‘Are you saying I don’t?’ she yelled. ‘We need to be sure. We need to overturn every stone if we want even the slightest chance in this war.’

‘Henri ...’ Bleak cautioned. But the Valian didn’t look at her. Her glare was fixed on her mother, the tension palpable. Bleak could still feel her magic simmering at the surface, ready to be unleashed again.

The others in the room said nothing, clearly not wanting to stoke the fire of an already volatile situation.

There was a quiet knock. ‘You sent for us?’ said a timid voice from the door. The groundlings Lyse and Maman stood at the threshold.

With a resigned sigh, Henri ushered them in and gestured to the map. ‘We need to know if there are herbs in Valia that will cure the Ashai plague markings.’

The women approached the table and shared a glance between themselves.

‘There are plenty of plants in Valia that may help,’ Maman said. ‘*Cure* is a strong word. But we can undoubtedly slow the process at least.’

Allehra stepped forward. ‘Those parts of Valia are gone.’

Lyse bowed her head. ‘Not all of them, Mother Matriarch. And the herbs we speak of are not contained to just one area. The groundlings farm out in the Sticks, too.’

Bleak frowned. It was unlike Allehra to be mistaken about Valia. Perhaps her brush with Arden’s mist and her own Ashai fire had been worse than they’d imagined.

‘See?’ Henri said, a muscle twitching in her jaw. ‘You’re sure of this?’

Lyse nodded, looking to Maman for reassurance.

‘She’s right,’ the groundling elder said.

‘Can you mark the places on the map?’

‘Of course,’ Maman said.

Allehra threw her hands up in the air. ‘What good am I, then?’ She turned on her heel and left.

Lyse’s eyes were wide. ‘We meant no offence.’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ Bleak said. She started after Allehra. Something wasn’t right.

Henri, Sahara and the others were behind her as she chased after the Mother Matriarch.

‘Allehra,’ she called out. ‘Allehra!’

Allehra burst into the great hall and skidded to a halt in front of Rion.

The teerah panther bared his teeth and growled. The sound sent a rush of goosebumps up Bleak’s arm. She hadn’t heard him use *that* growl in some time.

And then she heard: *One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...*

That gods-damned counting again. Bleak whirled around, her eyes finally latching onto the source. It was the bedraggled Ashai woman who continually wandered up to the towers from the village. She stared at Allehra. And when she blinked, Bleak swore she saw a momentary flash of odd eyes.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...

The woman lifted her hand and, with a single, trembling finger, pointed at Allehra.

As if in answer, Rion growled again.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ Allehra demanded, whirling around to face Bleak. ‘Have I not been humiliated enough today?’

Bleak frowned.

‘Bleak, what’s going on?’ Sahara’s voice sounded.

‘I’m sorry,’ Bleak said to her, before addressing Allehra. ‘Are you wearing Valian herbs?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Would you mind taking them off? Just for a moment?’

‘What?’

Sahara came forward and stood beside Allehra. ‘Bleak, what are you doing?’

‘Can I have the talisman?’ Bleak asked, holding out her hand.

Sahara folded her arms across her chest, rare fury clouding her face. ‘You need to show Allehra the respect she deserves. *Now.*’

Henri stepped forward and Bleak’s heart sank. Henri could afford to speak to Allehra in whatever way she wished, but Bleak ... Bleak had no standing here. She braced herself for the full extent of Henri’s wrath.

‘Hand over the talisman.’ Henri’s voice was firm.

Bleak’s eyes went wide. *What?*

Henri came to stand beside her.

Allehra scoffed. 'This is *ridiculous*.'

'We're waiting,' Henri said simply.

Looking around in furious disbelief, Allehra pulled a chain from around her neck, revealing a leather pouch at the end. She lifted it over her head.

A flood of thoughts came crashing into Bleak. Images, dark and desperate, pummelled into one another like waves against a ship in a storm. Two children. An array of horrific instruments laid out before them. A dungeon, cold and damp. A whirlpool of conflicting feelings, clawing to the surface in a sea of heinous acts. Blood. Rivers of it, running through the rivets of a cobblestone floor. A laugh, soft and delicate, ringing through a row of cells like eerie music. And a face, a freckled face, beautiful and terrifying.

Bleak staggered back, clutching Henri's arm and panting. What she'd seen ... It could never be unseen. And the woman standing before them ...

'That's not Allehra,' she said.

CHAPTER 10

Henri watched, stunned, as Allehra bolted for the door.
'Seize her!' Eydis cried.

But for the first time in her life, Henri couldn't move her feet. Her training didn't kick in. She was frozen to the spot. As was Sahara.

It was Dash who brought the imposter back, his blade pressed keenly to her throat as he forced her to kneel before Eydis. There was no question in the young man's umber eyes, only a fierce loyalty to the winter queen. He held his captive steady.

'Bleak?' Eydis prompted.

Bleak stepped forward. She, too, was in a daze, looking from the mad Ashai back to the woman claiming to be the Mother Matriarch of Valia. Bleak picked up the talisman that had been dropped in the escape attempt and turned it over in her hands.

'This is Allehra's talisman,' she said slowly. 'But that ... that's not Allehra.'

Henri studied the woman wearing their mother's face. There had been a reason she'd felt uneasy around her, a reason she hadn't wanted to divulge plans in front of her. And this was it. Some instinctual part of her had known.

'Who are you?' she ground out.

But the woman raised her chin defiantly and said nothing.

'Lyse,' Bleak was saying. 'Do you think you could make up one of those tonics? The ones that strip Ashai magic and enchantments?'

The groundling nodded.

Henri met Bleak's gaze with a silent question. The mist dweller clearly had her suspicions.

'I think this is all part of an elaborate enchantment,' Bleak said. 'The tonic will strip her of that kind of magic, and we will see her for who she really is. Right, Casimir?'

The Ashai leader considered this. 'It should.'

Henri nodded, trying to ignore her magic simmering just below her skin. 'Good.'

She watched as they clamped shackles around the imposter's wrists and ankles, and Eydis' guards cleared the rest of the hall. All the while, Dash guarded the prisoner.

Swinton would be proud, Henri thought. She watched as they dragged the pretender to her feet, waiting for Lyse to return. Henri glanced at Sahara; her sister's face was white. Whatever Henri was feeling, she knew Sahara was feeling worse. She had accepted Allehra without question upon her arrival to Wildenhaven, perhaps desperate for a sense of family after all this time. She'd stood up for her when Henri had questioned her motives; she'd shown a ferocious loyalty to an imposter. Henri could only imagine the whirlpool of conflicting emotions now spiralling within her sister.

'Do I know you?' Henri heard Bleak ask.

The Angovian was standing before the mad Ashai woman, peering into her unfocused hazel eyes.

'Bleak,' Casimir said from the girl's side. 'She's beyond our help.'

'No, she's not. She knew Allehra *wasn't* Allehra. There's something about her ...'

Henri approached them, the sight of Bleak tugging at something in her chest. 'What do you need?' she asked. The girl looked distressed: her odd eyes were wild, her hair had escaped its tie and hung loose around her face. She was clutching the Ashai woman's hands between hers, as though this mad person had an answer to a longstanding question.

'She keeps counting,' Bleak murmured. 'I can hear it.'

'Counting?' Henri could hear nothing. The mad Ashai was staring silently at the imposter. After years imprisoned at Moredon Tower, the woman was impossibly thin and gaunt, her skin tinged grey.

'Come on.' Henri tugged Bleak's sleeve. 'You're exhausted.' She led Bleak to a nearby seat, Casimir not far behind. She threw him a questioning look, but the Ashai leader simply shrugged. Bleak looked as though she

hadn't slept in days, dark circles shadowing her eyes. Henri felt for her, she really did. She knew what this war was doing to them all.

The Ashai woman ducked away and made for the door. Henri caught her by the upper arm.

'Who are you?' she said. The question was met with yet another blank stare. The woman shook off Henri's grip and left.

Is she as mad as we think? Henri wondered, gazing after the figure as she disappeared into the falling snow. She shivered.

Sahara came to Henri's side as Lyse returned, holding a vial of tonic.

They watched as the guards held the imposter and forced the tonic down her throat. Henri suppressed a gasp of horror. The woman began to transform. Allehra's face contorted, warping into a grotesque shape and colour as her skin was shed. Allehra's features seemed to melt, peeling away from the bones below in what looked like an agonising transition. Henri felt like she was going to be sick. The figure before them writhed around in the firm grip of the guards, her body convulsing. Finally she stilled, staring back at them with utter hatred. Her white-blond hair was long and lank, unbound around her pinched face. Scars littered her blotchy skin all over.

'Bleak was right,' Casimir said. 'That's not Allehra.'

'Who is she, then?' Henri asked.

'That –' Sahara reached across and squeezed Henri's hand – 'is Farlah. Ines' general.'

Henri's blood went cold.

'And if that's Farlah,' Sahara continued, 'we can only guess where Allehra really is.'

Henri locked eyes with her twin and swallowed, hard. 'Arden,' she said. 'Arden has her, Sahara.'

CHAPTER 11

Chief Yaridha's words were a constant murmur in Swinton's head as they trekked once more through the treacherous Janhallow Desert. They were on the run yet again, this time from a unit of Arden's silent guards. A neighbouring village had alerted them just in time. Swinton and Fi had grabbed the young royal couple and bolted, with Yaridha and Taakeem promising to do everything within their power to hold off the enemy as long as they could.

Now, as they pushed on through the blazing heat of the midday sun, Swinton couldn't help his mind returning to the vision he'd had back in Belbarrow – Olena's body being swallowed by those blood-red blooms. He wasn't going to let that happen. He pulled Xander's reins to halt, the scorching sand shifting beneath the poor horse's hooves.

'Keep up,' he said, twisting in the saddle to face Fi, Olena and Nazuri.

They hadn't had time to prepare. Now, they were suffering for it. The princess' face was red with burn, her lips cracked and raw. And although the prince was a native Battalonian, he wasn't faring much better. Swinton himself was gritting his teeth through the discomfort, his own skin growing tight beneath the sun's unforgiving rays. Only Fi seemed unaffected.

'We have to keep moving,' Swinton told them as their horses pulled into line beside Xander.

'Commander, we're trying.'

'Princess, with all due respect, every time we delay, the silent guards draw closer. And if they catch up ...'

'We are no match for them in our current state,' Fi finished for him.

Swinton nodded. 'The captain —' though that title seemed inadequate now — 'is right. We cannot risk being set upon out here.'

They continued on, and when the royal couple was out of earshot, Swinton leaned in towards Fi. 'Brother, we will not make it like this.'

Fi's gaze was sombre. 'I know. But there is nothing —'

'Fi ...' Swinton remembered the note in their tent.

'What is it?'

There was still so much he didn't know about the Baron of Battalon. But there was no time.

'Get us to the east coast.'

For a moment, the soft swish of sand beneath reluctant hooves was the only sound.

Fi took a deep breath. 'Alright, then, old friend.' The Battalonian clicked his tongue quietly. 'Follow me.'

SWINTON STAYED by Olena's side, though she had no trouble riding in the dark. Swinton realised with a jolt that this was her norm. No wonder she moved with such ease, with no falter in her direction. They cantered across the flatland. The horizon was now nothing but more darkness meeting the night sky.

No one spoke. Only the click of Fiore's tongue sounded, telling them where to lead their horses. To Swinton, it felt as though they were at the realm's edge, about to fall off into the abyss beyond. He was robbed of his sight, and the immense vulnerability he felt squeezed at his chest. But they were in Fi's hands now, and his brother-in-arms, whatever his past, would not lead them astray.

The rhythm of the ride and the hooves beating atop the sand was a song Swinton knew all too well now. His eyelids grew heavy despite the constant jolting in the saddle. His body ached, both from the nonstop riding and his injuries from the clan. He'd still not had a full night's rest, and sleep called to him, luring him under.

THE MUSIC WAS unlike anything he'd ever heard. One glorious note, light and sweet, filling the night's air. Then, a melody began: so full, so complex

and tantalising, Swinton stopped in his tracks. The sound started to build, slowly at first, powerful yet quiet, lifting up, up, up. Swinton didn't know where he was. His surroundings were muted and unimportant. But as the music dipped and rose towards its crescendo like waves in the sea, his feet moved of their own accord. He didn't know where he was going, only that he needed more of this life-giving symphony. He was gently pulled towards it, and with each step closer his chest swelled with relief, contentment, understanding ... This melody was his purpose, what he'd been waiting for his whole life. Nothing mattered more than this. Nothing —

‘COMMANDER?’ a voice called. ‘Commander, you’re going to fall.’

Swinton woke with a jerk, finding himself slipping in the saddle. Beside him in the darkness was the faint outline of Prince Nazuri.

‘Are you alright, Commander?’

Swinton cleared his throat. ‘I’m fine, thank you, Your Highness.’

The prince hesitated, and then seemed to decide not to push him further. For that Swinton was grateful. Suddenly chilled in the cool night air, he re-positioned himself in the saddle, the note of music still faintly stroking his mind. But it was he who had fallen behind this time. He urged Xander on.

The desert was still a sea of black before them. He had no notion of how much ground they had covered, or how close behind Arden’s silent guards were. He shuddered at the thought and prayed salvation awaited them at the east coast. Even if they had not had the enemy at their back, the Janhallow Desert was still a deathtrap. The blistering heat beneath the sun, the cold beneath the millions of stars, and the vipers beneath the shifting sand. Swinton shuddered again. One encounter with those deadly creatures was more than enough for a lifetime, in his opinion.

‘Stop,’ Olena’s voice sounded suddenly.

Swinton nudged Xander closer to her. ‘Highness, we —’

‘There’s someone else here,’ she said.

Swinton pulled up and listened. He could hear nothing but the huffing of their horses.

‘It’s just us.’

‘Shhh.’

The four of them were silent.

Swinton held his breath, straining to hear what he’d failed to before.

And there it was. A single set of hooves in the sand. Slow and clumsy. Then, a soft voice muttered a curse.

‘Therese?’ Olena asked into the night.

Swinton nearly jumped out of his skin. *Therese? What in the realm is she doing out here?*

The sound grew closer. Swinton could see the faintest outline of a figure on a small horse.

‘Your Highness.’ Therese’s voice was timid.

‘What are you doing here?’ The words flew from Swinton’s mouth. The last thing they needed was another person slowing them down. He could tell her horse was old, probably stolen. The poor beast was panting loudly.

‘I ... ran away ...’ she stammered. ‘The dusk before last. My father was determined to get us back to Ellest. I ... I couldn’t go back there. I wouldn’t. I thought I could make my way to Port Whelton and buy passage to Hawk End or Floraton. But I got lost. Luckily, I heard you in the night, and I’ve been trying to catch up ever since.’

‘Are you mad? You could have —’

‘Commander,’ Olena’s voice cut in. ‘We don’t have time for this. She’s here now. She comes with us.’

What? How was he supposed to protect them both?

‘Princess Olena is right,’ Fi allowed. ‘We need to go. They’re gaining on us as we stand here.’

Swinton didn’t move.

‘*Dimitri,*’ Fi snapped.

‘Then she rides with me,’ Swinton heard himself say.

A FIERY RED dawn broke upon the Janhallow Desert, like blood spilling across the dunes. Fiore led them further east, but his expression told Swinton all he needed to know. There was not enough distance between them and the silent guards of Heathton. Arden’s men would catch them, and when they did ... it would be a fate worse than death.

Therese shifted in the saddle in front of Swinton, her back pressed to his chest. She hadn’t spoken to him since they’d left her old horse and forged on through the rest of the night. He’d been harsh with her, he knew, but it was only because he was scared for her. This trek ... He didn’t know where

it would take them, and he was already responsible for three lives other than his own.

Still, he thought. I should apologise. Explain.

‘Can anyone else smell that?’ Olena said, lifting her face to the sun.

‘Smell what?’ Fi asked, sniffing.

But Swinton had learned his lesson. Olena’s senses were sharper than all of the rest combined. He closed his eyes and inhaled.

The odour was faint, but it was definitely there. The same chemical tang he’d smelled in Belbarrow not too long ago.

Swinton’s heart sank. ‘Firestorm.’

‘It can’t be,’ Fi muttered, scanning the horizon.

‘One must be burning close,’ Swinton replied, bringing Xander to stand alongside Fi’s mount. ‘I’ll never forget that smell.’

Fi swore.

Swinton didn’t even reprimand him. He was right to be worried. A unit of silent guards on their tail, and a firestorm looming out of sight.

‘We’ll have to stop soon,’ Nazuri said, leaning down to stroke his horse’s neck.

‘They’ll catch us when we do,’ Fi told him.

‘Then shouldn’t we have stayed with the people? Safety in numbers?’

‘I sent for help.’

‘Help? I don’t see any.’

‘Zuri.’ Princess Olena’s voice was firm. ‘That won’t fix things.’

The prince sighed. ‘You’re right. My apologies, Captain.’

‘No need, Highness.’

They continued on through the sandy plains, the sun growing hotter as it rose. Swinton’s shirt was already damp with sweat, and he could see the hair sticking to the nape of Therese’s neck. But there was nothing for it; the heat was trapped between their bodies. Fiore led them stoically across the rust-coloured dunes. To Swinton, everything looked the same. The horizon remained unchanged in the distance, and it felt like they were making no progress at all.

Until they came to a sudden halt at a gully: a giant crater in the desert surface, vast and unforgiving. Heat came off the sand in waves.

‘The East Sea is just beyond this,’ Fi said, looking out across the dipping stretch of land. ‘We have to hurry.’

Swinton squeezed Xander's sides with his heels. The poor beast. Xander was carrying double the load and yet he hadn't slowed. He was faring better than the other horses.

They started down the crest in the dunes. Therese leaned further back into Swinton as the sand slid beneath them.

'Stop,' Olena said.

Xander nearly lost his footing in the sand as Swinton brought him up short. He turned to the princess. 'What is it?'

But the princess didn't speak. Instead, she jumped down from her horse. Holding up her hand so no one followed, she took a few tentative steps downhill and stopped.

Swinton had to bite his tongue. Every second they weren't moving, Arden's force was gaining on them. But then Olena did something he didn't expect. She crouched and placed a palm flat on the sand.

'What's she doing?' Therese whispered.

'No idea.'

Swinton saw Nazuri and Fi exchange confused looks as well. At least he wasn't the only one who was clueless.

Finally, Princess Olena stood and returned to her horse, mounting it without any assistance.

'Captain Murphadias?'

'Yes, Your Highness?'

'We go around.'

'What? Your Highness, we can't do that – we'll lose too much time. We'll —'

'That wasn't a suggestion,' she said sharply. 'We go around.'

Without thinking, Swinton's gaze slid to Prince Nazuri, waiting for him to challenge her. But the prince looked only at Olena.

They would go around.

As they cantered around the edge of the gully, Swinton couldn't help but look over his shoulder, waiting for Arden's masked warriors to appear, charging for them in the near distance.

'Dimitri,' Therese said under her breath.

Swinton ignored the small thrill that passed through him. 'Yes?'

'I know there's nothing to be done, but ... I'm ... I'm scared.'

He adjusted his grip on Xander's reins and kept his eyes on Fi ahead. 'That's good,' he told her. 'Means you're not stupid.'

Fi and Olena pressed their horses into a gallop, leading the group around the crater. It wouldn't be enough. The princess' decision had cost them the only time they had had on their side, their only edge. And now ... it would be too late.

Finally they reached the other side. The horses were spent. White spittle foamed at their mouths and their steps were sluggish. As the finality of their failure dawned on Swinton, Arden's unit of silent guards appeared on the opposite side of the gully. Although still dressed in grey from head to toe, they were different to those Swinton had known at Heathton. Once, they had worn a simple strip of fabric across the lower half of their face, but now ... a white mask covered the entirety of each face, and the horses they rode were black thoroughbred Ellestian stallions. Swinton's attention snagged on the leather whips coiled at each man's hip. These were no ordinary silent guards.

These were the masked warriors of Oremere.

'Highnesses,' he said, turning to Olena. 'You need to take Xander and make a run for it. The captain and I, we'll buy you as much time as we can.'

Fiore was nodding, already off his horse.

'No.'

'Your Highness, now is not the time to argue.'

'Now is the *perfect* time to argue,' Olena snapped. 'If there is a realm left to be a queen in one day, then I want to be *the right kind* of queen. The queen I imagine would never run, would never leave her friends behind to die for her.'

Her friends.

Across the gully, the masked warriors started the descent into the crater on horseback. This was it. The desperation clawed at Swinton. It was his duty to protect Olena, and not just for Dash. For the realm. She was the ruler this godsforsaken place needed. She could make things right. Swinton swallowed the lump in his throat and steadied the tremor in his hand on the hilt of his sword. He'd failed them, failed them all. No matter how hard he and Fi fought today, they would die, and the prince, Olena and Therese ... He couldn't bear the thought of what might happen to them.

He looked to Therese. 'Stay with Princess Olena,' he said, helping her down from Xander. She pushed the damp hair from her brow and her eyes, full of panic, met his as she nodded. He unsheathed his sword. Fiore and

Nazuri did the same. Another scrape of metal sounded. Olena had unsheathed two daggers, and had handed one to Therese.

There was a cry from below. The masked warriors burst into a charge across the sandy basin. The stallions' hooves hammered against the ground; the beat of a thunderous war drum. And in the light of the blazing sun, the steel of their raised weapons glinted.

Swinton's heart nearly punched through his chest as the gap between them and the barbarous unit closed.

Then, a slither of movement caught Swinton's eye. It was subtle, camouflaged with the sand ...

There it was again. A flicker. Something sliding. Down the sides of the gully. An ominous, unified shift.

A viper, no – *vipers*.

Someone screamed.

Hundreds – *thousands* of black vipers burst from the sand. Vicious and sleek, their dark scales shimmered in the sun, while their predatory gazes were focused. Their prey was within striking distance. The vipers closed in from both sides. And attacked from beneath, a huge nest disturbed in the heart of the crater.

The stallions reared in terror, throwing their riders from their saddles, and bolting. With a collective hiss, the serpents surged forward, moving as one enormous mass, coiling around fallen warriors, striking at those still standing with ferocious, poison-filled fangs.

Their screams carried up the gully. High-pitched shrieks for gods and mothers pierced the air as razor-sharp fangs stabbed flesh again and again. The long black vipers squeezed around twitching bodies, crushing whatever life was left until the final breath had been stolen.

Swinton watched open-mouthed from safety above. The sight was as horrifying as it was triumphant. The vipers had devoured the force of masked warriors. Now, all that remained were the writhing black creatures, hissing and striking at each other.

Exhaling a shaky breath, Swinton turned to the women. Therese had positioned herself in front of Olena. Her knuckles had turned white as she gripped the princess' dagger; her mouth was slack. Princess Olena held the other dagger, and faced the carnage before them with a straight back, her clouded gaze blank.

'Princess,' Swinton managed. 'How ... how did you know?'

A small smile tugged at Olena's mouth, and she rested her free hand against her horse's neck. 'He was uneasy,' she said. 'Dash always told me that if a horse is uneasy, there is something else underfoot. So I tried to find what it was. The sand ... I could feel it vibrating beneath my hand.'

Swinton glanced at Fi. His friend and the prince beside him were similarly astonished. 'That's amazing.'

But the smile faded from Olena's face. 'I can smell it again,' she said.

'Smell wha—' But Swinton smelled it, too. The familiar chemical tang, stronger than before, stinging the insides of his nostrils. And this time, he felt the heat that went with it. Dread churning in his stomach, he turned from the gully of vipers towards the blood-red horizon.

Three enormous towers of swirling flame were hurtling right for them.

'Dimi!' Fi shouted.

Swinton whirled around to see a glimmer in the sand, where a man in a tattered tailcoat appeared.

CHAPTER 12

*I*t was up to Bleak now. She stood in front of the iron bars and peered in. The eyes that glared back with defiance were cold and sinister, but Bleak reached out with her magic and Farlah flinched.

Bleak swallowed her fear and closed her eyes. She couldn't hesitate ...

SHE FREE-FELL into Farlah's mind, dark and deep. When she reached the bottom, the passages were both like and unlike all those Bleak had entered before. They had the same glossy black stone halls and doorways of Allehra's mind, but these ... these were tainted with a different darkness, as though a sickness crept along the walls.

Screams sounded from within the rooms as Bleak passed. She didn't look. Didn't want to know what sort of pain Farlah had inflicted upon innocent people all over the realm. She had to find Allehra, the real Allehra. Bleak followed her instincts, followed the tether that seemed to pull her through the insanity of Farlah's mind. The woman was unhinged, and the joy that sang from her in those torture chambers made Bleak's skin crawl. She didn't let herself linger in any one place. She had to find Allehra, and she had to get out before the madness took her, too.

The screams became louder. Bleak cupped her hands over her ears. She didn't know how much longer she could take it. Then, she heard it.

Gods. Not again.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ... The counting blended with the screams. Tears pricked Bleak's eyes as the invisible cord at her navel tugged her towards something she knew she didn't want to see.

One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nin—

Bleak tried to fight the force that was bringing her to a dimly lit doorway, but she had no control here.

One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nin—

Bleak recognised the cells of Moredon Tower instantly, and the woman tied between the flogging posts. The mad Ashai from Wildenhaven. Only younger. A lot younger. Her ashy hair was filthy and her slight body hung limp in the chains. Her back had been whipped to a bloody pulp, and she'd bitten through her lip. Farlah stood behind her. White-blonde hair was slicked back into a thick bun at the base of her skull, and she wore a simple grey uniform that was taut across broad shoulders; the Ashai's blood was spattered across her front. Farlah's strong, dark brows arched cruelly as she surveyed her victim, while red dripped from the whip in her hand.

One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nin—

Was this what the woman had been counting back at Wildenhaven all this time? Her lashings? Had Farlah whipped her so brutally that it had sent her mad? And why, now, did she look suddenly familiar? Bleak could have sworn she'd seen this younger version of the woman before. It was the pointed chin and —

Bleak was tugged in another direction. Allehra, she reminded herself. I can't leave without finding Allehra. It was all too easy to get lost in the depths of someone's mind. It had been Allehra herself who had taught her that. Bleak suddenly found herself looking into a different chamber.

Farlah stood before Ines. The false queen was handing her a pouch of herbs. 'Wear it at all times,' she said. 'We cannot have your mind or energy exposed to any of them, or they'll know.'

Farlah put the pouch around her neck and tucked it into her shirtfront. 'What is it you want me to do, my queen?'

'When you take on the Mother Matriarch's form, I want you to get close to Alarise. I was unable to extract her magic when Langdon had her in the dungeons here. I want you to undo whatever enchantment Allehra put in those markings on her wrist. I want you to find Alarise's pressure point. I need her magic. I must have it if I wish to be at full strength.'

'It will be done, my queen. Whatever the cost.'

Reeling, Bleak was pulled away suddenly. That was why the imposter had called that meeting with her? Why she'd shown such an interest in the pattern she'd supposedly created? If Henri hadn't interrupted ...

Bleak came to a halt at another chamber. There, she saw Farlah standing at the mouth of the Heathton Castle maze, its manicured arches beckoning her.

What in the realm ...? She stepped into the room, her stomach churning. Allehra's in here?

The hedges towered on either side of her as she followed Farlah through the maze, those eerie red flowers blooming at their feet. The trek was dizzying, with numerous twists and turns in the path and shadows flickering across the ground. A gentle breeze blew through the hedges, sending a shiver across the heart-shaped leaves. The deeper they went, the colder it got. In some parts the maze was so overgrown that it closed over the top of them, sunlight breaking through the gaps in the foliage in weak, thin streams. Bleak forced herself to focus on her breathing.

I'm not trapped. I'm not trapped, she chanted to herself. Finally, they reached the heart of the maze. Bleak stopped in her tracks. Thousands of red blooms carpeted a garden of stone statues and furniture. Farlah walked to the centrepiece – a massive water fountain – and plucked one of the flowers. There was a quiet hiss, and the blooms vanished. Every single one. The water fountain wasn't just a water fountain. It was a statue of Ines. Her head was wrapped in long scarves that draped down into the folds of her gown. The stonemason had captured her likeness perfectly. Wringing her hands, Bleak stepped up onto the plinth alongside Farlah, who pressed her hand to the statue's chest, to her stone heart.

A loud groan sounded. The statue twisted at the base and began lowering them into the ground. As the realm above them disappeared, Bleak had to fight every instinct screaming at her to run. And as the statue ground to a halt, she wished she had. It smelled like death. Below the platform they now stood upon was an empty holding pen. A broken cough sounded. Bleak peered over the handrailing. It wasn't empty. In the far corner, curled up on her side, was the fragile frame of Allehra, Mother Matriarch of Valia. Farlah tossed a water flask down to her, but Allehra made no move to retrieve it.

What have they done to her?

'What's the matter, Allehra?' Farlah said quietly. 'Waiting to die?'

Bleak could see from the faint rise and fall of Allehra's body that her breathing was shallow. Around her lay discarded, untouched trays of food.

'You won't be dying today. I want your daughters here for the occasion.'

Bleak could feel the rage coming off Farlah.

There was a rasping gasp. 'Daughter,' Allehra croaked. 'I only have one daughter.'

Farlah laughed, the sound cold and cruel. 'It seems you have more to lose than you thought, old woman.'

With a ragged gasp, Allehra turned to face her tormentor. Bleak's hand flew to her mouth. The burns that the Mother Matriarch had sustained in Valia hadn't been treated. They were infected.

But the Valian gave a soft laugh of her own. 'If that's true, you're the one who's going to die.'

'I'm going to tear them apart for what they did to my cousin, and I'll be wearing your skin when I do it.'

Farlah pressed her hand to the statue's breast again. Bleak nearly lost her balance and gripped the stone as they began to ascend. But not before she saw Allehra's hand reach out, and take the flask of water.

BLEAK WAS THROWN BACK into the present. Dash was holding her upright.

'Allehra's in the Heathton Castle maze,' she managed, steadying herself against him. 'We have to tell the others.'

'Are you alright?' he asked gently.

'I ... I don't know.'

Dash nodded. 'I'll help you find them.'

IN EYDIS' study, Bleak told Henri and Sahara everything. She left them huddled in front of the fire to discuss their mother's fate in private. By the time she reached her own chambers, exhaustion had latched onto her bones. After her dealings with Farlah, it felt as though her magic was no more than a flickering ember.

She cursed as she entered her bathing room. She should have known that Allehra was an imposter. The way Rion had been restless around her. The way her own magic had been on edge. They were no closer to finding

Tailor, either. There had been no word from him or Fi. The Battalionian prince and Princess Olena were still missing, and there hadn't been a whisper about Commander Swinton. It was a mess. Every aspect of this damned war was a mess. Nerves churned in her gut at the very thought of it.

One of the servants had had the foresight to leave her a basin of warm water. With a grateful sigh, she peeled off her outer layers of clothing and went to wash her face. But as she cupped the water in her hands, she realised just how far the markings had spread. Feeling sick to her stomach, she went to the full-length mirror by the door. Her breath caught in her throat. Hands shaking, she removed her undergarments and took in her naked reflection. The dark pattern that had started on her thigh had now spread down her legs, and up more than half of her body. It swirled possessively across her right side, across her ribs, her breast and her shoulder, trailing all the way down her arm and onto her fingers.

She traced the lines and her magic hummed weakly.

A soft knock sounded at her door and she jumped. Snatching her robe from its hook, she pulled the fabric tightly around herself. The person knocked again, more insistently this time.

'Bleak? It's Casimir.'

She left the bathing chamber and opened the door a crack.

The Oremian prince's brow furrowed in concern. 'Are you alright?'

Bleak didn't trust herself to speak. Wordlessly, she opened the door and allowed him inside.

'What is it?' he pressed, peering at her face worriedly.

'They're ...' she started, feeling the hot sting of tears. 'They're everywhere, Casimir. The markings ...' She rolled up the sleeve of her robe, showing him her fingers and arm, then she pulled the fabric down from her shoulders and bared her collarbone as well.

Casimir stared. 'It's the same for me,' he told her.

Bleak covered herself back up and moved to stand before the dying fire. 'I don't understand it. Don't understand her ... Help me, Casimir. Help me to understand her.'

'I don't know what to tell you.'

'Don't tell me. *Show me*. Show me what she was like. Mind to mind.'

Casimir rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'In order to do that, I have to show you what *I* was like.'

Bleak hugged her arms to her chest and met his eyes. 'We've both done things we're not proud of, to survive. You told me that,' she said. 'But I need to know her, Casimir. I need to know what we're up against.'

Bleak could see the war waging within him. She understood his hesitancy more than he knew. Knew that there were parts of herself she wouldn't want to revisit, let alone share with another. But this was bigger than just him and her.

Slowly, the Oremian prince nodded and reached for her hands.

NO OLDER THAN SEVENTEEN, Casimir led Ines across the smooth rocks of a stream, shoes in hand. The leaves of enormous willow trees hung like curtains around them, vibrant and green, while the light melody of running water filled the air. They kept stealing glances at one another, warm smiles on their young faces. In that moment, they could have been anyone.

'I wish we didn't have to go back,' Casimir said, offering his hand as Ines came to the final stone before the bank. She hiked her white robes up around her thighs and accepted his help.

'I don't know why you're complaining,' Ines retorted. 'You get to go back as a prince. I go back as a servant. Always.'

'When I am king, there will be no high-priestess order.'

Ines laughed. 'I look forward to that day, my love. Though I fear it's a long way off for us, don't you?'

'I told you, I can speak to my father and King Edric.'

'Talk between kings never ends well for chained women, Casimir. You know this.'

'And you know that I wish it was different.'

'Wishing doesn't make it so. We need to take action.'

'You know I would do anything for you,' Casimir said, pulling her into his arms. 'What is it that you need?'

'I need an introduction to King Arden. And I need passage to Ellest.'

'What? Why?'

'Arden will play an important role in our future together, my prince.'

'You've seen it?'

Ines nodded. 'I've seen it.'

Casimir gazed at her. 'There's more?'

Ines looked at her feet, blushing. 'I cannot ask it of you.'

'You can ask anything of me.'

'Not this.'

'Yes, you can.'

The pair lingered at the water's edge, Ines fiddling with the straps of the sandals she held.

'Ines, tell me,' Casimir implored, lifting her chin.

She sighed. 'Your magic.'

'What about it?'

'Well ... I'm older than you.'

'So? We have always said that age means nothing to us.'

'But I want us to be equals, Casimir. In every respect.'

'I don't understand.'

Ines sighed again, threading her fingers through his. 'I want the same number of years as you,' she said. 'I know it's selfish, and that I shouldn't ask that of you, but I can't help it.'

Casimir brought her hands to his lips and kissed her knuckles. 'You know I don't like using my magic. You know any year I give you is a year I've taken from someone else.'

'I know. That's why I didn't want to ask.'

The young prince looked torn. 'But maybe ...'

'No, Casimir. It's alright. I don't want you to.'

'Ines, we will find a way. Together.'

The priestess smiled, tracing circles on the soft skin of Casimir's wrist. 'Together,' she echoed.

'I DIDN'T REALISE it at the time.' Casimir's voice brought Bleak back to the present. *'But that spot on my wrist ... That's my pressure point. Where another Ashai can extract magic.'*

'Every Ashai has a pressure point, you see. Though of course, it can take some time, some persuading, to find it,' Ines had told her down in the dungeons of Freyhill.

'She was already stealing years from you?' Bleak asked.

'Not years. I would have felt that. But hours. She would take hours from me, one at a time, usually ... In the ... heat of a moment, I couldn't tell.'

So calculated, Bleak thought. *So patient.* Ines had planned her reign over the course of years, waiting until every piece of the game was in place.

The chamber door swung inwards. 'Bleak,' a familiar voice sounded. Bren stood in the doorway, holding her length of rope. 'Bleak?'

Bren's gaze fell to Bleak's robe, and her hands clutched in Casimir's. 'Oh.' He was already backing away.

'Bren,' Bleak started, dropping Casimir's hands. 'Wait!'

'Sorry,' he spluttered. 'Should have knocked.'

'No, it's fine. Bren —'

But he was gone, the door clicking back in place behind him. Bleak made to follow him.

'Leave him be,' Casimir said.

Bleak whirled around, suddenly furious. 'Because that's worked out so well the last few times?'

Casimir blinked at her.

'I have to talk to him, Casimir. This can't go on.' Still in her robe, Bleak yanked the door open and rushed out, her bare feet freezing on the tiles. It didn't matter. She had to find Bren.

She raced through the corridors, ignoring strange looks from the guards.

His chambers are around here somewhere, she told herself, turning another corner and finding herself at another spiral staircase. Finally, she recognised his door.

'Bren,' she called as she rapped her knuckles hard against the timber. 'Bren, let me in. It's freezing out here.'

Silence. She tried the handle. It was unlocked. Slowly, she pushed the door ajar. Bren was inside, sitting on the end of his bed, head in hands. She went to him.

'Bren ...' She sat beside him. 'That wasn't ... wasn't what you thought ...'

'And ya know what I think, do ya?' He gave a hollow laugh. 'I forgot for a moment. Of course ya do.'

That barb hit a nerve. 'Do you think I *wanted* to be like this? Do you think I asked for it?'

'*I don't know*. Ya never told me. Ya lied to me for so long.'

'I didn't have a choice.'

'There's always a choice.'

'Choice?' Fury coursed through Bleak and she stood to face him. 'You want to talk about *choice*?' The words left her mouth, savage and

unchecked. She was done with him taking his anger out on her. 'What happened to you wasn't my fault.'

She braced herself for the brutal words he'd swing back at her. Waited for the blow to finally cleave them apart for good. But the words didn't come. Instead, Bren looked up.

'I know,' he said.

Then he was staring at her. No, at her shoulder, where the robe had slipped down. Eyes wide, he got to his feet and approached her, still staring at the markings on her exposed skin. 'I didn't know,' he murmured. 'I didn't know it was this bad.'

Bleak's eyes burned with sudden tears. But she couldn't form words. Instead, she pulled the tie of her robe loose and let the fabric fall. She let him see her. All of her. His wintry-blue eyes glazed over as he looked at her. He seemed to be holding his breath.

'Bleak.' His warm, calloused hand found her waist. She leaned into his touch, his clothes rough against her bare skin.

'I'm not sure ...' His voice cracked, but his gaze dropped to her mouth, and her heart thudded against her sternum. She was still as his fingers traced the markings from her hip, up along her ribs and the curve of her breast. Goosebumps rushed across her skin, and her breathing hitched as he leaned into her, bringing her face to his.

His lips were on hers. Tentative at first, so light she could have been imagining it. But he deepened the kiss, his hand at the back of her neck, pulling her to him, pressing her body against his. His mouth was hot, the kiss suddenly desperate. Years of tension fractured as his tongue swept over hers, his stubble scratching her nose. She needed more. His hands skimmed across her body, and she could feel his heart hammering against her own. Everything she'd ever felt for him that she'd kept locked away for a lifetime was spilling out. She had to touch him. Fumbling with the laces of his shirt, her breath caught in her throat as his hands cupped her breasts.

She'd been a fool to deny him, deny *them*, all this time. But as her hands brushed against his broad chest, her fingertips touched scars. Fresh scars. From Moredon. She broke away. His muscular torso was littered with them. They cut through the fair hair, jagged and pink. Tears stung her eyes once more.

With a trembling hand, she touched them one by one, until Bren caught her fingers in his. 'I'm sorry,' he said, stepping back. 'Bleak ... I can't.'

He picked up her robe and draped it around her shoulders.

‘Bren ...’ Her voice caught.

But Bren shook his head. ‘I just can’t.’ He made for the door.

‘No, we *do not* abandon each other,’ she said, lifting her chin. ‘Not anymore. No matter the situation.’

Bren faced her, his cheeks tipped pink.

‘Is it because of Tilly?’ she asked.

Bren shook his head. ‘It isn’t like that between us. Hasn’t been since Valia.’

‘Then tell me.’

‘Everything ... changed,’ he said. ‘I changed. My feelings for you changed. I’m ...’

‘Different,’ Bleak finished for him.

Bren nodded. He went to his bedside and retrieved something. ‘I came to yer room to give this back.’ He handed her the length of rope she’d misplaced. ‘I know it helps ya.’

Bleak took it, fighting the burn in her eyes. ‘Thank you.’

Bren sighed heavily, meeting her eyes once more. ‘I know it’s not yer fault. I made the choice to go after ya. And I have to live with that.’

‘I told myself I would fight for you,’ Bleak said softly.

‘What yer fighting for isn’t there anymore.’

AS BLEAK RODE RION through the hinterland outskirts of Wildenhaven, she could still feel Bren’s lips bruising hers, could still feel his hands on her. There was a hole in her chest like there had never been before.

She didn’t realise she was crying until the tears froze on her cheeks.

‘*I just can’t ...*’ Were she standing, recalling those words, so raw and fresh, would have brought her to her knees. A new wave of sorrow washed over her. Those kisses had been like leaping from a cliff into a raging swell below, only to find that the tide had receded, and there was nothing but jagged rocks. She looked to the snow-capped mountains looming over her, and remembered how she’d once thought of bringing him here. Of exploring this place together. But in what way? And in what way was she now filled with grief?

‘*I just can’t ...*’

She slid from Rion's back, her boots sinking knee-deep into the snow. Her hands shook as she uncorked the flask she'd stuffed into her cloak. The icy wind stung her face and the falling flakes wet her hair. She lifted the flask to her lips, desperate to burn the taste of him away.

'Bleak.'

Eyes red-rimmed, Bleak turned to see Henri and Sahara riding their horses towards her. With thick grey palma furs layered about their shoulders, side by side the Valian twins were ferocious.

Bleak collapsed, dropping the flask, the liquid fire spilling untouched into the snow. Both women leaped from their horses and rushed to her. Henri tipped the remaining contents of the flask into the snow and pocketed it without a word.

Bleak sniffed. 'I didn't drink it.'

The Valian simply shrugged. 'Dash told us to find you,' she said.

Bleak's teeth were chattering too hard to answer. Instead, she let Sahara pull her to her feet. Neither twin asked her what had happened. Henri wrapped her own cloak around Bleak's shoulders and they helped her back onto Rion.

They rode through Wildenhaven in silence and the snow started to fall in earnest. Just as the three towers came into view on the horizon, the storm hit. A bitter gale whipped up the fresh white powder around them and blasted through their layers. Bleak could have sworn she heard something behind them, but when she turned back, she saw only white.

When the trio reached the outer gates, she heard it again – a voice.

Alarise, it cried.

She squinted back into the snowstorm. A figure on horseback appeared in the haze.

Tailor.

Bleak's heart soared for the first time in a long while. Finally, hope dared to flicker in her chest. But as Tailor closed the gap between them, Bleak realised he wasn't alone. Behind him, covered in what looked like soot and ash, were Captain Fiore Murphadias, Princess Olena of Ellest, a regal olive-skinned young man, a maid Bleak recognised from Heathton and ... atop his stallion, sat Commander Dimitri Swinton.

His dark, shoulder-length locks had been sheared from his head. He wasn't wearing his uniform or his signature axes. He looked younger. Spotting her, Henri and Sahara, he leaped down from his horse and charged

through the snow towards them, not even glancing at Rion. Bleak slid from the panther's back once more to greet him.

Swinton's umber eyes locked onto hers.

'Where is he?'

CHAPTER 13

Bleak blinked at the commander. She knew *exactly* whom he was referring to. But she also knew that no matter who he was, he couldn't show up at the gates of Wildenhaven making demands about a boy who was still unaware of their connection. She had to protect her friend. She wouldn't allow Swinton to storm in here and ambush Dash.

She quirked a brow. 'Around somewhere.'

'Don't play games with me, Bleak.'

A throat cleared in warning beside her, and Swinton's eyes darted to Henri. 'I mean no ill will,' he said, calming himself. 'I just need to know he's safe.'

'He's safe,' Bleak replied smoothly, hoping Swinton wouldn't notice her puffy eyes.

A gloved hand gripped the commander's shoulder. 'Go easy, old friend.' Fi's voice was as rich and melodic as ever, and he smiled as he met Bleak's eyes. 'It's a bit brisk for us to be milling about out here, no?' he asked, still holding his horse's reins.

The commander seemed to take a steadying breath. 'Yes, let's get Their Highnesses inside and tended to.' He tore his gaze away from Bleak, and after a momentary shocked glance at Rion, he mounted his horse.

Bleak turned to Henri and Sahara. 'Will you take them to the towers?'

The sisters shared a look of concern, but Henri nodded. 'You're alright?'

Bleak ran her gloved fingers through Rion's fur and met Henri's eyes. 'I'm alright,' she confirmed.

The warrior queen mounted her horse.

‘Henri? Sahara?’ Bleak blurted.

The Valian twins turned to face her once more.

‘Thank you,’ she said, eyeing the pocket where Henri had stashed the flask.

‘We’re stronger in numbers,’ Henri told her, echoing words that once had been Petra’s.

Sahara and Henri led the newcomers through the outer gates and towards the Wildenhaven towers. Finally, Bleak found herself staring at Tailor. Like the others, he was covered in ash, he looked weary and the end of his tailcoat was singed.

‘We’ve been looking for you,’ Bleak said, suddenly nervous. She didn’t want to scare him away; he could be gone in a shimmer of light.

But his gold tooth flashed when his eyes met hers. ‘So I’ve heard,’ he replied.

Bleak stared at him. After all this time, after all the turmoil he’d put them through, he was just standing there, grinning at her. She folded her arms across her chest. ‘Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?’

Tailor shrugged. ‘Don’t you?’

Rion huffed impatiently behind her, eager to get back to the warmth of the towers, but Bleak didn’t move. ‘*Like what?*’

‘Oh, you know, thank you, for starters.’

‘*Thank you?* You can’t be serious right now.’

‘Well, I *did* just save two future monarchs of this realm from a fiery death. Not to mention two other influential players in this mad game afoot.’ He took a pipe from his pocket and placed it between his teeth.

Bleak was gobsmacked. Where the hell was Casimir? He needed to see the arrogant fool he’d pinned his hopes on for himself. She took a step forward, her magic thrumming in answer to her sudden fury.

‘What about what you did?’ she said quietly.

‘Oh? And what’s that?’

‘You don’t remember? You murdered a prisoner in his cell. Do you have anything to say about that?’

Tailor chewed on the end of his unlit pipe. ‘He deserved to die.’

‘Why?’

‘You know why.’

Bleak watched him, no trace of remorse on his face. It was as though he was waiting.

‘*You don’t remember me, do you?*’ he’d said to her before the snowslide, searching her face. She *had* remembered him, as the vagabond in Heathton who’d warned her to stop her search for a cure. But there was more between them than that. And then she knew it in her bones. The Tailor of Heathton, who’d built his reputation on weaving and selling truth and lies, wasn’t just some gold-toothed beggar.

‘It’s true, isn’t it?’ she breathed.

‘You’ll have to be more specific.’

‘Casimir was right. You’re him ... *You’re Ermias.*’ She could hear laughter echoing down the halls of Freyhill Castle.

‘Bleak!’ a familiar voice shouted from the gates. ‘Bleak, what are you —’ Casimir stopped in his tracks, eyes growing wide at the sight of Ermias. ‘It’s you.’

‘It’s me.’ Ermias smiled. ‘Now can we get inside? At this rate, we’ll freeze to death before the war.’

Casimir looked as shocked as Bleak felt, but he motioned for them to follow him back. Dazed, Bleak dismissed Rion and started to walk back to the towers, the magic of the Oremian heirs thrumming around her. A hundred questions bubbled over in her mind, but she didn’t know where to start, or who would answer. She kept quiet as they walked, trying to process the surrealness of it all. The three of them were together, finally, after all this time. They had survived. The Oremian monarchy lived on. Though judging from the magic rolling off Casimir, it wasn’t going to be a smiles-and-tears sort of reunion.

In the mudroom, Casimir turned to Ermias and folded his arms over his chest. ‘You have some explaining to do.’

‘Oh?’

Bleak went to reprimand Casimir before she, too, remembered their grievances. ‘You spied on us,’ she said.

‘And?’

Casimir threw his hands up. ‘And you never said anything! You never made yourself known. Even though you knew who we were. You left log books detailing our whereabouts for anyone to find!’

‘Why do you think I did that, hmm?’

‘You’re careless, just as you were as a child.’

‘Casimir,’ Bleak warned. They’d only *just* got Ermias back.

Ermias quirked a brow. ‘Notice anything about those log books?’

‘You left them *in a brothel*.’

Ermias rolled his eyes and nodded to Bleak. ‘You noticed.’

The realisation dawned on her slowly as she remembered the note about her being in Willowdale. ‘They ... Some of them were wrong.’

‘Exactly.’

‘So?’ Casimir’s anger was getting the better of him.

‘It’s called a *false trail*, Cas. I used those log books to lead the enemy away from you both.’

Casimir, stunned, looked from Ermias to Bleak. ‘Oh.’

‘That’s right, *oh*.’

Bleak shook her head. ‘That still doesn’t explain —’

‘Why I didn’t come to you? Too dangerous.’ Ermias put the pipe between his teeth. ‘She was everywhere and she was too strong. I bided my time. Put certain things into place, and waited for the right moment.’

‘Which is *now*?’ Casimir found his voice.

Ermias grinned. ‘Which is now.’

‘This changes everything,’ Bleak said, leading them from the mudroom into the hall. ‘We have to take you to the others right away.’

‘I’m not sure they’ll be overjoyed to see me,’ Ermias said.

‘We didn’t tell them,’ she told him slowly. ‘We didn’t tell them it was you.’

‘Oh. Why not?’

‘Because we thought you might be *Prince Ermias Goldwell*, and were you to return, we were going to need you by our sides, not behind bars.’

The image of Langdon’s blood spilling across the cell floor flashed in Bleak’s mind, as did the similarly bloody scenes she’d caused in the past. She reined in her judgement. She wasn’t one to talk.

Bleak brought the princes to Queen Eydis’ favourite study. There, they found Henri, Sahara, Swinton, Fi and Eydis crammed around the fire, each holding steaming mugs of tea and mulled wine. The fragrant scent of the latter made Bleak’s mouth water, but she pushed her cravings aside.

As they entered the room, Henri put down her mug and took in the trio. ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

Bleak ushered the others inside and closed the door behind her to keep the heat in. She hadn’t realised how cold she was until the warmth of the fire spread across her frozen skin. She glanced around. Swinton and Fi hadn’t yet cleaned up. It looked like they’d been brought straight here.

Typical Henri, Bleak thought. *Didn't even allow them to wash*. Swinton was clearly agitated, unable to keep still, while Fi was subtly trying to subdue him. Princess Olena and the Battalonian prince were nowhere to be seen.

It was Henri, sharp as ever, who cut Tailor a glare. 'Where in Rheyah's name have you been?' she snapped. 'Do you know how many times we could have used you and your damn magic?'

'Henri,' Sahara cautioned. 'Don't. We're —'

'I don't give a damn.' She turned back to Tailor. 'Will you honour us with an explanation? You do realise we're *in the middle of a war*?'

Ermias studied her coolly. 'I'm about to turn the tide of this *war*.'

'Oh? Then by all means, enlighten us.'

Across the room, Bleak caught Fi's eye. More than anything, the Battalonian looked amused. Bleak frowned in his direction, but he merely shrugged innocently and turned his attention back to Henri and Tailor.

Casimir cleared his throat. 'Henrietta of Valia, Eydis of Havennesse, meet Prince Ermias Goldwell, of Oremere.'

Bleak watched Henri like a hawk, noting that the warrior queen's knuckles were white as they gripped the hilts of her katars. Everyone in the room was watching. Those who had witnessed the matriarch's control slip during their last meeting were especially tense. But Henri looked from Ermias to Bleak, and then to Sahara. She tipped her head back and laughed. She laughed loudly and deeply, tears lining her graphite eyes. Beside her, Sahara grinned like a madwoman, and for the first time in a long while, Bleak felt the odd sensation of joy flicker within her.

Commander Swinton was scowling. 'The impending war doesn't seem like a laughing matter to me.'

At that, it was Fi who burst into laughter. 'Well, you're never big on fun, are you, old friend?'

Bleak's face hurt from smiling at the absurdity of it all. She watched Henri wipe the tears from her eyes.

Eydis clasped her hands together and waited for them to compose themselves. 'The commander is right,' she allowed, though her eyes were bright with amusement herself. 'We must call an official council meeting. One where *everyone* is in attendance.'

Bleak eyed Ermias' filthy clothes, and the ash covering Swinton and Fi. 'Perhaps we should allow the newcomers a moment to get cleaned up and

fed first?’

Eydis followed her gaze. ‘Indeed.’

Bleak found herself next to Fi, watching Commander Swinton approach the winter queen. There was no sense of cheer in his expression.

‘I need to see my son,’ he pleaded.

‘You will soon enough, Commander.’

Any trace of amusement vanished for Bleak. She leaned in towards Fi. ‘Dash doesn’t know,’ she whispered. ‘He doesn’t know who his father is yet.’

Fi didn’t take his eyes off Commander Swinton. ‘He will.’

CHAPTER 14

‘I won that last round,’ Dash told Luka as they trudged back from the training arena through the frozen grounds.

‘Did not.’

‘Did so. Fair and square.’

Luka snorted. ‘I let you.’

He gripped the hilt of his sword. ‘No, you didn’t. Just admit it. I’m getting better. A lot better.’

‘Sure,’ Luka said, shoving him playfully. ‘You’re the best swordsman there ever was.’

Dash shook his head. Luka was impossible sometimes.

They had waited out the snowstorm in the shelter of the training arena, sparring until, despite the cold, sweat coated Dash’s entire body. He felt stronger than ever, and knew, regardless of Luka’s constant teasing, that he was improving. He preferred the Valians’ style of swordplay. It favoured efficiency over flair, which would easily give him an edge over any enemy soldiers. He glanced at Luka. She’d gone quiet, and looked like her mind was far away from the icy track back to the towers.

She caught him watching her and sighed. ‘I’m so angry at her,’ she told him. ‘But I miss her.’

Dash wasn’t entirely sure what had gone on between the Valians, but he knew Luka’s mother, Athene, had been banished.

‘Where did she go?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know.’

Dash could tell he needed to tread lightly here. ‘Did she say goodbye?’

Luka gave a grim smile. 'I suppose it was me who said goodbye to her, in a way.'

He bumped his shoulder against hers. She had already suffered the loss of a friend, and now her mother, too. 'I'm sorry, Luka.'

She nudged him back. 'Thanks,' she replied. 'And you *are* getting better. *Slowly*.'

He laughed. 'I knew it.'

'Don't let it go to your head.'

Dash smiled, bracing himself against the cold as they passed the stables. The serious face of a stallion peered from one of the stalls. He hadn't been there on the way to the training arena, and Dash would have remembered, as he was a striking steed. In fact, the horse looked familiar for some reason.

'Stop dawdling, will you? I'm freezing my arse off here,' Luka called from ahead.

With a final frown at the stallion, Dash jogged to catch up with her. Finally, they entered the mudroom of the middle tower, shrugging off their sodden furs and hurrying into the glowing warmth of the great hall. Dash froze in the doorway.

She wasn't wearing her usual billowing finery, and her golden hair was dark with soot. But it was her.

'*Olena*,' he breathed.

Luka whirled around. 'What?'

'*Olena*,' Dash whispered, looking across the hall. 'She's here.' His chest seized. She wore dirty riding gear, and her skin was covered with dust.

How in the realm did she get here? Despite the informal attire, her back was straight and her head was held high. She looked regal in a way she never had before, at least not to Dash. She was speaking to a young man standing attentively at her side. From his olive complexion and sun-streaked hair, Dash knew he could only be Prince Nazuri of Battalion.

'What are you doing?' Luka hissed. 'Go talk to her.'

But suddenly, Dash felt a rush of determination. With sturdy hands, he grabbed his furs back from the hook in the mudroom.

'Dash.' Luka came after him.

'There's something I have to do,' he told her, before bolting out into the freezing night.

NO ONE PAID Dash any heed in the bustling kitchens. After all, there were new royal guests to feed.

He went to the bench Abigail had left for him and ran the flat of his hand across the smooth surface. *Olena is here*, he thought, the pounding yet to abate in his chest. He hadn't had enough time to think about how he was going to explain everything to her. Didn't know how he would convince her it was truly him. Things would be different now. He knew that even though it shouldn't matter, his age would change things between them. Their friendship, which had always been the most precious thing to him in the realm, wouldn't be the same. But there *was* something he could do. Something to show her he was still *him*.

'You alright there, Dash?' Abigail's voice sounded from a nearby oven.

He gave a stiff nod and Abigail let him be. His mind was racing. How had Olena got here? What would she say when he finally went to her? Who would he be to her now? The questions felt as though they were burning a hole in his brain as he reached for the flour. He had to focus. He'd been practising, and now he was going to get it right.

'Bleak said we'd find you here,' Luka said, striding into the kitchen, her arms folded over her chest.

Bleak was at her side, clad in palma furs, her eyes red and puffy.

'You're not the only one who knows where people are,' she told him, sliding a jar of sugar onto the bench. 'We've got some time. We'd best get started.'

'What do you mean?'

Bleak just shook her head and took the basket of eggs Luka held out to her. While it was a crowded workspace with the three of them huddled around the bench, Dash was grateful for the company. He found the bowls and measuring utensils where Abigail had shown him, and set about preparing his ingredients.

'Ermi— Tailor returned,' Bleak told them, bringing a pot of fresh tea to the bench and sliding onto a stool.

Dash looked up. 'When?'

'During the snowstorm. He was the one who brought the Battalionians here.'

'Oh.' Dash tipped the flour into the mixing bowl. He'd be glad for Tailor's return. The gold-toothed stranger had shown him a lot of kindness,

and perhaps he'd bring news of Mama and Pa. He mixed the ingredients together briskly.

'You think you'll be able to stop the plague markings from spreading?' Luka asked, dipping her finger into the bowl and scooping out a smear of batter to taste.

Dash swatted her hand away. There'd be none left at the rate the Valian was going. He turned to Bleak. 'Is that true?'

'We don't know yet,' she sighed. 'There'll be a council meeting, once everyone gets fed and cleaned up. We'll have our answers then.'

Dash nodded as he began to grease the baking trays.

'Thank you, by the way,' Bleak said stiffly.

He frowned. 'What for?'

'Sending Henri and Sahara out for me.'

'Oh.'

Luka glanced curiously between them.

'How did you know where I was?'

'I ...'

'A vision?'

He nodded.

Bleak swore and yanked a leather pouch from the front of her shirt. 'I thought this thing was supposed to stop all that? Isn't it supposed to protect me from other magic?'

Luka took it from Bleak. 'It should. But I suppose we don't know how strong everything is since Valia was burned, since those markings started.'

'Damn.'

Dash fidgeted uncomfortably. 'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, it's not your fault. But ...' Bleak blushed. 'What did you see?'

'Nothing,' Dash said. 'I mean, just you and Rion. You looked upset.'

He tried not to squirm under Bleak's odd-eyed scrutiny, and felt Luka's curiosity pique. Dash knew he was a terrible liar. Ma had always said so. His vision had been a little more extensive than he'd let on. Enough to know that Bleak's tears were over the fair-haired Angovian man he'd seen around the tower with Tilly. But Bleak didn't question him further, and they went back to the task at hand.

For the next few hours, Dash baked. He made batch after batch, losing himself in the rhythm of measuring and kneading. Bleak had fallen asleep, her head cradled in her arms on the bench, and Luka had dragged herself off

to sentry duty with a groan. But Dash wasn't tired. All he could think of was Olena.

By the time Dash emerged from the kitchens, flour dusted his clothes and batter lined his fingernails, but he didn't care. Hoping Olena was still awake, he entered the great hall, the tray of biscuits balanced on his palm before him.

There she was.

She was free of dust and soot, and her golden hair gleamed in the morning light. She wore a simple gown, far less cumbersome than those she'd so often been forced into in Heathton. Dash held his breath as he approached, each step towards her making him more and more nervous.

Someone blocked his path. 'Who are you?' Prince Nazuri demanded.

He was roughly the same height as Dash, though more muscular and princely in a tailored tunic.

'I ... I wanted to ...' Dash struggled to get his words out.

'Dash?' A soft voice murmured. Olena was there, pushing Nazuri to the side. She stepped forward, inhaling deeply. 'Dash ... is it truly you?' She closed the gap between them, and reached down for his face.

Dash took her hand in his, and moved it higher up to press to his stubbled cheek. He had never been more self-conscious of his deepened voice. 'I told you I was much changed,' he said.

She didn't pull her hand back as Dash had feared she might. Instead, she brought her other hand up and held his face. 'But it *is* you ... I know it.'

Dash slid the tray of biscuits onto a nearby table, just as Olena pulled him into a tight embrace. It was only now that Dash realised he was bigger than her. Her small frame folded into his arms easily. He breathed her in. *Olena ...* Olena was here. They were together.

She drew back just far enough that he saw tears line her eyes as she asked, 'Did you bring one of those biscuits for me?'

DASH WALKED arm in arm with Olena through the Wildenhaven tower in utter disbelief. He didn't know how long they'd stood there holding each other, but eventually, Olena had asked him to go for a walk. Much to his surprise, she had dismissed Prince Nazuri and the guards she had with a casual wave of her hand. Her orders had been followed without question.

‘Things are different for you,’ Dash said, as they turned a corner in the hallway.

Olena laughed. ‘Things are different for us all. And I think you win on that front.’

Dash flushed. ‘I didn’t know how to tell you.’

‘Your – Commander Swinton, and Captain Murphadias, they told me about what happened. Hearing it from you, hearing your new voice, it just makes it real, I suppose.’

‘I suppose.’

‘I like the new voice,’ she added, her cheeks tinged with pink.

‘Really?’

Olena nodded.

Dash’s chest warmed with pleasure. But he didn’t linger on the topic. He still didn’t quite know how he felt about it all himself. Instead, he sought details of Olena’s latest adventure. ‘What was it like? Being with the commander and captain in the desert?’

‘Some things don’t change,’ she murmured with a smile. ‘It was scary. We were chased across the plains by masked warriors, who we bested with sand vipers.’

‘Truly?’ Dash’s eyes were wide.

‘Truly. But the most frightening part was the firestorm. I can still feel its heat on my skin, Dash.’

‘What happened?’

‘Commander Swinton ... He saved us.’

‘How?’

‘He galloped towards the captain and me – we’d fallen, you see – and he threw a massive fireproof canvas over us all.’

A vision, or a memory of a vision, came to Dash’s mind ...

‘Get down!’ a deep voice boomed over the roar of the blaze.

The captain threw the princess to the ground, shielding her body with his.

A blanket of black fell over them, and then there was nothing but the howl of the firestorm beyond ...

‘We could hear it,’ Olena was saying. ‘The flames raged on for hours. We were hot and sweaty and parched beneath the tarp. But when it was over, we were alive. We were safe. And your friend Tailor brought us here.’

‘Whoa,’ Dash said.

Olena gave a soft laugh. ‘Yes, we were very lucky. Your – Commander Swinton showed great courage. We owe him our lives.’

We ... That’s right. Dash had almost forgotten about Olena’s betrothed. He bit his lip. ‘How are things with the prince?’

‘Things?’

‘Or should I not ask that?’

‘Dash, you should ask whatever you want to ask. You always have.’

‘But ...’

‘But nothing.’

Dash didn’t reply. No matter what Olena said, she had to know that they weren’t children anymore. There were rules.

‘Zuri is my friend,’ Olena told him. ‘He has been kind to me since the first moment we met. We make a good team.’

Zuri? Team? What does that mean?

‘How are you feeling?’ she asked, squeezing his arm. ‘I wish I could see what you look like. You’re tall?’

‘I’m tall,’ Dash allowed.

Olena smiled. ‘And you mastered quaveer?’

‘I’m not sure I’d call it mastered, but yes. I told you I would.’

‘You did.’

Dash couldn’t stop looking at her. He’d dreamed of this moment for so long, and now it was here. She looked different. Beautiful, even. He’d never thought of her as beautiful before ... Suddenly, he was glad she couldn’t see his cheeks flush.

The sound of running footsteps broke out behind them. ‘Your Highness!’

They turned around to find a young redheaded woman catching up with them. ‘I was told to bring you to the council room. The meeting’s about to begin.’

‘I can take you,’ Dash said. ‘I know where it is.’

‘Thank you, Therese,’ Olena said to the woman before turning to Dash. ‘Lead the way.’

He’d completely forgotten about the meeting. Bleak had told him, but lost in the joy of having his friend back, it had slipped his mind. Now, as he walked Olena – *Princess* Olena – to the official war-council meeting, it hit him. He was walking a future queen of the realm to the chamber where the future of the realm might be decided.

‘Just in here,’ he said, holding open the door for her.

Inside, over a dozen faces peered back at them.

‘Sorry we’re —’ Dash stopped mid-sentence. His gaze met a pair of eyes that were almost identical to his own.

Commander Swinton of the King’s Army got to his feet. He stared at Dash. They took in each other’s lean frames and sharp jawlines – even their expressions of shock were similar.

Captain Murphadias’ words were suddenly echoing in Dash’s head.

‘You look just like him ...’

‘Who?’ Dash had demanded.

‘Your father.’

Dash took in the commander’s dark features and towering height, and a wave of realisation barrelled into him.

‘His father would want to do whatever it takes ...’

Dash couldn’t breathe. The air was too stale in here, too warm. He started to back away.

The commander stretched out a hand. ‘Zachary —’

But Dash was already running from the chamber.

CHAPTER 15

*G*ods, the boy can run, Swinton thought as he leaped from his chair and chased after Dash. The sight of his son had stolen the breath from his lungs, and he'd gawked, open-mouthed, at the mirror image of his younger self: tall and limber, with a mop of coal-coloured hair and sharp, dark features. He had no idea what he was going to say were he to catch up. He'd had a lifetime to think about these things and it still wasn't enough.

Swinton burst out of the tower and into the freezing winds. Not even stopping to pull on a cloak, he raced after the tracks in the snow before they disappeared. He felt sick to his stomach. He'd never meant for Dash to find out like this, in front of a room full of people who clearly already knew his secret. But as his legs pumped across the snow towards the village, part of his heart sang. The truth, however ugly, however messy, was out. In all these years, Swinton had never imagined a time when he wouldn't die with this secret.

He spotted fresh tracks leading to the stables.

It makes sense he'd find comfort here. Swinton ducked into the building, grateful for the shelter from the wind. It was instantly warmer, thanks to the body heat from dozens of horses, no doubt. Swinton's nostrils filled with the familiar scent of fresh hay and manure as he slowed his pace. He didn't want to startle Dash. And if he was honest with himself, he still wasn't sure what he was going to say. He walked through the stables deliberately, his boots tapping a steady rhythm against the ground as he passed each stall. To his surprise, he found Dash with Xander.

The boy – no, young man – was stroking the stallion's nose, and Xander, usually averse to strangers, seemed perfectly at ease.

Swinton didn't enter the stall. Rather, he leaned against the gate on his elbows, saying nothing.

Dash didn't look up as he spoke. 'This is your horse.'

Although he was the spitting image of Swinton in his youth, in that moment, his demeanour was exactly like Eliza's. Gentle, patient. The pain Swinton expected to feel didn't come.

'Yes,' Swinton replied. 'His name is Xander. Your mother gave him to me.'

Dash's amber eyes met Swinton's. 'So it's true.'

Swinton pushed open the gate and entered the stall, his boots crunching loudly atop the freshly laid hay. The thread of magic between him and his son, once alarmingly weak, now felt like an unbreakable iron chain.

'Pa isn't my real pa?' Dark hair fell across his brow.

'He's your grandfather. And Dorothy is your grandmother. They agreed to raise you for us.'

'And my real mother?'

Swinton ignored the tremble in his knees. He took a brush from a nearby bucket and started on Xander's flank, opposite Dash.

'She died,' he said finally. 'A long time ago.'

His son nodded, eyes glazing over. It was a lot to take in.

Swinton held his breath as Dash moved. Gods, he didn't want him to leave. Didn't want this conversation to end, no matter how hard it was.

But the boy didn't leave. Instead, he leaned down and picked up a brush from the bucket, and began to brush Xander's other side.

'He likes you,' Swinton said, nodding to Xander. 'He usually doesn't like strangers.'

Dash didn't look up. 'I'm not a stranger.'

Swinton didn't dare to let his heart soar as it wanted to in that moment. *No, you're family. Our family*, he wanted to say, so much that the words burned in his throat.

Dash cleared his throat. 'I only meant, I used to care for him at the castle. Pa —' He froze on that word, seeming to mull it over. 'I worked in the stables a lot.'

Swinton nodded slowly. 'So did Eliza, your mother,' he said. 'That's how we met, actually.'

Dash glanced up as though he wanted to know more, but he quickly averted his gaze.

They groomed Xander in silence. The only sound was the soft swish of the brushes over his coat, and the occasional nicker from the stallion.

‘Did they ever tell you your second name?’ Swinton heard himself say. His voice sounded unnecessarily loud in the quiet. ‘Your mama and pa, I mean.’

Dash shook his head, that dark hair swinging.

‘Caleb. For my father. Zachary Caleb Swinton.’

Swinton noticed his son’s hand still for a moment, the brush suspended over Xander’s coat.

‘I’m named after Sir Caleb?’

‘That’s right.’

The boy seemed to nod to himself for a moment, before returning to the task at hand. ‘I look like you,’ he said.

Swinton smiled grimly. ‘I’m sorry for that.’

‘Everyone noticed, didn’t they?’

‘Hard not to.’

Dash’s brow furrowed. ‘You don’t ... You don’t feel like my father.’

The hard truth of those words sank like a blade into Swinton’s heart. How he wished he’d been brave enough back then. How he wished the boy before him had known him as a son knows a father. But it wasn’t Dash’s fault. He spoke a simple truth, with no cruelty or judgement. Swinton swallowed the lump in his throat. His son deserved the same in return.

‘I don’t think I ever will,’ he said steadily. ‘Emmett is your father by all true meaning of the word. He was there for you when I couldn’t be. But ...’ Swinton mulled over the words before he said them. ‘I do want to *know* you,’ he said. ‘To *get to know* you. As best as I can.’

Dash bit his lip. ‘What if I don’t want that?’

Swinton’s chest ached, but he schooled his expression into one of neutrality. ‘Then that is your choice to make.’

‘I ... I don’t know ...’

Swinton placed his brush back in the bucket. ‘You don’t have to know yet. You decide, when and if you want to make that decision.’

He left Dash in the stall with Xander. There was so much more he wanted to say. He wanted to explain that he hadn’t been ready, that he’d been grief-stricken, that he hadn’t wanted to live without Eliza. And Eliza

... He wanted to tell Dash all about her. How they'd met, what she'd been like. But the boy had a lot of information to process, and the last thing Swinton wanted to do was to overwhelm him and drive him away. He needed time. They both did.

Swinton headed back to the towers alone. He would have missed the council meeting by now, but he didn't care. He'd been with his son. His son, who finally knew who he was. He knocked the snow from his boots against the stone wall of the tower and entered the mudroom. He was in a daze as he stepped into the great hall, feeling a lightness he wasn't sure he'd ever felt before. Dash hadn't yelled, hadn't forsaken him. There was hope.

'You've got some gods-damned explaining to do,' said a feminine voice to his left.

Henri.

'First,' she continued, 'you drug me and leave me for dead at that fucking inn. You tell Bleak that Bren is safe and back in Angove.' She took a long step towards him. 'And to top it all off, you spread the gods-damned mist in the first place. Have I missed something?'

Swinton met her fiery stare. 'No.' He felt her magic latch onto the energy around him, and he didn't fight back.

Fi was instantly at his side, trying to defuse the tension. But Bleak came forward.

'Henri.' The girl looked as she had the night before: red-eyed and haggard. There was much he had missed.

'You had your vengeance on him already,' she argued. 'Back in Hoddinott. Now is not the time or place for round two.'

'That was for one of three crimes. He cannot go free after all he's done.'

Bleak gripped Henri's arm. 'We need him.'

Need him? What's she talking about? Swinton was baffled. He was the last person he expected Henri and Bleak to turn to for help.

Bleak was pulling Henri away from him, reasoning with her. The odd allies had come a long way since he'd last seen them. While they weren't exactly arm in arm, they spoke to each other with a newfound sense of ease and mutual respect.

Suddenly, there was a different pair of graphite-green eyes glaring at him.

A fist collided with his face.

Stars and pain burst across Swinton's vision. His nose was still mending from his time in Battalion. He staggered back, clutching the bridge. Spots of blood dripped to the floor.

He looked up. 'What the —'

'That was for my sister,' Sahara said, massaging her knuckles. 'If you ever do what you did at Hoddinott to her, to another woman again ... I'll kill you.'

Swinton wiped the blood onto his trousers, his face burning. He nodded stiffly. 'Noted.'

'Good.'

A hot flush of shame spread across Swinton's face. He deserved to feel shame, he knew. For all his crimes, not only to Henri, but to the realm. He'd put himself before its people and the peace. The hall was half full of royalty, Valians, Oremian rebels and Wildenhaven generals, and he let them see his humiliation, his remorse, as keenly as he felt it. For he felt it to the bone, to his very core.

Bleak tugged his sleeve and led him to a nearby table. 'You know Heathton Castle and the maze well, don't you?'

Swinton's skin crawled at the very mention of it. 'Yes.' He eased himself onto a bench.

'Good,' Henri said with a side glance at Sahara. 'You're going to help us get our mother back.'

'Amongst other things,' Bleak added.

What is going on here? Amidst all this chaos, they want to return to the most dangerous place in the realm?

Bleak crossed her arms over her chest. 'Yes, we do,' she told him.

Swinton baulked. 'How ...?'

'Your little trinket,' she replied. 'You don't have it anymore.'

Swinton's hand flew to his chest, before he realised that she was right. He'd left his talisman, the enchanted coin of Yacinda, in the dust of the Janhallow Desert.

'We'll have to get something else to protect you. Something different, something that doesn't stifle your ability. We need all the magic we can get.'

A man Swinton didn't recognise stepped forward. 'Agreed.'

'Commander, meet Casimir,' Bleak said, gesturing in the stranger's direction.

If Casimir had heard about his misdeeds, he didn't let on as he gripped Swinton's hand in a firm shake.

'Ermias, Bleak and myself will join you as well,' Casimir said. 'There's something we need to retrieve.'

A familiar gold-toothed grin flashed beside Henri. Tailor – no, *Ermias*, as he'd just been referred to – gave a mock salute. 'I'll take us to the rural counties,' he said. 'I don't want to transport us straight into a pack of guards in Heathton. And I'll have to do it in lots of three, assuming the commander, captain and Dash will go together?'

'Dash?' Swinton croaked. 'Dash remains here.'

Silence fell. And Swinton followed their gazes to the figure standing behind him.

'You are not my keeper,' his son said, eyeing his bloody nose.

Swinton started. 'Dash —'

But the young man shook his head. 'No. You get no say in my whereabouts or actions. That's not how this is going to work. You said – my choice.'

Swinton felt all eyes on him. Dash was right. He had no business acting the part of the protective father now.

'I go where Olena goes,' Dash announced.

Princess Olena. But Swinton stopped himself from correcting him aloud.

'I have little desire to return to Heathton, Dash,' said Olena from the other end of the table. 'I will stay in Wildenhaven for the time being.'

'Then I stay by your side.'

Numerous people hid their smiles. Apparently, the friendship between Swinton's son and the Princess of Ellest was much admired.

'So it is agreed, then?' Bleak said. 'Casimir, Ermias, Henri, Sahara, Commander Swinton, Fi and I will go to Heathton. We will retrieve the amulet. We will rescue Allehra. We will find the herbs to stop the plague markings spreading.'

Amulet? Plague markings? Swinton turned to Dash, and for the first time noticed the dark swirls peeking from his shirt collar.

'What in the name of the gods is that?' he demanded. Then he spotted the same markings on Bleak, on Casimir.

'A problem we're trying to solve.' Bleak cut him a warning glare.

'Don't you think I —'

‘No,’ Bleak snapped. ‘We’ll fill you in later.’

Queen Eydis swept in then, an elaborate gown billowing beneath the furs resting on her shoulders.

‘You’ve had a trying few days, Commander,’ she said, with a pointed glance at Bleak. ‘Might I suggest you and the captain try the hot springs?’

Upon his arrival, their introduction had been brief, but Swinton had seen enough to know that regardless of what Eydis said, it was not a suggestion.

THE WINTER QUEEN’S attendant led them from the comforts of the hall into the freezing woods beyond the three towers. Ulrich had brought fresh towels and a basket of supplies, but Swinton vowed he’d rather jump into a firestorm than disrobe in the snowy hinterlands. Despite the numerous furs they’d been loaned, his entire body was shaking as fresh flakes fell around them. To his annoyance, Fi had a wide grin on his face.

‘Come on, Dimi. Where’s your sense of adventure?’ he quipped as they sank into the snow.

‘Adventure?’ Swinton scoffed. ‘What do you think the last few months have been? Because I tell you now, they’ve been no stroll through the gardens for me.’

Fi laughed, the melodic sound echoing through the giant trees. Somehow, the bulky fire-continent native looked just as at home in frozen lands as he did in the desert. Swinton silently cursed his friend’s adaptable nature. His own teeth were chattering so hard his jaw hurt, and he kept his hands tucked firmly under his arms for maximum warmth.

‘This way, Commander, Captain,’ Ulrich said, motioning for them to follow.

As they walked, Swinton’s mind drifted back to Dash. *You don’t feel like my father*, he’d said. Swinton could hardly blame him for that, but it didn’t mean the words hurt any less. He had never been a father to Dash, and likely never would be.

Swinton jolted as that throaty whisper sounded in his ear once again. ‘*Both of you, and your bastard son will die ...*’

Swinton looked around wildly and Fi’s gloved hand caught him by the arm. ‘Dimi? Are you alright?’

He was going mad. He must be. Lennox was dead. There were plenty of people who could hurt Dash, but the king’s former pet wasn’t one of them,

not anymore. He gave Fi a stiff nod and focused on Ulrich's back as he led them around a sudden turn and down a rocky path. Below was a small valley, and at its heart was a steaming pool of ice-blue water.

'These are Her Majesty's personal hot springs,' Ulrich told them as they made their way through the deep powder towards the water's edge. 'It's an honour that she has shared these with you,' he added, frowning at Swinton.

Swinton turned to object to Fi, but his friend was already shrugging off his borrowed furs and tugging off his shirt.

'What are you waiting for, old friend? You likely need a soak more than I.' Fi groaned as he sank into the water.

He was probably right. Swinton couldn't remember the last time he'd had the luxury of a proper bath. Life on the run had meant basins of water and a rag. He winced as he peeled off his outer layers, handing them to Ulrich.

'Gods,' Fi murmured as Swinton pulled his shirt over his head, revealing myriad bruising across his torso.

'Courtesy of your Battalonian brothers,' he said, finally lowering himself into the water. The hot spring offered his aching muscles and joints instant relief. He found a ledge to sit on and sighed as the heat wrapped around him.

'There are supplies in the basket here. I'll return in an hour,' Ulrich told them, before leaving.

Fi turned to Swinton, his expression serious. 'You did not deserve that beating, Dimi.'

Swinton splashed his face gently, washing the dried blood from his nose. 'Which one?' he said.

'The one in Erostep. I'll not deny you earned your punishment from the Valians.'

Swinton nodded. 'I deserved them all.'

'It was *my* plan that wreaked havoc on the village all those years ago.'

'And you were under *my* command.'

Fi was quiet.

'Did you ever think we would end up here?' Swinton asked, gesturing to the snow-capped mountains that loomed in the distance.

'The only thing I was sure of was that we wouldn't stay. I heard whispers of this conflict brewing long ago.'

'One of the benefits of being Baron of Battalon?' Swinton teased.

Fi's brows shot up in surprise. 'Something like that.'

Swinton took in their surroundings with quiet wonderment. The vast expanse of near-blinding white, the jagged peaks and snow-covered pines. Out here, there was no knowing that war threatened them all.

'What else have the whispers told you?' he asked Fi. 'Do we stand a chance against Arden? Against *her*?'

Fi smiled grimly. 'Whispers do not foresee the future, old friend. Perhaps you could tell us that?'

Swinton laughed in spite of himself. 'My magic doesn't work like that.'

'Then only time will tell, eh?'

'I suppose you're right.'

'I'm right about a lot of things.'

'If you say so.'

'Well, I was right about you and Therese.'

Swinton looked up. 'What?'

Fi was grinning. 'It was I who requested she enter your service. I requested that she join us in Battalon.'

'What? Why?'

'Well ... for her safety, first and foremost. But I could tell ...'

'Tell what?'

'That you liked her. And that she liked you.'

'Nothing has happened.'

'Say no more, old friend. Say no more.'

Swinton felt his face flush. 'I mean it.'

Fi raised his hands in mock surrender. 'I only meant I am happy for you, Dimi. Glad you have given yourself permission to live more than a half-life.'

Was that what he'd done? He hadn't made a conscious choice. And he certainly didn't want to forget Eliza. Swinton looked at his friend. There was no judgement, only sincerity.

Fi swirled his hands in the water and met Swinton's gaze. 'In the face of so much violence and loss, it's good to know that there is some light left in this realm,' he said.

THEY RETURNED to the Wildenhaven towers after dark to find a boy on horseback waiting in the courtyard.

‘Who are you?’ Ulrich demanded as they drew closer.

‘I have a parcel for Lady Alarise,’ he said timidly, his face covered with a thick woollen scarf.

‘Who sent you?’

‘I was paid to bring it to her from Port Avesta.’

‘By whom?’

‘I don’t know who they were. But they ... they gave me a gold coin.’

Ulrich frowned. ‘Well, hand the parcel to me. I shall see it delivered to her.’

Swinton eyed the bulging saddlebag, and the icy patch of red at its base. ‘I don’t think that’s wise, Ulrich.’

‘What? Why?’

‘I think ... I think you should get Bleak, and Her Majesty, to come outside. Now.’

‘Her Majesty is not one for being summoned. Least of all by —’

‘Ulrich,’ Fi interjected. ‘Now.’

Alarmed, Ulrich left them in the courtyard. Swinton glanced at Fi, whose worried expression mirrored his own. Swinton prayed that their instincts were wrong.

Bleak and Queen Eydis appeared from the doors of the middle tower, and Dash was close behind. ‘Gods,’ the winter queen cursed, as she hiked up her layered skirts and descended the stairs. ‘What is it?’

‘A parcel for Bleak, but I thought you should see it, too,’ Swinton said, noting the messenger boy shifting from foot to foot, hesitating at the clasp of the saddlebag.

‘Here.’ Swinton unclasped it and reached inside. His bare hand met a frozen head of hair. Bracing himself, he pulled a familiar face from the pack.

Bleak swore, and Eydis clapped a hand over her mouth with a gasp.

‘*Gods*, who is that?’

Swinton’s stomach turned to lead as his eyes found Dash’s.

‘The Heathton Castle cook,’ his son said.

Next to Dash, Bleak’s expression was stony. ‘We meet back here,’ she told them. ‘We leave for Ellest within the hour.’

CHAPTER 16

An array of weapons lay spread out on Henri's bed. Numerous katars, her weapon of choice, as well as daggers and swords. Making fast choices, she strapped a pair of katars to her thighs and slipped a dagger into her boot.

Her door clicked open. She didn't need to turn to know who it was.

'I thought we were meeting in the courtyard —' Her words caught in her throat. Sahara stood in the doorway dressed in full Valian leathers. Deep forest green hugged her body, and black boots were laced to her calves.

'Hope you don't mind,' she said. 'I borrowed some of yours.'

Henri blinked, speechless. She'd never allowed herself to imagine ... She took a deep breath. Amidst all the horrors of the past few months, the sight of her sister dressed from head to toe like a Valian made her heart soar.

Sahara's kohl-lined eyes smiled back at her. 'Thought it was only right.'

Henri still didn't trust herself to speak. Instead, she passed Sahara a sword, and strapped another to her own back. She hadn't seen Sahara in leathers since they were teenagers. As they continued to arm themselves in silence, she couldn't help but steal glances at her sister.

Finally, she cleared her throat. 'We better get going,' she said.

Sahara nodded, buckling her sword belt at her waist, and taking a pair of fighting knives from the collection on the bed. But once she was in the doorway, she hesitated.

'Henri?'

Henri's brow furrowed. They couldn't delay. 'What is it?'

‘I’ve been meaning to ask. But I didn’t know if it was right. If it was my place to,’ Sahara said. ‘But you’re my sister, and I need to know. Are you ... are you alright? About ... About Athene?’

The sound of her name was like a punch to the gut, sending Henri’s stomach plummeting to the floor. She’d done everything she could to lock up those feelings and throw away the key. But it hadn’t stopped the ache in her chest, or the uneasiness churning inside her. Athene had made herself a part of Henri, only to wrench that part away when she needed it most. She had torn it from where it belonged and cast it out into an icy void. Henri felt as though a fragment of her was physically missing, leaving a gaping hole in her, leaving her breathless at the loss. She hadn’t spoken of it to anyone. To speak of it would only make it real. And it couldn’t be real.

‘We’re in the middle of a war, Sahara.’ She fought to keep her voice even.

‘True,’ her twin allowed. ‘But the heart never listens to anything other than its own beat.’

Henri tightened the straps holding her katars to her thighs, before meeting Sahara’s almost identical gaze. They had never spoken like this before. Had never discussed their feelings in the way she knew other young people did, in the way that they should. But from the look on her sister’s face, it was clear she understood. There was some measure of comfort in that.

Henri nodded. ‘We have to go.’

They re-joined the others in the icy courtyard. Henri didn’t fail to notice the looks of awe thrown their way. She held her chin high. Sahara and her ... together. They were Valia incarnate.

Tailor – no, *Ermias* – approached them. Henri cursed herself. All these revelations were beginning to get confusing. Ermias had cleaned up since his arrival, but he still wore his tattered tailcoat over borrowed clothes.

With a pipe between his teeth, he grinned. ‘I wouldn’t want to mess with you two.’

‘That’s for the best,’ Sahara said, brows raised. ‘Now. How are we doing this?’

Ermias nodded. ‘I’ll take you and Henri first.’

Sahara fidgeted. ‘How does it work?’

Henri glanced at Sahara. No one but her would know that behind that demand were nerves. The same slight change in her sister’s voice occurred

whenever heights were mentioned.

Ermias merely shrugged. 'You'll see.' He held out a hand to each of them.

Henri figured she liked the idea of this about as much as Sahara did. But there was nothing for it. She removed her glove and took the Ashai's hand. Magic flared as soon as his hand closed over hers. A golden light shimmered around them and Henri felt a surge beneath her boots. She was freefalling, a scream caught in her throat. Dizziness blurred her vision and panic rose in her chest. The only thing anchoring her to this realm was Ermias' hand in hers, and she gripped it with all her might. The freefall seemed to go on forever, dragging a silent shriek from within until ...

A summer breeze kissed her skin. Henri opened her eyes, a cry escaping her lips. The canopies were emerald green, and the living bridges winding above them were every bit as glorious as she remembered. The magic of her ancestors whispered to her own, its familiar rhythm beating beneath her skin. Wildness. *Valia*.

She was in Valia. She was *home*.

'Why ... why are we here?' Sahara asked. It was the first time her sister had seen the forest in over a decade.

'I thought you might want to remember what you're fighting for,' Henri said. 'I asked Tailor to bring us here first.'

Henri savoured the warm breeze on her face and the smell of the trees she'd missed so much.

'Henri ...' Sahara's voice faltered. Henri followed her towards the heart of the forest, only to stop in her tracks. The keep, once lush and green and full of life, was now nothing but charred remnants. Ash drifted through the air, disintegrating when Henri caught it between her fingers. The black skeletons of what were once Valia's pride and joy loomed over them.

'Gods,' Henri muttered, tears stinging her eyes as she reached the scorched trunk at the heart of the keep. Allehra's quarters. She ran her hand along the blackened bark.

Henri couldn't breathe. She hadn't been here. She hadn't been here to defend her home, her people.

'They'll pay,' Sahara murmured. 'They'll pay for this, Henri, I swear it.'

Henri turned to her sister and nearly blanched at the fury she found behind those eyes. It matched her own. She didn't try to stifle the torrent of

rage that rushed through her. She would hone it, use it to lay vengeance at her enemies' feet.

'We have to go,' Ermias said, offering his hands. 'Ready?'

Henri gritted her teeth. 'Ready.'

Golden light shimmered once more and the warrior queen left the scorched remains of Valia behind.

ERMIAS TOOK them to an abandoned property in the Eastern Farmlands of Ellest. The windows and doors had been boarded up, and an eerie quiet lingered in the fields around.

'Why here?' Henri asked. There were no horses in sight, no clear road to take. It was the middle of nowhere.

'Can't travel us all so close to the city,' Ermias said, straightening his coat. 'I need to save my strength. Make towards Heathton,' he told them. 'I'll bring the others to you.'

'How will you find —'

But the Ashai's light shimmered and he was gone again, leaving only two dusty footprints in his wake.

With a heavy sigh, Henri turned to Sahara. 'Shall we?'

Sahara pulled a compass from a hidden pocket within her leathers and handed it to Henri. 'Like we've got a choice,' she said, before she headed towards the looming crop of sugarcane.

It felt like a lifetime ago that Henri had journeyed across the massive territory with Bleak, Swinton and Fiore. She never would have dreamed that one day, she might do the same with Sahara by her side. She looked to her sister. Sahara's eyes were glazed over, and she stared ahead as they trekked across the grasslands.

'Sahara?'

'Mmm?'

'We'll get her back,' she said.

A muscle twitched in Sahara's jaw. 'I should have listened to you. You knew something wasn't right.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Doesn't it? I was gone for ten years. And I thought I knew my mother better than my sister, who'd been there with her the whole time.'

Henri kept quiet.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sahara said. ‘I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have doubted you.’

‘It wouldn’t have changed anything.’

‘It would have changed how I feel about it now.’

Henri shrugged. ‘Then that’s your burden to bear.’

‘I know.’

Henri quickened her pace. ‘Come on. You’re slowing us down. I thought you were the stronger of us two.’

‘Want to spar again and see?’

‘Save it for Arden.’

They passed through a field of wheat at a jog, the high fronds whipping past them. They saw no one. No workers tending to the crops, no children running amok around the farmhouses. The quiet made Henri’s skin crawl. Despite the sun warming her back, it didn’t feel like she was in Ellest. Not the Ellest she’d known, the place she’d longed to return to from the frozen hinterlands of Havenesse.

‘What are the chances of Ermias bringing us back some horses?’ Sahara was sweating.

Henri snorted. ‘Slim to none.’ She squinted at the familiar buildings on the horizon. ‘Damn,’ she muttered.

‘What is it?’ Sahara asked, halting alongside her.

‘Let’s just hope we’re long past this place by the time the others get here. Come on. We have to cover as much ground as we can.’

The town of Hoddinott looked the same as it had all those months ago: the butcher with the pig carcasses in the window, the bakery with loaves of bread piled high, and the dusty apothecary. Henri noted the faces peering from the glass and the stores drawing their curtains and shutters as the Valians approached.

Sahara frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

Henri said nothing as she led her sister down the high street, to the heart of the town. There it was. The Hodd’s Nott inn. Or what was left of it. A blackened reminder of what had happened here. She, Bleak, Swinton and Fiore had done their damndest to burn it to the ground. Henri could feel eyes on them. She felt it in her gut. The townsfolk watching them knew her. Knew that she’d been a part of the horrors that now lay in the ashes at their feet.

‘This is it, isn’t it?’ Sahara breathed. ‘Where Bleak lost control?’

Henri glanced at her in surprise. ‘She told you about that?’

Sahara nodded.

‘Good.’ Henri made to move away from the town centre. ‘It was eating away at her.’

But Sahara bent down and retrieved something from the ground.

‘What is it?’

Sahara handed her the piece of yellowed parchment and Henri’s heart sank. A sketch of Bleak. Her odd eyes had been drawn to look menacing, matching the word stamped beneath her face.

MURDERER.

Henri cursed. If Ermias brought the others here ... She balled the parchment up in her fist. ‘Are there any others?’

Sahara was staring down the street. Henri’s heart sank. For lining every door, every available wall, were more of the same. A smear campaign against Bleak. Against the Ashai people.

And there, at the town gates, the mist dweller herself now stood, with Casimir by her side, taking it all in. Henri approached just as Swinton, Fiore and Ermias materialised behind them.

‘Arden will say anything,’ she told Bleak, grasping the girl’s bony shoulder.

Bleak met her gaze with a stony expression. ‘It’s the truth.’

‘It’s not that simple,’ Henri countered, looking to Casimir for help.

‘Isn’t it?’

The Ashai prince was useless. He remained quiet.

Henri clicked her tongue in annoyance. ‘It’s not that black and white, and you know it.’

But Bleak merely shook her head. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

‘We need horses.’ Swinton scrunched up one of the posters. Something about the way he did it told Henri he’d seen something similar before.

‘Well, let’s find some and add that to our list of crimes,’ Bleak said dryly.

‘From memory, petty theft has never bothered you before,’ Fiore quipped, nudging her in the ribs.

Bleak shrugged and headed for the village stables. Skin prickling, Henri followed her, only to find that the stables were not unoccupied. Henri drew her katars as they entered the building.

A middle-aged woman stood between them and the stalls, a broadsword clutched in her trembling hands. Behind the fear in her eyes was something

else. Anger. Hatred. Her gaze shifted from Henri and Bleak to Swinton and Fiore, ignoring the Oremian princes behind them.

‘I know who you are,’ she said, raising her blade.

Henri stepped forward. ‘Then you know that sword will do you no good.’

But the woman stood her ground. ‘You ... you left my three children without a father.’

‘A father they were better off without,’ Henri said.

The woman lunged, swinging her sword wildly. Henri knocked it aside effortlessly, and it clattered to the ground.

A sob escaped the woman. ‘That wasn’t for you to decide.’

In disbelief, Henri watched as Bleak retrieved the fallen blade. ‘It wasn’t her,’ the mist dweller said as she handed it back to the widow. ‘It was me.’ She raised her hands in surrender. ‘And you’re right. It wasn’t for me to decide. But I cannot take it back.’

Tears tracked down the woman’s face, but she made no further move against Bleak. Henri didn’t know if it was because of the warriors at Bleak’s back, or if deep down, the widow knew what sort of man her husband had been. Either way, they didn’t have time.

‘Captain, Commander. Saddle us some horses,’ she heard herself say. The men didn’t argue.

The woman stared at her. ‘You’ve murdered our husbands, our sons, our brothers ... and now you’ve come to steal our horses, too?’

‘Yes,’ Henri told her. She could feel Bleak’s guilt pouring from her very being, but Henri wouldn’t acknowledge it. There was no place for that here. The leering face of the barman flashed before her. She could feel the memory of his unwanted touch on her skin, and the panic of utter helplessness raging within her. The dead men may have been husbands, fathers, sons and brothers, but they were not the kind that deserved to walk among wives, mothers, daughters and sisters.

Swinton and Fiore reappeared, leading saddled horses from their stalls. Fiore handed Henri the reins of a brown mare, and she swung herself up onto its back without hesitation. She was done with this place.

THE PLAGUE and misfortune that had befallen Ellest had hit the East Farmlands hard. Where once crops had grown prosperously and farmers

had tended the fields, now stretched vast paddocks of parched, yellow grass. The rural properties, windmills and cotton farms had been abandoned, left to scavengers and then the elements once they'd been stripped of their use. Henri urged her horse faster as they rode across the withered county. The company of seven was an odd one, but this war had brought them together for a reason, and Henri knew she had to trust in that now.

As dusk fell, she led them towards the sound of running water, where they could wash and refill their canteens. But as they drew closer to the source, Henri halted her horse. It was the King's River. And beyond its rushing current and soft banks, where once the West Farmlands had lain, was now a sea of mist, roiling eerily across the land.

Teeth clenched, still in her saddle, she turned to Swinton. 'Your doing?'

The commander's expression was unreadable as he stared out onto the mist-covered acres. 'Yes,' he said simply.

Henri's magic danced with fury as she led the company back inland from the river. They maintained a steady pace across the East Farmlands and she remained quiet in her anger as the others filled Swinton and Fiore in on the events of the past few months. On how they'd rescued Casimir from Oremere, and Bren and the Ashai from Moredon. It wasn't until Casimir got to the snowslide battle that Henri's blood went cold. The loss of Petra was still unbelievable to her. She kept waiting for her kindred to come strolling up to her, making some lewd comment about Eydis' brother, but she was absent. A missing link in their chain. A gaping tear in the fabric that made the Valians who they were.

Henri felt Sahara's gaze on her, but she kept her eyes ahead.

Night fell, and when they could go no further, they set up camp beneath. After the icy climate of Havennesse, none of them felt a fire was necessary in the warm winds of Ellest. In the soft light of a single torch, they unstrapped their weapons and passed around small rations of bread and cheese.

'We're only a day's ride away now,' Swinton told them, ripping a piece off his roll but not eating.

'Do you know what's awaiting us at Heathton?' Bleak asked, though to Henri, her gaze seemed distant. No doubt she was still thinking about those posters they'd found in Hoddinott. Henri didn't blame her. It was an unjust,

underhanded smear campaign to undermine Bleak, should her true heritage come to light. Henri expected nothing less from Arden.

Swinton was shaking his head. 'No more than you do. I sailed for Battalon months ago. Since then, Queen Vera was murdered, the plague hit, the masses were affected ... I do not pretend to know what lies beyond the gates. But Fi and I are wanted men, both you and Henri have bounties on your heads, and from what I understand, Ines will do anything to get Casimir back.'

'I feel so unwanted,' Ermias quipped as he bit down on a piece of cheese.

Swinton cut him a glare. 'We need to remain unseen for as long as possible.'

'Brilliant,' Bleak muttered.

Henri huffed a laugh in her direction. Bleak met her gaze with a resigned smile and passed her another chunk of bread.

'Just so we're all on the same page,' Sahara said, clearing her throat. 'There are three missions here, correct? Find Allehra. Locate the herbs we need for the Ashai. And Bleak, Casimir and Ermias, you're to retrieve this ... amulet?'

'That's the gist of it,' Ermias said, removing the cork from a flask with his teeth.

'Well, as long as we've got *the gist* of it,' Sahara retorted.

But Ermias merely flashed a wicked grin her way and lifted the flask to his lips.

HENRI'S SLEEP was broken and restless, her mind brimming with their plans and worst fears. She woke them before dawn and they rode hard.

At last, the shadow of Heathton rose on the horizon and they reached the city border. Henri had no inkling of what fate awaited them, awaited Allehra on the other side of the hills. All she could do was turn to her sister.

'*Simuliah?*' she asked quietly in a near-forgotten tongue.

Sahara gripped the hilt of her sword and smiled. '*Etiam. Simuliah,*' she said.

Yes. Together.

CHAPTER 17

Bleak couldn't stop the shudder that racked her body. She lay next to Henri with the others, on their bellies peering over a crest in the land, looking down. Below, the gates of Heathton were swarming with soldiers.

'Masked warriors,' Swinton said softly, not tearing his gaze away. 'Ines' masked warriors.'

Bleak couldn't move. It was as though she'd turned to lead and was anchored to the ground. The last time she'd passed through those gates to the castle, it hadn't ended well. She longed for Rion's reassuring presence. She didn't feel whole without him, didn't feel safe. Here least of all. Images of Bren and the mad Ashai woman strung up between the flogging posts flashed before her. Her fingers found the little vial of poison she kept in her pocket. She had meant what she'd said in Heathton the first time. She wouldn't be taken alive.

There was a gentle touch to her shoulder.

'No one gets left behind this time.' Henri helped her to her feet. 'I swear it.'

They retreated to the foot of the crest. Everyone's faces mirrored Bleak's own concern. They could feel it, too, a subtle damper on their magic, and a strange dark taint in the air.

Bleak swallowed the lump in her throat. 'So where is it?'

Casimir took a deep breath and composed himself. 'The library.'

'Inside the castle?'

'Yes.'

‘Gods, you didn’t make this easy for us, did you?’ Ermias snapped. ‘How in the realm are we meant to get into the very heart of the castle without getting captured? And then what? I’m guessing it’s a little more complex than picking your favourite book from the shelf?’

Casimir ground his teeth. ‘The three of us need to use our magic to retrieve the amulet. It was the only way to protect it from her – if all three of our powers were used.’

‘Fantastic.’

Bleak rubbed her temples. The tension in the group was getting to her more than usual. She looked at the older Oremian prince and realised the intricate markings had reached his jawline.

‘We have to do this now,’ she told them. ‘Much longer and Casimir and I won’t be around to help you retrieve it.’

Ermias was picking his teeth with the point of his dagger. ‘Well, I’m ready to hear your bright ideas for retrieval.’

The concern knitted across Casimir’s face was clear, but Bleak knew he was coming to the same realisation they all were. *They had to try*. If they didn’t, it was only a matter of time before they were all dead anyway.

‘We can’t just stroll through the gates,’ Casimir allowed.

‘No kidding.’

‘Enough, Ermias,’ Bleak said sharply. She turned to Swinton and Fi. ‘You know the city best.’

‘That we do,’ Fi said, looking to his brother-in-arms.

Swinton stood with a single nod. ‘I know a way.’

THE THUNDEROUS ROAR of Heathton Falls was almost deafening. The spray from the nearby rocks dampened Bleak’s skin, and a growing sense of dread squirmed in her stomach as they made the descent to the water’s edge. Thousands upon thousands of gallons of water poured downwards, churning white at the foot of the falls. They reached the wet banks of the King’s River and Bleak turned to Swinton.

‘Well?’ she called over the noise.

‘You’re not going to like it.’

‘Didn’t expect I would.’

Swinton grimaced. ‘Can you swim?’

‘I’m from Angove,’ she scoffed. ‘Course I can bloody swim. Question is, am I going to die in the process here?’

‘Very possibly.’

Bleak turned back to the seemingly infinite cascade of water. ‘Oh, good.’

Swinton addressed the group. ‘The entrance is behind the falls. There is a small channel to the side over there,’ he pointed. ‘If we can swim through there, we can get to the passage we need.’

‘Rheyah help us,’ muttered Sahara. ‘You’ve done this before?’

‘Once.’

‘That doesn’t fill me with confidence,’ Bleak said, taking in the formidable waters.

Swinton shrugged. ‘I didn’t die.’

‘Well, what a relief,’ Henri snapped. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

Swinton and Fiore led them down a narrow path closer to the foot of the falls. The spray of the water kissed Bleak’s face, and for a moment, she closed her eyes and pretended she was back on the deck of *The Daybreaker* with Senior and Bren. The illusion didn’t last long. Casimir elbowed her in the ribs and jutted his chin in Swinton’s direction.

‘We enter here,’ Swinton yelled over the roar. ‘Stay to the side. There’s a chain you can hold on to. Let go and you’ll be crushed by the water.’

Bleak watched as Swinton lowered himself into the white foam, pulling a rusted chain from the bank. With his face fixed in a determined expression, Swinton pressed himself against the side of the river, fighting against the current, which rose and rose.

Bleak swallowed, remembering the last time she’d had to use that much upper-body strength. At the Crossing in Valia, where Henri had forced her to swing across an enormous gorge. She shook the tremor from her hands. She’d survived that. Now, she’d survive this.

Swinton disappeared from sight and suddenly Fi was at her side, helping her down to the chain. There was nothing for it. She took a deep breath. The cold water rushed into her boots and soaked her clothes as she lowered herself into the river. With her teeth chattering, she began the climb towards the other side of the falls. The pull of the current was hard and insistent, and soon, her feet could no longer reach the riverbed. She gritted her teeth and dragged herself along the chain, her arms already straining.

The river wanted to swallow her, tugging at the lower half of her body, trying to rip her in two.

Each grasp of the chain was harder than the last. She was gasping for breath, up to her throat in the churning water.

‘Not much farther, Bleak,’ called a voice from beyond the falls.

She hoped Swinton was right. She was about ready to let the current sweep her away. At least the burning in her arms would cease.

Finally, she passed the thundering veil of the falls.

A sturdy hand gripped her arm and heaved her out of the water.

‘You alright?’

Bleak cleared her throat and pushed the sopping hair from her eyes. ‘Fine,’ she replied, looking around. They were in a cave of sorts; a dark, wet cave, with several tunnels leading in different directions.

‘What is this place?’ Henri appeared behind Bleak, looking exhilarated.

Swinton shrugged. ‘I’ve never known its name. Besides Fi, I don’t know anyone else who knows about it.’

‘It reminds me of —’

‘The East Sea Underpass?’ Ermias interjected, emerging from the water and wringing out the front of his shirt.

‘Exactly.’

‘That’s because it is. Or part of it, in any case,’ Ermias told them.

Henri turned to Bleak and Sahara. ‘If that’s true, we cannot linger. The lisloiks ... Their call can lure us into the passages. We don’t have Eydis’ wolfdogs to guide us. We need to be quick.’

Bleak didn’t question the Valian. Instead, she squeezed the water from her clothes as best as she could and lengthened her strides to keep up, motioning for Casimir and Ermias to do the same.

Swinton and Fi led them wordlessly through the dark tunnel. Bleak didn’t need to be a mind whisperer to understand the fear that was churning through them. She felt it herself, knowing that this could be a trap, knowing there was a good chance that they might not make it back out of Ellest. As they always did at times like this, her thoughts went to Bren. She was dragged back to that heated moment of passion between them, before it had been snuffed out. She didn’t know what it meant, if anything, and she didn’t know how she felt anymore. She pushed the memory away.

What’s done is done, she told herself, as light broke the endless dark of the tunnel. The passage brought them out into the woodlands, behind the

royal grazing paddocks and stables. Heathton Castle loomed, casting a cold shadow over Bleak's damp skin. Goosebumps rushed across her arms as she took in the towering turrets and stone walls, and the castle beyond.

Casimir's shoulder brushed hers. 'It was the only place I knew it would be safe,' he murmured. 'I had hoped we'd never need it.'

Beside them, Ermias was quiet, taking in the sight alongside them.

'Well, we're here. And we do need it, now more than ever,' Bleak said. 'So let's find it and get out.'

'We need to split up,' Swinton said. 'Our numbers aren't a great advantage anyway. We're better off not being all together in case we're caught.' He turned to the Valians. 'Henri and Sahara, you're with us. Bleak, you take the others to the western servants' entrance by the kitchens. It should have the least security there.'

It didn't matter how many dangerous situations Bleak managed to get herself in, the fear was the same: a relentless tightness in her chest and the near inability to swallow. There would come a time when someone didn't make it out alive. She knew that much.

Swinton and Fiore disappeared into the paddocks to scout the area, leaving Bleak and the rest of them to contemplate what they were about to undertake.

A firm hand gripped Bleak's arm. 'We meet back here before next sundown,' Henri said, with a glance at Sahara.

Sahara gave Bleak a tight smile and nodded at her sister.

'And if we're not here?' Bleak asked.

'Be here.'

'But if we're not —'

'No one gets left behind.'

Bleak nodded stiffly as Swinton and Fiore reappeared. The group readied themselves.

'Bleak.' Fi approached her. 'Good luck.'

'And you,' she said. 'Though you won't need it with Sahara and Henri by your side.'

Sahara and Henri turned back at the mention of their names.

Bleak couldn't stop herself. 'Sahara, Henri —'

Henri flashed a grin and palmed a katar. 'See you next sundown, mist dweller.'

Bleak felt the corner of her mouth tug upwards. ‘Next sundown,’ she agreed.

THE HEATHTON CASTLE grounds were crawling with guards. Bleak couldn’t even count how many. She clenched her fists, silently praying that the secret message she’d sent off before their departure reached the right people in time.

She took Casimir and Ermias around to the western gate of the castle as per Swinton’s instructions, but now ... now she was flummoxed as to how they were meant to get in undetected. Ermias couldn’t risk moving them in case it was straight into the path of a patrol. And they certainly couldn’t fight their way in.

‘They’re not the usual guards,’ she muttered to the Oremian princes on either side of her.

‘Ines’ lackeys,’ Casimir confirmed. He pointed to a soldier wincing. ‘Branded, no doubt.’

‘Like gods-damned cattle,’ Ermias muttered as they looked out across the yard.

‘Deadly cattle,’ Bleak said, noting the uniforms they wore: black, with a single red bloom on their breast.

Ermias gave a hollow laugh before glancing at Casimir. ‘Does Ines or Arden know about the amulet?’

‘Yes. Ines was here searching for it. But I took every measure I possibly could to protect it, to hide its existence from them.’

‘Let’s hope that’s enough,’ Ermias said. ‘Tell me she’s not here anymore?’

‘She’s not. We received word that she’s back in Oremere.’ Casimir rubbed the bridge of his nose. ‘Now, how are we going to infiltrate the castle?’

Bleak was only half listening. She was watching the troupe of guards patrol the perimeter. She had to take a chance ... She took a steadying breath and reached out with her magic. It wasn’t as easy to wield as it usually was, and it didn’t feel quite right, but Bleak chalked it up to the odd damper in the air. In any case, she had to try.

She felt Casimir and Ermias’ eyes on her, but she ignored them as she focused on one of the guards. His mind was murky as she slipped inside,

but not shielded. She could work with this. She set about her task, forming new pathways in his thoughts, in his memories, until she'd crafted a new sense of purpose in him. And then she moved to the next guard. And the next.

‘What’s she —’

‘Shhh,’ Casimir cut Ermias off as Bleak finished work on the last soldier. ‘Well?’ he said to her.

‘Wait here,’ she told him. Ignoring his protests, Bleak stood. Hands shaking uncontrollably by her sides, she approached the western gate. The guards didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Didn’t raise the alarm. So far, so good.

‘You there!’ A guard from another part of the grounds approached. ‘It’s *her*! Seize her!’

Bleak remained rooted to the spot as the guard broke into a run towards her. He drew his sword and charged.

Gods, she cursed herself. *I’ve made a mistake.*

Suddenly, the other guards sprang into action, cutting her attacker down with swift and brutal blows. He lay dead at her feet, his blood seeping across the cobblestones.

‘How did you do that?’ an awe-filled voice said in her ear. Casimir.

She shook her head, amazed that it had worked. ‘Come on. We have to get moving.’

The troupe of Ellestian guards surrounded Bleak and the others, a circle of protection.

She wasn’t overly familiar with the castle layout, having only been inside once before. She dipped into the mind of the head guard and had him lead them into the servants’ entrance. Her stomach was squirming.

‘It’s too easy,’ she hissed to the others.

‘Easy?’ A note of incredulity laced Ermias’ voice. ‘You think this is *easy*?’

‘It doesn’t feel right.’

‘We’re entering the heart of enemy territory. It’s not supposed to feel right,’ Ermias quipped, not taking his eyes off the hallway before them.

‘What if it’s a trap —’

A pair of guards rounded the corner and stopped in their tracks at the sight of them. ‘What’s the meaning of —’

Bleak’s troupe attacked, bringing the two down in a scuffle. She’d instructed that no blades be used, so as not to alert any nearby castle staff

with the noise. She held her breath as they moved forward, stepping over the lifeless bodies of the two guards. Bile burned the back of her throat. She'd been responsible for the end of so many lives. The blood on her hands now was endless.

A hand on her arm steadied her.

'Not here,' Casimir said. 'Don't let that darkness take hold here.'

'What —'

'I can feel it. Feel it in your magic surging.'

Ermias glanced between them and then focused his gaze forward. They crept through the servants' hallways, and eventually up the stairs to the next floor. They saw no castle staff. No one other than the guards they left dead in their wake. The castle was dark and eerie.

What happened here? Bleak wondered as they turned another corner and finally came upon the doors Henri had described. Beautiful open tomes had been carved into the oak, with intricate embellishments flourishing across their pages. Bleak placed a palm flat against the timber. A whisper. A whisper of magic tickled her fingertips.

'Bleak.'

She started at the sound of her name on Casimir's lips.

He reached across her and pushed open the doors.

Bleak had never been inside a library before, had never been one for reading. But this one was not what she'd imagined. Enormous shelves had been knocked over and thousands of books littered the floor. Pages had been torn from hundreds of volumes, and some of the shelves had been hacked at with an axe. Ines had destroyed the place in her search for the amulet.

'This way,' Casimir said, climbing over a fallen shelf.

Bleak instructed half their troupe to remain just inside the entrance. 'Bar the door,' she told them. The rest stayed with her and the men as Casimir led them through the mess, towards the wall at the back where a small cupboard stood.

'That's it?' Bleak scoffed when Casimir reached for the handles.

Casimir ignored her and opened the doors.

It was empty. No more than an unused linen cupboard.

But Casimir reached inside, and knocked a fist to the back of it. The backing gave way, revealing an antechamber behind it.

‘What ...?’ She trailed off, watching Casimir crawl through the small space and enter the chamber on the other side. With a glance of disbelief in Ermias’ direction, she followed him.

The antechamber was cold and dark, a single beam of light pouring through from the library.

Casimir helped Ermias down into it. ‘You have to take us to the room on the other side.’

‘What?’

‘Beyond this antechamber is where I hid the amulet.’

‘But ... how? There’s no entrance.’

‘We don’t have time for questions.’

‘Describe it to me.’

‘We don’t —’

Ermias cut him off. ‘I need to know where I’m taking us, or things could go wrong.’

Casimir made quick work of describing the room beyond; Ermias hung on every word.

‘Not much to go on,’ he muttered to Bleak as he took her hand and clasped Casimir’s with his other.

Light shimmered, and she felt the uncomfortable pull of Ermias’ magic. The realm spun around her in a dizzying blur. Moments later, they emerged in a dimly lit alcove.

In here, the magic was so potent Bleak could scarcely breathe. She felt on edge, spotting a small chest in the centre of the room. Casimir was already there, running his long fingers across the top of it.

She wanted to demand how he’d done this, but the magic swirled around her and wrenched her so hard she staggered. Gripping Ermias’ hand, she knew it was too late. She was already plummeting into the depths of Casimir’s mind ...

THE LANDSCAPE STOLE the breath from her. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains and emerald-green pine forest, the lake was the largest she’d ever seen. Its water was vibrant turquoise, and like mirror glass, it reflected the mountains and sky above. It was the kind of perfection that only nature could offer.

Beside her, boots crunched atop sand, and she watched as Casimir approached the water's edge. He was younger, perhaps early twenties, but he carried himself as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Where the water kissed the shore, he crouched and lowered his fingertips to its surface.

What is he doing? Bleak wondered, frowning as Casimir knelt in the sand, waiting. She had never seen him look so disturbed.

Moments passed, and the young prince's face crumpled. It seemed as though whatever he had hoped for wasn't to be. He dug a hand into his pocket and retrieved something. A necklace, Bleak realised. He clutched it tightly, his knuckles turning white, and tipped his head to the sky. Was he praying? Or giving up?

A soft hiss sounded from the lake.

Casimir's head snapped forward, scanning the water. Something was coming.

Ripples fluttered across the water's surface and then ... the lake seemed to part as a creature emerged from its depths. A woman, or so she appeared at first. Though she wore a near-translucent shift that clung to her body and her feet were bare, there was no doubt that she was a queen. Her hair was black and waist-length, tangled with dark seaweed, and atop her head sat a crown of coral.

'You came ...' Casimir stammered, as the creature glided towards him.

'Only because I could taste your desperation, boy prince.' Framed by dark shadows that could have been scales, her lilac eyes flashed. 'I do not take kindly to being summoned.'

'I came to warn you.'

'Warn me? Do not think we are unaware of your bedfellow. You are in league with the collector. And our people will have no part in it.'

'I made a mistake.'

'Many.'

'She's going to take it, Queen Delja. Lamaka's Basin.'

The creature's eyes flashed again. 'It is not hers to take.'

'No. But that won't stop her.'

The lake rippled again, disturbing the glassy reflection of the surrounding mountains, as though responding to its queen's rage.

'And so Oremere's boy prince has come to save his subjects?' Queen Delja's head tilted slightly, a predator studying her prey.

'Please.'

'He wants something, too, then.'

Still on his knees in the sand, Casimir took a deep breath. 'Yes.'

Queen Delja folded her arms across her chest, revealing black talons at her fingertips, waiting.

'Ines' plans are already in motion,' said Casimir. 'There is no stopping what will happen to Lamaka's Basin now.'

'Then why should I help you?'

'For the future, Delja. There will come a day when we can return to our lives as they were.'

'War never leaves the future intact as it was.'

'That may be so, but you still want a future, don't you?'

Bleak held her breath as she watched the memory unfold. Ermias did the same beside her.

Queen Delja said nothing, but continued to stare at the young prince.

Casimir held out the necklace he'd been clutching. Slowly, it floated from his palm towards the lisloik queen standing in the shallows. It dropped into her outstretched hand.

'You're the only one who can enchant it.'

'There are many enchantresses and Ashai throughout the realm.'

'None as powerful as you.'

'You know nothing of my power. Just a boy prince.'

'Even boy princes recognise strength when they see it.'

Queen Delja toyed with the silver chain, and ran her fingers across the amulet itself. 'You mean to preserve her magic?'

Casimir shook his head. 'I mean to cause a crack in her armour. Can it be done?'

The lisloik queen sent the necklace floating back towards Casimir. 'Perhaps. For a price.'

The young prince's face hardened with determination. 'Name your price.'

Her face broke into a terrifying smile. 'Immortality.'

Casimir frowned. 'You already live longer than any known creature in the realm. I cannot —'

'It's none of your concern, boy prince. And don't lie to me. I know of your magic. They whisper of it even beneath the seas. I know of how you can gift years, gift life to people. You will do so for me.'

‘But, Delja, it doesn’t work like that. I have to have those years to give.’

‘So get them.’

‘I cannot steal years from others to give to you.’

‘Give me the gift of immortal life, and I shall give you your chance at a future.’

‘Delja —’

But the lisloik queen was already gliding away, descending into the depths of the lake. The water rippled once more and she was gone, returning the surface to a now eerie stillness.

Bleak and Ermias watched as Casimir’s eyes glazed over before he got to his feet, and left the shore of Lamaka’s Basin.

BLEAK’S MOUTH was dry as she looked down at her hand tightly gripping Ermias’. The image of the lisloik queen flashed before her once more. She shuddered. Without meaning to, she’d invaded Casimir’s mind. And she’d shared that memory with Ermias. The chamber’s magic still tugged at her menacingly and she swayed on her feet.

But Ermias dropped her hand and rounded on Casimir. ‘You ... you did it?’

The eldest prince’s face was unreadable. ‘I did what I had to.’

‘You took life from innocents, and gave them to ... that *thing*?’ Ermias’ voice was raised.

The reality of Casimir’s actions washed over Bleak in a wave of shock.

‘Had I not, we would have no —’

‘Enough,’ Bleak said, shaking her head and trying to steady herself. ‘We are not here to debate the morality of actions long past. We need to get the amulet and get out of here.’

‘And what exactly will that achieve?’ Ermias snapped. ‘We don’t even know how this damn thing works.’

‘It may cause a crack in her defences,’ Casimir replied. ‘Her power may weaken if we wield a weapon that hosts a part of her. It may trick her magic —’

‘May,’ Ermias snorted, incredulous. ‘Your confidence overwhelms me, Casimir.’

Ignoring the fury rolling off both men beside her, Bleak turned to the chest. There was no lock, no hinges, no visible way to open it from what

she could see. Even in his anger, Ermias bore a similarly confused expression when he followed her gaze.

‘We need to combine our magic,’ Casimir told them, teeth gritted.

Bleak felt Ermias glance at her, but she merely shrugged. This was Casimir’s plan.

‘Every Ashai has a pressure point.’

Pressure point. The words sent a cold shiver through Bleak’s entire body, taking her back to the dark cell in Freyhill’s dungeon. Her hands grew clammy, and she took a step back from the chest.

‘Bleak?’ Casimir asked.

She stepped back again. What was he asking of them? Of her? When she’d already endured so much?

‘Bleak,’ he said again. ‘It’s alright. You’re in control now.’

Both Ermias and Casimir led her back to the chest and held out their hands.

I’m not in Freyhill, she reminded herself. *I’m not in Freyhill.*

‘What do I have to do?’ she managed.

‘Focus on your magic,’ Casimir said. ‘Draw it up from within you. The rest should be instinct.’

Bleak swallowed. ‘Alright.’

Casimir gave her a nod and closed his eyes.

Bleak did as she was told, blocking out the sound of the breath leaving her lungs, blocking out the questions, the fear and the sense that they were out of time. Instead, she narrowed in on the fire that flickered within her. A ball of magic that flared to life on its own. She fuelled it, encouraged it with every fibre of her being. And brought it to the surface.

She opened her eyes to find the chamber awash with golden light. Her magic met Casimir’s and Ermias’ ... There was a faint click.

The chest opened.

‘How ...?’ she breathed again, peering inside.

A simple amulet rested on a plain cushion, its chain silver, with a violet stone set in the pendant.

‘You saw how.’

‘No. How is it that Ermias and I are needed to unlock it? How did you get it in here in the first place?’

Casimir chewed the inside of his cheek. ‘I brought locks of your hair to Queen Delja. She enchanted it. It can only be wielded by the ruling families

of Oremere. Us. It also contains a kernel of Ines' power. So that when we use it against her, it recognises her magic and can get past her defences.'

Bleak didn't know how she felt about that. Casimir had taken her and Ermias' fates into his own hands. 'And what about getting it in here?'

Casimir gave Ermias a guilty side glance.

'What?' Ermias demanded.

'You brought me here,' Casimir said quietly.

'What?'

'You were only a child.'

Ermias stared at Casimir, and Bleak could feel the growing tension in her gut. This wasn't good. Despite there being no way for anyone else to get in or out of the chamber, she was filled with a sudden sense of urgency.

'We should —' she started.

'You used me. *A child*. To get you into this place? When we were on the brink of destruction?' Ermias demanded.

'It was for the good of the realm.'

'To fix *your* mistakes.'

'*Ermias*,' Bleak tried to calm him, but it was no use.

'You fell for some insane conqueror, sold our kingdom's secrets for a spot in her bed and now —'

'Yes!' shouted Casimir. '*I did*. I did those things and worse. And I've paid for it *ever since*. Do you think a day goes by that I don't regret it? What makes you —'

Casimir's angry words faded away as Bleak studied the stone. She wondered what sort of enchantment had allowed the lisloik queen to trap an ember of Ines' power within. She wondered if it would truly give them an edge against her. The violet colour of the stone seemed to change before her eyes; a glimpse of lilac swirled and vanished. The same colour as Delja's eyes. Mesmerising.

'Bleak? What are you doing?' sounded Ermias' voice. 'You alright?'

Bleak hadn't realised she'd been standing so close to the chest. Something within the stone was whispering to her magic.

Casimir approached her. 'It contains the power of five dominant magic wielders,' he said. 'That's why all three of us are needed to use it.'

'It ...' Bleak didn't know how to finish her sentence. She didn't know what it was doing to her, but the pull of its energy was strong, personalised

to her own magic. Though ... that made sense, didn't it? If it had been enchanted using her very essence in the first place?

Goosebumps rushed over her skin as her magic sensed something else pulsating within the once-more violet gem. A different sort of power. Insatiable. Bleak's fingers brushed the stone. There was a quiet hiss. A feather of smoke escaped the chest.

No, Bleak realised. *Not smoke – mist.*

Ermias leaped back. 'Is that meant to —'

'No.' Casimir snatched the amulet from Bleak and wrenched her away from the chest.

The mist came alive, spilling from its confines as it roiled towards them. Bleak's back hit the wall.

A YOUNG GIRL, no older than six, materialised before her. Her head was shaved and she wore a simple white robe and sandals. In her hands she clutched a ragged sack of belongings.

'Is that everything?' a faraway voice said.

The little girl nodded, tears tracking down her face. 'Please,' she whispered. 'It's all I have.'

'*ERMIAS!*' Casimir bellowed. 'Get us out of here.'

Mist crept up her body and Bleak felt Ermias' hand clamp onto her arm in a panic.

Light shimmered once more.

CHAPTER 18

Swinton and Fiore dragged the guards they'd killed into the maze. *Four.* Four more deaths to add to Swinton's seemingly endless tally of victims. There would be more before the day was done. Wiping the blood from his sword on the ground, he was silent as he led Fi, Henri and Sahara into the shadows of the hedged pathways. It was as he remembered, only wilder, with its whispers of magic louder, more insistent. One look at Henri's clenched jaw told him that she, too, could hear and feel it. He didn't fail to notice that the matriarch had placed herself in front of her twin, ready to defend and protect.

He turned his attention back to the twisting white pebbled path before him, sword at his side. There was no knowing what Arden had changed in his absence, what measures he'd put in place to protect his secrets. A cool breeze whistled through the hedges, sending a shiver through the emerald-green leaves and a chill down Swinton's spine. He had prayed he would never have to come back here. To the maze, and the horror that lay beneath it. A site of unimaginable cruelty and suffering. Was there no end to it? All those people like him, like Dash ... He pulled the dagger from his boot and motioned for the others to quicken their pace. It grew darker as they plunged deeper into the maze. Its lure was deadlier than ever, like a temptress. Its magic, full of malice and destruction, called to Swinton's. He took a deep breath as the tiny red flowers began to blossom at his boots, leading them through the towering hedges. When they reached the heart of the maze, Henri stopped short alongside him, gaping at the sea of red blooms before them.

'What is this place?' she breathed.

Next to her, Fi stood as though he was rooted to the spot, while Sahara surveyed the flowers and rubbed the goosebumps from her arms.

‘I don’t like this,’ she muttered.

‘Dimi.’ Fi turned to him. ‘As Henri asked, *what is this place?*’

Swinton made for the middle of the garden, where beneath the hundreds of blooms, the statue of Ines stood. ‘Somewhere I hoped I’d never have to show you.’ He plucked a single flower, and with a hiss, the sea of red vanished.

Fiore stepped back in alarm, cursing as he took in the newly revealed barren garden and stone features.

‘That’s her.’ Henri approached the statue that now stood before them.

Swinton nodded. ‘That’s her.’

Henri’s eyes were a storm of rage, but she said nothing more.

Swinton climbed onto the plinth. ‘Get up here. All of you.’

With their jaws clenched in apprehension, his three companions did as he bid. He brought an unsteady hand to the statue’s heart and pressed. There was a loud groan as the statue began to twist at its base. Swinton could feel the tension pouring off the others as they began their descent into the belly of Enovius. He gripped the statue, trying to prepare for what he was about to see. No matter how many times he’d been lowered into the depths of despair, nothing could ever prepare him for it. He took his last breath of fresh air and the garden above disappeared. He gathered himself as best he could.

There was nothing.

Where hundreds of emaciated Ashai had been imprisoned, crammed in like animals for the slaughter, was nothing. Only the faint scent of decay lingered.

‘Where is she?’ Henri’s voice was quiet, a threat.

‘Bleak said she’d be here,’ Sahara replied, peering down into the empty space.

Henri shot an accusatory look at Swinton. ‘Well, she’s not.’

‘I was just doing what I was told,’ he said.

She took a step towards him. ‘Like the dog you are.’

‘Henri. Enough,’ Sahara snapped. ‘Can you sense anything? Her energy? Was she ever here?’

Swinton held the warrior queen’s stare, but she tore her gaze away from him. She looked around the chamber, tentatively touching her fingertips to

the wall.

‘I don’t know,’ she said finally. ‘This place is doused with our herbs. Or something similar. It’s almost as though they’ve been modified. Heightened. I have no inkling of magic down here.’

‘Well, where is she, then?’ Fi said.

Swinton shook his head. None of this was right. His instincts were screaming out to him that he was missing something vital. He knew it, he just didn’t know *what*. He went to the sideboard at the end of the platform. This was where Arden stored the treated Valian herbs to use on the Ashai to nullify their abilities. If Allehra wasn’t here, perhaps at least the herbs still were. He’d used them to recondition his talisman last time he was here. He threw open the doors and peered down at the shelves. Rows and rows of vials greeted him. He snatched one up and uncorked it.

Empty.

Falling to his knees, he grabbed another. And another. Empty. And empty.

‘Dimi, what are you doing?’

‘The herbs ... The herbs we need. They should be here.’

‘But they’re not.’ Henri’s hand reached past him and took a vial. She removed the cork and tipped it upside down.

‘No.’

‘Is this a trap?’ Henri crouched beside him, her graphite eyes boring into his. ‘Are you setting us up? Are you still working with Arden?’

She had every right to mistrust him. Every right to suspect he was the man he’d been in the past.

But Swinton met her stare. ‘No. I’m not working with Arden,’ he said evenly.

The Valian’s eyes narrowed, before she turned back to the shelf of empty vials before them. ‘Fine,’ she said.

‘Dimi,’ Fiore said, palming his fighting knives restlessly. ‘I think we should get out of here.’

Swinton was inclined to agree.

Upon their return above ground, they waited at the mouth of the maze. The courtyard was empty. The squire barracks was quiet.

‘Where is everyone?’ Fi muttered, frowning at Swinton.

‘I don’t know.’ Something wasn’t right. Even on its quietest days, the castle was a hive of activity. Today, eeriness had settled over the grounds.

‘Henri ...’ Sahara was looking at her boots, where three red flowers bloomed.

Henri crouched at her sister’s feet and studied the blood-coloured petals. These damned things represented so much suffering, so much misplaced power.

Suddenly, a wild cheer erupted in the near distance. The sound echoed through the hedges behind them, hundreds of voices strong.

Henri stood. ‘*What was that?*’

Swinton looked to Fi. ‘Sounds like it came from the old amphitheatre?’

The applause sounded again, louder still.

Fi nodded.

‘We should see what’s happening there,’ Henri interjected. ‘We’re not leaving this gods-damned capital without Allehra.’

With a glance at Fi, Swinton nodded. ‘So be it.’

The former Commander and Captain of the King’s Army led the Valian twins through the deserted castle estate, following the bursts of cheers as they grew louder and louder.

The noise was indeed coming from the old amphitheatre. The grounds surrounding the structure were trampled and muddy, while the roar coming from within was almost deafening.

What in Rheyah’s name is happening here?

As they crept closer to the gates, he saw the banners. The King’s Tournament.

‘Dimi ...’ Fi’s gaze fell to the royal sigil on the fluttering fabric.

‘What is it?’ Henri demanded.

‘Arden – he hosts a tournament every year. It’s usually in Willowdale, but ...’

‘But?’ Henri pressed.

‘But it appears he’s hosting it in the capital this time. We need to get closer.’

Swinton noticed Henri’s jaw clench, but she nodded.

‘Lead the way,’ she said.

The old amphitheatre hadn’t been used for formal events in recent years, certainly not during Swinton’s time as commander. He wasn’t all that familiar with its more discreet entrances. Fi, however, was.

‘I used to meet Tailor here,’ he explained. ‘When I was still running the Belbarrow dark markets from Ellest. He’d bring me reports and I’d supply

him with goods to transport. This was the safest place. No one ever came here.' He tugged Swinton's sleeve and motioned for the Valians to follow close to the towering stone wall, the cheers within growing more frantic.

Swinton's palm was clammy holding the hilt of his dagger. He felt sick. Whatever lay on the other side of these great walls ... He took a deep breath. Whatever it was, he had to know what was happening.

Fiore brought them around the side of the amphitheatre to a cramped, dark passage. Broad-shouldered Fi had to turn side-on to lead them through. They were beneath the stands now, and above, the stomping of the crowd was like thunder. The passage opened up into a space where they could peer out between people's legs and feet, to the arena. Swinton craned his neck. Whatever sport was taking place had captivated the audience, but dozens of guards blocked his view. The hard clang of steel echoed across the space, spurring the crowd on.

Swinton's chest constricted. *There he is.* In the opposite stands, King Arden sat in an elaborate throne; silver and gold entwined above his head to reach a sharp apex. Carved into the filigree was an all-too-familiar face. *Ines.*

Arden smoothed down the front of his pristine tunic, his palm running over his heart, where a single red bloom was embroidered.

Swinton felt sick. The king bore a smug expression. The slight smirk of an ignorant man who thought he had the best hand at the card table. Perhaps he did. But it was the sight of the man beside the king who caused Swinton's breath to catch in his throat. Whose face Swinton had known since birth. *Sir Caleb Swinton.* His father, wearing their house sigil of crossed battleaxes emblazoned proudly on his chest, his expression unreadable. Swinton's hands shook. He couldn't believe he was sitting there, still the king's right-hand man, still the most revered knight in Ellest. How could his father's loyalty be so blind? How could he possibly serve that bastard, who'd wrought so much pain and suffering on the realm? Sir Caleb's presence ultimately meant something else as well, Swinton realised, his stomach sinking. It meant that he'd disowned his son. There was no other way he would be allowed to stand where he now stood —

A shriek from the arena sounded. The jeers of the crowd forced Swinton to tear his eyes away from his father. He stood on his toes and squinted, trying to make out what was unfolding before them. It felt like a lifetime ago that he had participated in the famous King's Tournament, and faced

the torrent of bloodlust from the spectators. This was worse. In all his years of tournaments, battles and training, he'd never seen such fever.

Still unable to see, he looked to the figure on the other side of the king. Prince Jaxon. The heir to the crown of Ellest. The teenager's once youthful face was now gaunt, his stare blank as he watched the duel unfold before him. A shell – that was what the prince had become. And on his shoulder rested the hand of Tannus, the king's weapons master.

Swinton turned to Fi. 'What are we —'

He was cut off by thunderous applause from the crowd. Above where they were hidden, the stands quaked.

Swinton whirled around in time to see the wall of guards part. *Gods.*

It was Mother Matriarch Allehra, staggering to her feet. She had been forced into Ellestian armour and was clutching a longsword. Her silver-streaked midnight hair had been hacked away, leaving much of her head bald, revealing the extent of her scarring from the fire.

The man advancing on Allehra was no stranger to Swinton. His arrogant stance, his leer ... *It can't be ...*

Henri was already moving. As was Sahara.

Swinton lunged for the Valians, but even with the strength of one hundred men, he could not have stopped them.

CHAPTER 19

Henri didn't think. Her katars were already clutched in her hands as instinct drove her forward into the arena. Sahara moved with her, her sword unsheathed and poised for violence, her cropped hair swinging at her jaw. The crowd erupted as the sisters burst out into the open and the guards surrounding Allehra whirled around to face them.

Henri sliced across the first throat with her blades. *They will die. They will die for what they've done here. Every last one.*

She cut across the back of one guard's legs, sending him to his knees, striking him on the back of the head with the iron hilt. She blocked a blow to her neck and drove her katar straight into her attacker's heart, feeling breastbone and muscle crunch upon impact. Blood splattered across the dusty ground as nearby, Sahara swung her sword. Henri watched her sister's back and Sahara watched hers as they cut their way through the force of Ellestians. More guards swarmed from the stands. It didn't matter. She and Sahara were unstoppable. They always had been together. Henri relished the weight of her weapons gripped across her fists and the cries of pain that left the soldiers as she dealt blow after blow, her blades shining red.

She used her magic, thrumming in her hands, to knock half a dozen men aside, and then half a dozen more, but ... Something blunt struck her across the shoulderblades. She staggered, catching herself before she hit the dirt. There was a cry of shock and bone crunched. Sahara was already wrenching her sword from the man's abdomen, blood specked across her face.

They reached Allehra. She had been strapped into Ellestian men's armour as a cruel joke, ill-fitting, clumsy and worn. It had been rammed

onto her body and buckled across her with little care. Her face was marred with bruising and burn scars, her silver-streaked midnight hair shorn away and singed from her scalp on one side. The woman who had once been a beacon of strength and Valian training was now something else. Thin and weak.

And injured, Henri realised as their Mother Matriarch limped towards them. But as she grew closer, as Henri placed herself between Allehra and the onslaught of Ellestian guards, she saw something flicker in her mother's eyes. They burned bright. Bright with pride as her gaze fell upon Henri, and then Sahara. Together. Allehra straightened, lifting her own sword, and smiled at Henri.

'I knew you would come,' she said. 'Both of you. I knew it.'

Henri noted Sahara placing herself at Allehra's back, so their mother had a guard on either side. But Henri suddenly realised that it wouldn't matter at this rate. The guards continued to swarm from beneath the stands, fresh and ready to fight, whereas despite her stamina and discipline, Henri found her energy flagging. They were surrounded. She looked up in time to see a familiar face.

The eyepatch confirmed it. The brute of a guard who'd been in the Hawthornes with Bleak all that time ago. The bastard who'd manhandled the Angovian, who'd tried to —

Yes, it's definitely him. Henri noted his sneer, and froze. *Isn't he dead?* She was *sure* Bleak had told her he'd been part of the crew she'd killed on her way to Oremere. That she'd used her power in the same way she'd done in Hoddinott.

Siv Lennox advanced, locking eyes with Henri, a hunger etched on his face that chilled even Henri's bones. Something wasn't right here. The eyepatch he wore was black, save for the red bloom that had been painted in its centre. Henri remembered throwing her katar, the blade embedding into the would-be rapist's eye. She had been glad for it. Now ... now she wished she had killed him then and there.

'You,' he said, taking another step towards her, his sword gleaming in the sun.

'Me.' Henri was going to end him.

She lunged first, slicing her katars across his middle with a warrior's precision. She waited for the tips of her blades to find the weak spot between the pieces of armour, to cut through the delicate skin of the lower

abdomen. They didn't. He leaped back, with a speed that didn't match his substantial size. She cursed, wanting nothing more than to spill his guts upon the dirt here and now.

He drove forward with his sword, a blur of movement and speed. Henri blocked his blow with both katars, her arms trembling beneath the force. He was strong. Stronger than she'd anticipated. Almost as though —

He struck again, not holding back. Henri knew he sought vengeance for his lost eye and the humiliation she'd put him through. That was nothing compared to what she'd do to him now. Allehra was still behind Henri, her sword drawn but her stance weak. Lennox was one of the puppet masters behind this horrific farce that King Arden called tournament entertainment. And he would pay. Henri adjusted her stance and launched herself at him.

He was ready for her. Steel sang as his sword met her katars, the impact reverberating through both her arms and into her chest. He struck again, this time catching her on her shoulder, his blade sinking into the soft skin there. She swore. The sharp pain and warm trickle of blood sent her rage into a spiral. How could he have landed a blow? She was better, *much better* than he was.

Sahara's sword clanged loudly behind her. Henri hoped her sister was faring better than she was. She ducked another swing from Lennox, and went on the attack, jabbing aggressively with her blades.

Where's Swinton? She cursed as Lennox parried around another of her blows. She looked to their hiding spot below the stands, but there was no one there. *Bastard*. He'd taken his shot to run. Like the coward he was. She'd been waiting for him to crawl back to the king — Lennox's blade found its mark again. This time just above her breast. Pain carved through her like a hot knife and her breath whistled between her teeth. Lennox wasn't the same man she'd encountered in the Hawthornes. He was different. He was wearing her down. *Impossible*.

Henri chanced a glimpse behind her. Sahara and Allehra had their backs to her, both fighting valiantly, but the sheer numbers of Ellestian guards were overwhelming. Henri cursed herself for acting with emotion rather than training. After all they'd been through ... were they to die here? As part of some sick entertainment?

From the corner of her eye, she spotted commotion in the stands. Swinton and Fiore. Fighting their way through the crowd towards the king.

Lennox knocked her to the ground. His heavy boot pressed onto her chest, forcing her back down, pushing on her fresh wound. She tried to manoeuvre from beneath him, to twist and kick as she'd done so many times before in battle. But the weight of him on her was too much. She couldn't budge from beneath his boot. It felt as though her ribs, her sternum might crack under the pressure. This was it. He was going to gut her here, like an animal in the dirt. Vengeance for his lost eye, vengeance for robbing him of Bleak ...

A warrior cry sounded.

Henri's heart stopped. *Petra?*

But it wasn't her kindred. The thunder of a hundred horses' hooves shook the ground as Valians swarmed the arena, spilling onto the field like a river bursting its banks. And it wasn't only Valian warriors. Groundlings charged, swords and spears seized in their fists. With the healer, Lyse, on horseback at the heart of the fray. *How did she get here?*

'Charge!' she yelled over the battering of weapons.

At the diversion, Henri twisted out from under Lennox's boot, flipping up and bringing her own boot crashing into the side of his face, the side with the eyepatch. He lurched forward, but Henri's strength and energy surged at the sight of her people. She lunged, driving her katar in between the pieces of Lennox's armour, in between his ribs. She felt the tip of the blade pierce flesh and scrape against bone. A sharp cry of pain escaped Lennox and he doubled over. Henri didn't wait. She wrenched the katar from his body, dripping with blood, and made for Sahara and Allehra.

'How?' she managed when she reached them, taking in the sight of the Valians crashing into the Ellestian guards.

'Bleak,' Lyse replied. She jumped down from her horse, sword dripping red.

'Bleak?' Henri cut down a charging guard, and his body slumped to the ground with the others.

The groundling nodded. 'She knew we'd be needed. *All* of us. She had Ermias travel me to the Sticks to rally our remaining forces.'

Allehra joined them. 'But the groundlings can't ...'

Lyse raised a brow and switched sword hands. 'Just because we didn't meet the standard you set, doesn't mean we're not capable of great things. Look around. A Valian from the Sticks is still worth twenty ordinary men.'

Henri nodded and gripped the groundling's shoulder. 'You're damn right there.'

'Where's Swinton?' Sahara said, her eyes wild, dirt and blood smudged across her skin.

Henri whirled around and looked to the stands. The former commander and captain had reached the king's inner guard, where Arden had a knife to his own son's throat.

CHAPTER 20

Swinton threw his hand across Fi's chest, stopping the Battalionian from lunging at the king. Arden's silver dagger gleamed against the soft ivory skin of Prince Jaxon's throat, which was pale enough that Swinton could see faint blue veins pulsing in the prince's neck. Time hung suspended and the chaos around them fell away. Swinton and Fi stood frozen before king and heir, helpless and panicked. The future king's life was at stake, his blood about to be spilled across the throne that was rightfully his. Swinton took a deep breath, praying to all the gods that another young life would not be extinguished so soon.

'There's no need to hurt the boy, Arden,' Swinton said slowly, finding his voice. 'He's your son.'

'Arden?' The king laughed. 'I see we've finally dispensed with formalities.'

Prince Jaxon squirmed beneath Arden's grip, trying to edge away from the blade. On both his and the king's tunics, the Ellestian royal sigil was embroidered: the crown of fire encircling two crossed battleaxes. Swinton gritted his teeth. Those axes made a mockery of him – his own family's sigil, one that no longer belonged to him. His eyes narrowed. An addition had been made to the royal sigil – there was now a red flower at its centre, like a heart.

Someone cleared his throat.

Even in his sixtieth year, the revered knight looked fit and muscular. Grey peppered his charcoal hair and beard, while his umber eyes were bright and alert. Sir Caleb stood beside the two royals, his battleaxes drawn.

He took in Swinton's shaved head and plain clothes, his gaze snagging on the sword in his son's hands rather than their family's traditional weapons.

For the longest time, all Swinton had ever wanted to be was the knight who stood before him. And for the longest time, he'd kept his distance, kept his secrets, to protect his father from the shame, from the truth of what he was and what he'd done. His admiration for the man ran deep, more than his father, more than *anyone* had ever known.

'Father,' he heard himself implore. *You're standing on the wrong side*, he wanted to yell. But Sir Caleb didn't move. He turned from Swinton. Swinton had renounced his former self; now his father had renounced him as well. Sir Caleb's gaze had turned wholly to the king. Perhaps he, too, had fallen under the false queen's spell – perhaps her face had been burned into his breast like so many before. If that had become his father's fate, there was nothing Swinton could do for him. He turned back to Arden, a pit of despair churning within.

'What is it that you want?' he asked.

Arden applied more pressure to the dagger resting against Prince Jaxon's flesh, and the teenager's eyes grew wide. He gave a strangled cry as the skin broke, a trickle of blood running down his neck. 'Please,' the boy gasped.

'All I wanted was loyalty,' Arden said, ignoring his son. 'From you. From my subjects. From my wife.'

'You *had* our loyalty.' Swinton's sword was heavy in his hand. He could feel Fi tense beside him. 'It was us who didn't have *your* loyalty. Your people trusted you. Look where you led them.'

Arden's expression was one of cool amusement. 'This is it?' he sneered. 'You've come all the way back to Ellest to *ask me* to stop? That's your big plan? I would have thought —'

His words were drowned out by a thunderous sound – a unified warrior cry from below. Swinton glanced down into the arena. He nearly dropped his sword. A second force of Valian kindred had charged through, and were battling the Ellestian guards.

Where did they come from? Swinton drank in the sight of the fierce warriors on horseback. And the sight of Henrietta Valia, staring back at him from the heart of the arena. Her hair had escaped its braid and was blowing wildly in the wind across her mud-specked face. Around them, the crazed

crowd fled in droves, knocking the core guard surrounding Arden, near trampling them.

Swinton glanced at Fi. Now was their chance. He gave his friend a subtle nod, seizing the moment of distraction, and lunged. He knocked Jaxon from the king's grip and tackled Arden with all his might. There was a blur of movement and a shout behind him as Fi took on Tannus.

Where is Sir Caleb?

He had Prince Jaxon. As a hostage or a protected heir, Swinton didn't know.

A vice-like grip clenched around his throat and suddenly they were falling. He and Arden tumbled down the stands, each impact rattling Swinton's body, jarring his bones. They kept falling. Swinton's shoulder, back, hip – everything connected with the stone benches. He couldn't see Arden. Everything was a blur. He cried out as he slammed into more stone, his teeth knocking together. He bit through his lip as finally, he skidded to a halt in the dirt. On the ground, the frenzy of the battle around him was dizzying. A blur of horses, swords and blood, unable to discern friend from foe. Gasping, he hauled himself to his feet, and Arden scrambled upright beside him.

Sudden colour caught Swinton's eye. A sea of red flowers bloomed in their wake. A wave of them barrelled towards king and commander, creating a wall of blooms closing in around them. They were trapped within. Swinton's chest constricted and his throat closed up as the floral walls edged closer and closer. In a moment of surrealness, he realised that the flowers had no scent. They crept in further, pressing against his shoulder. Their petals were full of whispers, thousands of them.

What is this madness? Swinton lurched forward, gripping his sword as Arden faced him.

The king ran his fingers across the red flowers now towering around them. A phantom wind rustled the foliage and kissed Swinton's battered skin. The whispers grew louder. They were speaking to him, calling him. Something pulsed in his breast pocket beneath his armour. The pouch of Valian herbs Henri had reluctantly given him. It pulled him back from an invisible ledge. Arden's magic simmered in the enclosed space, tainted with something Swinton's own magic recoiled from.

'It'll never be yours,' he told the king. 'The power you long for. It's hers. She'll never allow you to wield it for yourself.'

‘She already has.’ King Arden unsheathed the sword at his waist and Swinton staggered back. It was a weapon unlike anything he’d ever seen. The blade glowed like a hot ember, like it would catch ablaze at any moment, like it would not only cut, but melt flesh.

‘A gift,’ Arden told him as he advanced.

Swinton scrambled back. His sword would do nothing against such a weapon. He backed into the solid wall of red blooms, their petals hissing against his skin. It sounded like prayers to Enovius.

‘Forged with the power of energy shifters from Oremere ...’ Arden struck.

In a horrified daze, Swinton only just managed to raise his sword in time. The moment Arden’s blade met his, he felt it: his energy being sucked from his body. Arden struck again, and Swinton’s block this time was weaker. More of his energy sapped from his very being, while Arden seemed to grow stronger. His blade skimmed across Swinton’s unprotected arm.

‘Do you remember that mission all those years ago?’ Arden said quietly, admiring the blood on his blade. ‘The one that promised a knighthood. The one that took you away from Willowdale, away from her.’

Swinton’s heart caught in his throat. Eliza’s golden hair flashed in his mind; a curtain of it falling about their faces, her breath warm on his cheek.

‘A group of malcontents, wasn’t it?’ King Arden said, taking a deliberate step towards him.

Swinton couldn’t swallow. ‘They ... they wanted to steal ...’

‘The horses?’ Arden smiled. ‘That’s what I heard too.’ But the glimmer in his eyes said something else.

‘No.’ The word escaped Swinton, no more than a flicker of a shadow across the void of time and misdeeds. She flashed before him again. The dusting of light freckles over the bridge of her nose. The subtle curve of her smile. The scowl she reserved for when he’d done something to displease her.

Arden’s sword crashed down on Swinton’s. His arms shook beneath the force. The very steel of his blade trembled, and *hissed*, before splintering and shattering.

‘She was a true beauty, the stable master’s daughter,’ Arden said.

Swinton couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe.

‘But I needed someone who was without distraction, someone who had nothing to lose. And you know, I enjoyed the ... poetry of it. The son of the man who saved the realm from the mist, was the one to destroy it. So you see, I couldn’t allow her to live.’

‘You ...’ But Swinton couldn’t form the words. There were no words. Arden pressed the tip of his blade to Swinton’s heart. Swinton didn’t care about the pain that seared as the steel made contact with his skin, ripping his energy, his very being from his body. He didn’t care if Arden carved his heart out then and there. It was broken anyway.

‘Not me, exactly,’ Arden told him.

‘Me,’ a gruff voice interrupted.

Swinton didn’t move as Siv Lennox cleaved through the wall of red blooms. They seemed to part for him, as though they knew him, recognised a familiar, poisonous part of him. He held a wound at his side, blood flowing freely, but his face ... His face was etched with deep satisfaction, as though he had been waiting for this very moment his whole life.

‘She called your name, you know,’ he said. ‘At the end. When the light was fading from her eyes. You’ve killed before, Dimitri. You know the moment I mean.’

Swinton was silent. Nothing mattered now but the two men who stood before him. The men who’d killed his wife, who’d threatened his son, who’d forced him to do unspeakable things. Rage and grief coursed through him, but Arden’s glowing blade was still poised at his chest, slicing through his armour as though it were butter, the steel slowly piercing his flesh. He felt the blade sink into his skin, and hot blood spill. He didn’t feel pain. It paled in comparison to what raged in his heart. He couldn’t move. The enchanted sword was feeding off his energy, off his fury and despair, robbing him of the power and the will to defend himself.

He stared at Lennox. ‘How ...?’

‘Am I alive?’ Lennox smirked, advancing. ‘King Arden made a request to our queen. He knew how much fun we’d have together. Her Majesty found a way to bring me back, for a time. A brilliant combination of mist and Casimir’s stolen years. If I do well, I receive more time. More time to slaughter each and every single person you’ve ever spoken to. Every person that gutter rat and forest bitch have spoken to. Until —’

There was a rustle from nearby as someone else carved through the wall of blooms. King Arden and Lennox whirled around towards the noise. The

king's blade momentarily left Swinton's chest.

'Dimitri!'

Swinton hadn't heard that familiar voice call his name in a long time. He staggered.

Sir Caleb threw his battleaxes to his son, and Swinton caught them, their weight suddenly reassuring in his hands. Arden spun back around to face him, but Swinton was faster. He gripped the battleaxes firmly, and, flipping to his feet, in one clean motion sliced through Arden's neck.

The king's eyes went wide, and he gave a strangled gasp. Blood gushed from the open wound, and his head tumbled from his shoulders. A soft thud sounded as it hit the ground.

Around them, the wall of blooms vanished. Swinton dropped the axes, struggling to stay upright. His father rushed forward, heaving him up and supporting his weight.

King Arden was dead. His eyes were still open, frozen in shock. They stared at Swinton as blood pooled around his decapitated head.

There was a shout. A Valian Swinton didn't recognise charged at Lennox, taking him on in a whirl of her blade, blocking a blow that was meant for Sir Caleb. Swinton jolted back to the present, tearing his eyes away from Arden.

In the arena, Henri's people were being forced back by Arden's army. Swinton's heart sank. They had fought valiantly, but Arden's numbers were too great, his forces too strong. Forgetting his own pain, Swinton could do nothing but watch on in horror as the Ellestian guards overwhelmed the Valians. The violence was endless. The wet slice of a blade into flesh. The crack of a hilt into a nose. The wind around them sang a broken cry of pain. He could no longer see Henri and Sahara; there were too many soldiers, a swarm of them rushing in. Unstoppable. Swinton struggled in his father's arms, trying to reach them. He couldn't leave the Valians to die.

'There's nothing you can do, son.' Sir Caleb held him back, trying to drag him away from the chaos. There was no waking from this horror. He'd brought them here, the Valian queen and her people. Brought them here to face their extermination. The screams became his own, where he felt them at his core.

A soldier struck down a Valian before his eyes, and nearby an injured horse shrieked in pain. The charging yells of bloodlusting men filled the air, their eyes shining with the reckless knowledge that victory was close.

Swinton finally spotted Henri at the heart of the battle. Her skin and leathers were slick with blood, her eyes wide in disbelief. It was almost over.

A horn blasted. A protracted, low sound. A horn Swinton had heard once before, a long time ago, in Battalon.

Fiore Murphadias stood in the stands, the horn pressed to his mouth as he blew it again.

Time stood still. All eyes were on the former captain as he rolled up his sleeve, revealing the lick of flame tattooed on his forearm.

Swords hung suspended at soldiers' sides as they fixated on Fi. *The Baron of Battalon*.

To Swinton's shock, a spear clattered to the ground. A guard turned to Fi, jaw slack. He removed his gauntlet and bared a similar tattoo of fire. Though it was far smaller than Fi's, the inked fire wrapped around the man's wrist, almost a twin to the Battalonian's great flame. Dirt sprayed as a shield was plunged into the earth and another guard stepped forward. Clumsily, he tore off his left greave. Twisting his leg in Fi's direction, he revealed a series of small flames trailing up his calf.

What in the realm ...? Forgetting his pain, Swinton stared at the bizarre scene unfolding before them. Surely this wasn't right? Surely —

A final figure stepped forward. Swinton recognised him as Arden's new captain by the engraving on his breastplate. The man was enormous, towering over his fellow soldiers. He removed his helm, locking eyes with Fi from across the arena as he strode towards him, his expression unreadable. When he reached the foot of the stands below Fi, the new captain reached for his gorget, discarding the armoured collar. There was an intake of breath. For running down the right side of the new captain's neck was an inked Battalonian flame.

'Soldiers of Ellest, put down your weapons,' his voice boomed across the amphitheatre.

It was as though the entire King's Army was rooted to the spot. The Valians looked around, dazed and confused. Swinton stared as well. What was happening here?

The new captain waited. And then ... swords, shields and spears clattered to the ground in unison. The King's Army was surrendering.

Swinton's eyes found Fi once more. *The Baron of Battalon*. It wasn't possible, was it? That his friend's influence reached so far.

A cry of rage pierced the shocked silence. Lennox's face distorted with fury. Spearing the Valian he'd been duelling through the middle, he picked up the king's discarded sword and charged back towards Swinton.

'You and that foreign bastard,' he hissed, spit flying. 'Both of you, *and your bastard son* will die ...'

The wall of blood blooms shot up from the earth once more, blocking out the Valians and King's Army as Lennox stormed towards Swinton and his father, brandishing Arden's magic sword. Swinton faltered and sank to the ground. He had no energy left in his bones, no fire left in his heart. King Arden had robbed him of every last shred. His father's efforts to haul him upright were pointless. And now, he and Caleb were both unarmed.

Lennox neared, the hatred burning in his eyes a clear sign of his intent: he was going to finish what he'd started. He bared his teeth and closed the gap between them. 'You're going to pay for *everything* you've —'

There was a sickening wet slice.

Lennox made a strangled noise as blood shot onto Swinton's armour.

A katar protruded from Lennox's good eye. He collapsed, his skin suddenly withering.

Someone shoved his lifeless body aside. Henrietta Valia stood in his wake, her hair unbound and matted. But the warrior queen gave a crazed grin as she offered Swinton her hand.

Swinton took it; Henri's grip was firm and reassuring in his. As the Valian pulled him to his unsteady feet, red exploded around them. Flowers burst in a wave across the entire amphitheatre.

CHAPTER 21

Mist swirled even as Bleak, Casimir and Ermias were transported from one place to the next. Bleak felt it crawling on her skin and teasing the magic in her veins to the point of insanity. It was relentless, merciless, just like the false queen who wielded it. They were caught in the *in-between*, she realised. Ermias' magic was stunned. She couldn't see either prince, but could feel their panicked grips around each of her hands. Had it been a trap? How had Ines managed to infect a box she couldn't open with toxic mist? And now ... there was nothing but black around her. Nausea hit her, as did the sudden pull of Ermias' magic and the glimmer of light.

Bleak was sent sprawling across the ground, her palms stinging as she skimmed the dirt. Panting, she looked around. Casimir and Ermias were in similar positions. Ermias had brought them to the entrance of an arena. Bleak watched in horror as Ellestian civilians and guards alike fled from it, their screams sharp bursts in her ears. A torrent of red flowers swallowed the structure, washing over the great stone archways and columns in a terrifying tide. She, Casimir and Ermias staggered from the stampede's path, gaping as the blood-coloured blooms took over, like a poison takes a body.

'What's going on?' she yelled above the chaos, the mist from the chamber still damp on her skin.

'My magic brought us here,' Ermias shouted back. 'The others ... Henri and Sahara, they're inside.'

No. They can't be. 'Henri!' she cried out, as the flowers closed over the main entrance. 'Henri!'

Casimir held her back, his arms clamped tight across her chest. The memory of the snowslide flashed before her eyes. The snow pummelling down the mountain, devouring everything in its path. She had nearly lost them once. Now, it was happening again.

‘Henri!’

But it didn’t stop. The flowers took over everything, rushing across the grounds surrounding the arena, kissing the toes of Bleak’s boots. Everywhere. They were *everywhere*. Her body sagged into Casimir’s hold and a quiet gasp escaped her. She’d failed them. Failed them all.

At last, the blooms ceased to spread. Their velvet petals shone brilliant red in the sun’s glare, and shivered in the afternoon breeze. Bleak’s stomach was lead, and as silence settled around them, her knees buckled. It was all too much. Her magic and mind were spent; she had nothing left. The sight of Ines as a child lingered in her mind. Having the amulet was pointless if they had no forces left to rally, no friends left to fight for.

Suddenly, there was a crunch from within the amphitheatre, and a curse. The sound of a katar slicing through foliage filled the air. Henri emerged from the arena, hacking at the blooms, hair loose and wild. Sahara was close behind, cutting through the flowers remaining in her sister’s wake, and behind her ... Allehra. The *real* Allehra. She was clumsily clad in oversized men’s armour, and she looked dreadful, her face covered in bruises and her hair cut unevenly close to her skull, but it was her. Bleak could feel it. Without thinking, she rushed forward and threw her arms around the Mother Matriarch.

Allehra squeezed her back, the armour pressing into Bleak. ‘I knew you’d work it out,’ she said, pulling back to gaze at Bleak’s face.

‘It’s you,’ Bleak breathed. ‘It’s really you.’

‘It is.’

Bleak released her and turned to the others. ‘You’re alright? You’re all alright?’

‘More or less,’ Henri said, sheathing her katars at her thighs. ‘Thanks to you and the groundlings.’

‘The groundlings?’

Henri nodded. ‘They got your message. See for yourself.’

Bleak peered behind the warrior queen. Lyse, the young healer, was leading dozens – no, *hundreds* of Valians and groundlings from the arena. Some on horseback, some on foot, bruised and battered, but *here*, in

Heathton. They looked to Lyse for instruction, some of their faces slack-jawed in awe of their unusual leader. Bleak opened and closed her mouth in shock. She had asked Ermias to transport Lyse back to Valia some time ago to rally the remaining groundlings and Valians, but she never thought ... Never thought this would happen. They had come. They had all come to their aid.

In the midst of the Valian forces, Fi emerged, supporting Swinton's weight across his shoulders. The former commander looked very much worse for wear, but alive. And Fi ... The others were looking at him differently; awe-struck. *What happened in there?*

Bleak froze. For behind Swinton and Fiore, a pair of strangers caught her eye. An older man with battleaxes emblazoned across his chest – he could only be Sir Caleb Swinton – and a teenage boy, who, by the crown sitting askew atop his head, could only be Prince Jaxon of Ellest.

'What —' she started, but she was cut off.

'What happened to Arden?' Casimir demanded from beside her.

It was Swinton's gaze that levelled with the Oremian prince's. 'He's dead.'

Indeed, Swinton's armour was awash with blood. Some had dried in a rust-coloured stain on his skin. Arden was dead? Swinton's words hung between them all, and Bleak waited for them to sink in, for the relief to wash over her like a tide.

But she felt nothing. '*You will think of me often at Moredon ...*' The king's words sent a shiver down her spine. The man who'd tortured Bren. The man who'd wanted to do the same to her.

'Good,' she heard herself say.

Swinton locked eyes with her and nodded. He, too, had every reason to relish the king's blood seeping into the earth.

'We need to decide our next move.' Casimir turned to the group with a glance at Bleak and Ermias. His hand remained in his pocket where he'd shoved the amulet. Bleak shuddered. She didn't know what sort of magic had allowed her to see into Ines' past, or if it was some sort of manipulation on Ines' part. Whatever it was, she didn't want the thing anywhere near her until the last moment.

'You can use our cottage,' said a voice from the crowd. A man, perhaps in his sixties but by no means elderly, came forward. His face sported

colourful bruising, and he walked with a subtle limp, but he approached them with his head held high.

‘It’s not much,’ he told them. ‘But it’ll do. Might even be able to put a hot meal in some bellies.’

‘I know you,’ Bleak heard herself say, stepping forward. She’d seen him once before. ‘You’re Dash’s pa.’

Bleak caught the man’s glance in Swinton’s direction, but he couldn’t help his weathered face breaking into a smile as his eyes met hers. ‘I am. You know my boy? How is he?’

‘Well,’ Bleak said. ‘Better than well. Though he misses you.’

Mr Carlington nodded, then with another glance at Swinton, he motioned for them to follow. Bleak frowned as Sir Caleb Swinton and Prince Jaxon of Ellest joined their company without a word. Just like that, they were to trust the Ellestians? Those who’d been closest to King Arden? Keeping her objections to herself, she wondered again what had happened inside that arena.

Their company started towards Heathton Castle. There, red blooms had flowered as well. A fortress of petals, as though it had always been so.

‘What in Rheyah’s name,’ Henri muttered as she trudged alongside Bleak, staring up at the swallowed turrets and gatehouse.

Bleak couldn’t form the words. The crop had spread across the capital like every blight Ines had birthed into being. Like the markings across Bleak’s skin, she knew the blooms offered nothing, resembled nothing, but suffering.

‘Kindred, groundlings,’ Henri called, turning to face the armed force marching behind them. ‘Take the castle courtyard. Round up whatever remains of the Ellestian guards. I want to question them. Lyse, you’ll represent the groundlings at our council. Appoint someone of your choosing to oversee the treatment of the wounded. And someone else to organise food and water.’

Bleak hid her surprise. This was a far cry from Henri’s usual stance on groundlings. But Lyse bowed her head. ‘It would be an honour, my queen.’

Casimir tugged Bleak’s sleeve and she followed him and the others through the courtyard and past the stables, to a small cottage on the edge of the woods.

Dash’s childhood home, she realised. As they crammed around the Carlington dining table, Bleak saw reminders of Dash everywhere. The

wooden practice sword on the sideboard, the pair of muddied children's boots by the door and the tattered pieces of parchment covered in drawings of knights and monsters on the far wall. She wasn't the only one taking in the details. Commander Swinton gazed longingly at the practice sword, as though only just realising he hadn't been the one to teach his son how to strike and parry.

A stool crashed to the floor. Bleak whirled around in time to see Casimir catch Ermias before he hit the ground, eyes rolling back.

'What's wrong?' She rushed to his side and helped Casimir ease him into a nearby armchair. Ermias leaned back and closed his eyes, his face pale.

'He needs to regain his strength,' Casimir told her.

'Will he be alright?' Henri asked, offering a flask of water.

Casimir nodded. 'I think so. He's just overexerted his magic.'

Bleak swallowed. Ermias was their way back out of Ellest. Without him, it would mean a journey through the tunnels, and who knew how long that would take. *Or how long we have left*, she thought, eyeing Casimir's tattoo, which now had spread up the back of his neck and behind his ears.

Dash's pa slid a pot of stew onto the dining table, and a bowl of bread. 'I'm afraid that's all we have.'

Bleak tried to give him a reassuring smile. 'Thank you, Mr Carlington.'

'Call me Emmett.'

The Carlingtons didn't have enough bowls, so they ate out of cups and mugs as well. Bleak savoured the rich flavours of the stew. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten. She studied the small kitchen, imagining Dash learning to cook there with his —

She looked around. 'Emmett? Where's Dash's mama?'

Silence lingered for a moment.

'It's my fault,' said a quiet voice. Prince Jaxon. The first words out of his mouth.

'Nonsense, Jax.' Emmett waved him away.

'But it is. She tested my food, and she fell ill.'

'She's alright, lad.' Emmett braced a hand on the prince's shoulder before addressing Bleak. 'She took a bit of a turn. She's resting, but she'll be alright, thanks to Tailor.'

'Tailor?'

Emmett nodded. 'Tailor was the one who brought us herbs to help stop the poisoning. It was only a matter of weeks ago. He shouldn't have been here at all, but without him and Martha, the castle cook, Dore wouldn't have made it.'

So that's *why Tailor had been in Heathton*. That's *why he'd needed to see Martha*, Bleak realised. 'Perhaps one of our healers can see to her now?' she said, nodding to Lyse. 'Just to be sure she's alright?'

Having already appointed a second-in-command of the kindred and groundlings, Lyse stepped forward. 'I'd be happy to.'

As Bleak watched Emmett show Lyse into another room, Henri elbowed her.

'Did you get what you needed, then?'

Bleak glanced at Casimir before nodding. 'We did.'

Casimir stepped forward, fishing a scrap of fabric from his pocket. He held the amulet in his palm for Henri and Sahara to see, while Swinton and Fi peered over his shoulder.

'That's it?' Henri said.

'That's it.' Casimir pressed his thumb to the centre of the violet stone, and applied pressure. It cracked.

Bleak swore. 'What in the realm ...?'

But the stone had broken into three pieces. Smaller stones of the same making, as though they had been forged that way. Casimir offered a piece to her. Ignoring the instinct within that told her to throw the shard back at him, she took it. As soon as she touched the crystal, she felt it. More than she had in the chamber. Something different. This was the beating heart of her homeland's magic. She locked eyes with Casimir.

But Swinton spoke first. 'What can these tiny stones do to help us?'

Bleak felt Casimir hesitate to drag his gaze away from hers.

'Each of the Oremian ruling family members wears one,' he said finally. 'With these, our people in Oremere will recognise us as the heirs to the thrones. Wearing these, the natural forces of magic within Oremere will work with us, not against us. When this amulet was forged, I trapped an ember of Ines' power within it. We can wield it against her.'

'To what end?' Sir Caleb interrupted.

'To whatever end.'

'That doesn't sound overly hopeful, Casimir,' Sahara said. 'You don't think we can defeat her?'

‘I think, with this, we have a chance.’

Bleak studied the crystal glinting in her hand. ‘That’ll have to do, then.’

Casimir ran his fingers across the markings on his neck and turned to Swinton and Henri. ‘Did you get what *you* needed?’

The unlikely companions exchanged concerned glances.

‘Not everything,’ Henri allowed. ‘We found Allehra, as you’ve seen. But the herbs ... The stores were empty. We found nothing that might slow or cure the —’

‘That’s not entirely true,’ Allehra said from where she sat at the table, hands clasped before her.

Bleak and the others stared at her. Allehra had always had her secrets – Bleak knew that from the numerous times Henri had vented her frustration with the Mother Matriarch. But now ...

‘What do you mean?’ she asked finally, approaching the table and taking the seat beside the Valian elder.

‘I took them,’ Allehra said.

The chair on the other side of Allehra scraped back. Seated, Henri folded her arms across her chest. ‘What?’

Allehra waited until the rest of the group had positioned themselves around the table. Bleak shifted uneasily in her chair, looking at the odd group. Sir Caleb stood beside Prince Jaxon, who was no older than she, his face etched with worry. Emmett and Lyse reappeared from the other room to stand beside Swinton and Fiore, while Casimir took the seat to Bleak’s left and Sahara sat next to Henri. Ermias remained in the armchair, his eyes still closed.

‘You were saying?’ Henri prompted her mother.

‘The herbs you seek,’ Allehra began. ‘I took them. Or rather, I ingested them.’

‘What?’

Sahara elbowed Henri. ‘Let her finish.’

Bleak nearly laughed at the incredulous look Henri shot her sister. No doubt the warrior wasn’t used to being reprimanded in public.

A smile played on Allehra’s lips, and Bleak realised how long it must have been since she’d seen her daughters together, let alone acting like siblings. But she couldn’t savour the moment for long. The Mother Matriarch straightened in her chair.

‘Valia Forest is a special place, where our ancestors practised the art of herbalism for hundreds of years.’ She gave a nod of acknowledgement to Lyse. ‘And while our talent for such things was known across the realm, it was never seen as a threat. Or so we believed. Until King Arden had mist released in our gardens.’

Bleak stopped herself from glancing at Swinton.

‘We had the largest crop of magical herbs across all four known continents. Herbs to suppress magic, herbs to strengthen it, herbs to treat injuries inflicted by magic. When Arden released that mist in what we now call the Forest of Ghosts, he knew we’d save Valia, but he also knew that in the process, we’d destroy the one thing we had that he did not – a shield against magic. A balance.’

Bleak rubbed the bridge of her nose. The Forest of Ghosts was clear in her mind, both as the thriving pocket of Valia she’d seen in Athene’s memory, and the graveyard of trees it had become. A sacred part of the Valian territory, wiped out.

‘I hadn’t realised that he’d long since stolen cuttings of our crop and started his own. But *he* hadn’t realised that Valia had another crop, out in the Sticks. A small crop by comparison, but enough to keep our ruler and our elite kindred protected.’

Bleak didn’t miss Henri’s hand resting on her chest, where beneath her fighting leathers, the pouch of magic herbs lay against her skin.

Allehra continued. ‘What Arden also never realised was that the moment he attacked that part of Valia, was the moment he showed his hand. We had a vague notion of what he was planning, of what he’d use against us. After that, I worked with our groundling elders. We selected talented Valians-in-training to be sent to the Sticks, to learn magical herblore.’

Opposite Bleak, Henri’s expression was unreadable. Had she known?

‘But we didn’t have enough for what Arden was planning, that I knew. We had seen the effects of the mist and the plague only once before. The groundlings and I discussed the possibility of creating healing tonics, should the worst happen. But our stores were depleted. So when Ines’ general, Farlah, came for me, I let her take me. I needed to get to Heathton. In my weeks as prisoner there, I ingested Arden’s supply below the maze. All those vials? I took them, knowing there was a chance we could make the tonic from my blood.’

‘What?’ Sahara’s eyes snapped to her mother’s.

‘My blood carries the essence of that magic. A lot of it.’

‘We will not allow you to sacrifice yourself!’

‘I don’t need to die, Sahara. My blood can be taken, little by little, to make the tonic. Lyse here knows how to brew it.’

‘You’ve done this before?’ Casimir asked.

Allehra shook her head. ‘No. We need to test it.’

Bleak gazed at the markings covering her hands and Casimir’s beside hers. ‘Casimir and I will be your test.’

‘No,’ Henri said. ‘Use one of the older affected Ashai.’

Bleak shook her head. ‘There’s no time. We need to know if this works here and now, before we return to Havenness. Without the tonic, we’ll die anyway, and soon. And Ines will get her hands on our magic. If she does, that’s the end. For all of you.’

‘She’s right.’ Casimir rested a warm hand over hers.

Henri’s gaze didn’t falter. Finally, she nodded. ‘Very well.’

Lyse clapped her hands together. ‘I’ll get started right away,’ she said.

‘How long will it take?’ Bleak asked her.

‘No more than a few hours.’

Bleak nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘Allehra,’ Lyse said. ‘If you’d come with me?’

Allehra rose from her seat and they went to another room.

‘Are you sure about this?’ Henri searched Bleak’s face.

Bleak smiled grimly. ‘No.’

‘Sounds about right, then.’

Swinton cleared his throat and frowned at their seemingly flippant exchange. ‘So what now?’

He’s right, Bleak realised. They needed to keep moving forward, no matter what obstacles they faced. She looked back to Henri.

‘The kindred and groundling force should return to Valia,’ she said. ‘From there, they can wait to receive word to march on Oremere from the East Sea Underpass.’

Henri shifted in her seat. ‘The final battle will definitely be in Oremere?’

Bleak nodded. ‘I have no doubt. There’s something poetic in ending something where it began. Ines won’t be able to resist that.’

Casimir nodded. ‘The rest of you should return to Wildenhaven. You need to strategise with Eydis and the others.’

‘You?’ Henri’s brows shot up.

‘Yes,’ Bleak heard herself say. ‘Casimir and Ermias need to be in Oremere. To rally our people.’

Henri shook her head. ‘We’re strongest when we’re together. *You know this.*’

‘We cannot bring the whole fight from Wildenhaven. We need to shake her foundations. And those lie in Oremere. I’ll return to Havenness with you, but Casimir and Ermias go.’

Henri crossed her arms over her chest and, surprisingly, turned to Swinton. ‘What do you think?’

The commander ran his fingers along the scar on his jaw. ‘I don’t like it,’ he said. ‘But they’re right. We are at a disadvantage if we simply invade from the outside. If we have Valian forces come from the south, the rebels coming from within, and Eydis’ army attacking from the north, we’re in a much better position.’

Bleak’s mind was racing. The strategising alone was enough to spin anyone’s head, but the fears and thoughts pulsing around her fed her growing sense of panic. This war had thrown them all together into a raging whirlpool. There was no knowing who would emerge at the end. The little girl flashed before her eyes again. She took a deep breath.

‘Geraad and the rebels have arranged to meet Ermias and me in Oremere,’ Casimir said. ‘We will meet you on the battlefield.’ It was only as Casimir’s words washed over her that Bleak realised his hand was still on hers.

DUSK SETTLED across the eerily quiet capital. Bleak walked beside Henri, on their way back from seeing to the Valian forces and the prisoners they’d taken. Their boots crushed silken red petals as they left the castle grounds. Bleak was relieved to be out of there, and yet, something nagged at the back of her mind.

‘Henri?’

‘Mmm?’

Bleak took a deep breath. ‘You crossed the East Sea Underpass ...’

‘I did.’

‘What do you know of the lisloiks?’

‘What?’

‘The lisloiks. The creatures that inhabit the tunnels?’

‘Oh.’ Henri frowned. ‘Eydis spoke of them. They were trapped there when the mist spread.’

‘What else?’

‘What’s this about?’

‘I just ... What else?’

Still frowning, Henri continued. ‘From what I understand, they live in the Underpass, luring anyone who wanders the passages to their death. That’s why I needed to take Bear. Apparently, he is able to resist their calls. They’re killers, Bleak.’

‘Surely no more than you and me?’

Henri gave her a sideways glance. ‘They’re different to you and me ...’

‘Did Eydis tell you anything else?’

‘That they were from the Northern Passage waters.’

Bleak frowned. ‘That’s not right. They’re ... they’re from Oremere.’

‘All I know is that when I was down there ...’

Bleak waited.

Henri sighed. ‘When I was down there, I could sense their malice. Their songs were beautiful, but full of cruelty. They wish nothing but suffering on the realm.’

Bleak chewed her bottom lip, her mind racing. Henri had been afraid of them. *Henri*, the most fearless warrior Bleak knew. It didn’t bode well for her plans.

When they reached the cottage, Casimir was waiting for them.

‘How’s Ermias?’ Bleak asked.

‘Still sleeping,’ he replied. ‘Lyse gave him some sort of draught to help return his strength, but she said it would be best if we waited until morning. She also gave me these.’ He held out two small vials.

Henri eyed the tonic. ‘I’ll leave you to it,’ she said, and left.

When she was gone, Bleak took one of the vials from Casimir and peered at the dark liquid within, trying not to think about the fact that it contained Allehra’s blood. The thought of that alone made her feel queasy. But there was nothing for it. She removed the cork.

‘Shall we?’ she asked Casimir.

‘Not yet,’ he said, pressing the stopper back into the vial. ‘Let’s take a moment.’

‘A moment?’

‘For ourselves.’ He was already moving.

Bewildered, she followed him through the woodlands surrounding the cottage. It wasn’t long before she could hear the roar of Heathton Falls again.

‘What are we —’

The view was spectacular. In the fading sunlight, the whole of Ellest was awash with hues of rose and gold. The line of the horizon was straight and unending before them.

Beside her, Casimir sighed.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked.

He laughed quietly. ‘No.’

‘I’m sorry for what Ermias said.’

‘Ermias spoke the truth.’

‘His version of it.’

‘I did those things, Alarise. There’s no denying that.’

Bleak sighed. ‘Then I’ll tell you a lesson someone once told me. “You’ll remember those things for the rest of your life. But don’t let them define you.”’

Casimir raised a brow. ‘Who shared that wisdom with you?’

It was Bleak’s turn to huff a laugh. ‘Commander Swinton, of all people. A lifetime ago now.’

‘And does it work? Thinking like that?’

Bleak shrugged. ‘Some days more than others.’

Casimir nodded and turned back to the sprawling lands before them.

Bleak savoured the quiet. Here, she could almost pretend there was no war looming, that they weren’t two leaders of a continent, but simply two people enjoying the view of the realm.

‘Alarise?’

‘Hmm?’

‘I’m scared.’

‘You? Scared?’

‘I’m scared that we’ve got to this point, been through so much, only for it to all end here.’

Bleak understood. She’d felt that way before. But ... She uncorked her vial. ‘It doesn’t end here.’

Casimir followed suit and clinked his against hers. ‘To victory?’

‘Here’s hoping.’

They raised the vials to their mouths, and drank.

Heat rushed across Bleak's skin and she gasped, grabbing Casimir's arm and dropping her vial. It felt as though something was crawling across her arms, her legs, her whole torso. She looked at the back of her hands – the markings were receding before her eyes.

'Bleak ...' Casimir breathed. The tonic was having the same effect on him.

'It works. Thank the gods, it works.' Relief flooded through her. She was already running back to the cottage. 'We have to return to Wildenhaven.'

CHAPTER 22

Dash still couldn't believe it was her. Olena was *here*, in Wildenhaven. She sat opposite him now, her golden hair braided into a crown on the top of her head, her clouded eyes deep in thought. Prince Nazuri paced behind her, nearly wearing the carpet bare in front of the fireplace.

'Sit down, Zuri,' Olena told him. 'I can't concentrate.' She was fiddling with the quill in her hands, the ink dripping onto the parchment laid out before her.

Dash wasn't entirely sure why he was here. He knew nothing of Battalion's military situation, or what to do with the refugees fleeing Belbarrow. But Olena had insisted he join them, and so he had.

Prince Nazuri sighed and dropped into the chair beside her. 'It seems too dangerous to me,' he said finally.

'It's war,' Olena replied. 'It's dangerous by nature.'

'I know that, but it's an unnecessary risk.'

While Dash had sat in silence, the pair had been brainstorming uses of Battalion's resources in the upcoming conflict. The problem was that the Battalonian Army was still under the command of King Roswall, who had let the continent fall to Ines. The units of the army that were loyal to Prince Nazuri were defending the refugees and guarding the remaining free cities.

Olena rubbed her temples. 'What do you think, Dash? You've been awfully quiet.'

Nerves churned in Dash's belly. 'I ... I don't think it's my place to ...'

'I'm making it your place,' Olena said. 'We need a fresh mind on this. Nazuri and I have come up with nothing.'

Nazuri frowned. 'Nothing? We've had many ideas.'

'None of them quite feasible,' Olena replied gently.

'Not yet, but your friend here is a stranger to Battalion and our strengths.'

'Your strength is fire,' Dash heard himself say. 'You need —'

'We've already procured a shipment of firestorm wells to use in the upcoming conflict,' the prince snapped.

Dash balked. Olena seemed to like Nazuri, but right now, his temper was that of a desert viper.

Olena's brow was raised. She seemed to be waiting.

Prince Nazuri sighed again. 'My apologies, Dash. I'm weary from our travels. We have a shipment of resources due shortly. But we don't know how best to utilise them.'

Dash didn't know what to say. While the prince's apology was sincere, he didn't want Dash there, that was obvious. And *what* was a firestorm well? Dash was too afraid to ask.

DASH KNEW the way to the Wildenhaven stables by heart now. He often found himself wandering down to watch the horses, usually when tensions around him were high and he couldn't find his voice. And when he was worried. As he trudged through the knee-deep snow, teeth chattering, he couldn't remember what it had been like to worry as a child, if he had worried at all. Things were simpler then. He couldn't recall having this tight ball in his chest as a boy, not like now. Bleak, Tailor and ... Commander Swinton had been gone for an age. And they'd received no word of their whereabouts, or the success of their mission. Only this morning as he'd dressed, he'd noticed how the markings had spread across his body. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was claimed by Ines' disease. He didn't want to die, but worse was the not knowing. The uncertainty of war was as cold and sharp as any blade. The last battle flashed before him, the lashings of red across the brilliant white snow, and the sounds of imminent death around him, men moaning for their mothers, crying for Enovius to take them.

The warmth of the stables washed over his chilled skin as he entered the tack room. The stable hand greeted him with a nod, and Dash was struck anew with how surreal it was to be here. *He* had been that stable boy not

long ago. And now ... Well, now he didn't know what he was. The sweet scent of freshly laid hay was like a salve to his spinning mind. The images of the war's carnage ebbed away as he walked past the stalls, the horses within whinnying at his approach. He stopped at the door of the largest stall.

'Hello, boy,' he said to the majestic stallion within. *Xander*.

Back in Heathton, he'd always admired this horse, had worked with him in the corral countless times. But it was different now. This wasn't just the commander's horse. It was *his father's*. All his life, he'd been the son of a nobleman, the grandson of a celebrated knight, and not known. Ma and Pa had kept it from him, all the while watching him yearn to be a squire. It had been his birthright. He was more noble-blooded than any of the bullies in the training yard.

Xander nudged him with his nose, as though he knew Dash's thoughts were spiralling. Dash picked up a brush from the grooming bucket and started work on the stallion's already gleaming coat.

Nothing is a birthright, he reminded himself. He had a right to be angry, yes, he knew that. They'd lied. More than what Mama deemed a 'tall tale'. But he'd had a good life, a happy childhood. And that was more than many people could say.

Xander nickered softly, and Dash moved on to his mane. It was hard, getting used to all the thoughts and feelings that flooded his mind and heart. He'd never felt this much conflict within before, this much turmoil.

'I think he likes you better,' said a familiar voice.

Dash turned to spot Luka grinning at him from the door. 'You think?'

Luka leaned on the gate with her elbows and wiggled her eyebrows. 'Maybe.'

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'Looking for you.'

'What for?'

The amusement faded from Luka's face. 'I thought I saw Athene.'

'Your mama?'

Luka nodded. 'Down by the Forest of Wolves. It was only for a moment, but I could have sworn ...'

'Do you want to find her?'

'I don't know,' the Valian said. 'Henri banished her. I don't know what will happen if she's caught sneaking around here.'

‘You’re worried.’

‘Wouldn’t you be?’

Dash’s hand paused mid-brushstroke. ‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘Do you want me to go with you?’

‘Are you sure? We could get in trouble.’

‘There you are!’ Jarel appeared at Luka’s side. ‘They’re back.’

Dash’s stomach dropped, and the tight ball of anxiety flared in his chest. Luka understood.

‘What about the commander?’ she asked.

Jarel nodded. ‘He’s with them. Come and see.’

Dash and Luka followed him back to the towers. Inside, at the heart of the hall, a big group had congregated. Dash saw the two newcomers at once and started. Sir Caleb Swinton and Prince Jaxon of Ellest, the latter embracing Princess Olena tightly. The former looked up and caught Dash’s eye. Dash had to stop himself from gripping Luka’s arm as the famous knight approached him and offered his hand.

‘I believe we’ve met before, Zachary.’

Dash could feel the eyes of the hall on him, could see the shock on Commander Swinton’s face, already moving towards them.

The last time he’d had contact with the famous knight, his touch had brought on a vision. Dash knew now, more than ever, how valuable his visions could be. So this time, as his hand met that of his grandfather’s, he reached inside himself to find that well of untapped magic.

Dash took Sir Caleb’s hand and shook it. This time, he was in complete control as his surroundings disappeared.

HE WAS both above and within. A massive circle of fire surrounded them all. A perfect ring of raging flames. They devoured all in their path, insatiable. The roar of the blaze was deafening, drowning out the cries of agony as soldiers caught alight. It was a wild beast, incensed. Unstoppable. The heat singed Dash’s exposed skin, but ... it didn’t burn. His flesh didn’t melt away like those around him, their mouths etched in silent screams before the fire took them. He looked around, dazed, as the flames danced to an inaudible rhythm, and shadows flickered beyond ...

EYDIS' cool hand was on his arm. 'What is it, my young friend?' she asked, her eyes bright.

Dash was suddenly aware of everyone surrounding him. Sir Caleb was still before him, his face lined with concern, and Commander Swinton was at his side, his mouth tight-lipped, as though he'd been holding his breath. He'd done it. He'd managed to have a controlled vision. Dash suspected his magic reacted to Sir Caleb because it was trying to tell him of his origins, of where he belonged in the world. But it wasn't to his father or grandfather that he now looked; it was to Olena.

'I know how to use the resources from Battalion,' he told her.

LATER THAT EVENING, while he waited for Bleak to bring him a vial of healing tonic, he sat beside Olena and her brother, Prince Jaxon, at the dining table. They had finished eating but remained in the hall, which was still bustling after the company's return and his revelations. Olena and Jaxon's presence reassured Dash, reminding him of home.

'Your mama and pa are fine,' Jaxon was saying. 'Your mama fell ill a few weeks ago, but thanks to Tailor, she is recovering well.'

Dash nodded, not trusting himself to speak. It felt like a lifetime ago he was helping Pa in the stables or plucking feathers from a chicken with Mama in the kitchen. The thought of Mama being unwell ... It brought a thick lump to his throat.

'You will see them again,' Olena said, ever the empath.

'And what of you?' he said. 'How do you feel about the king being gone?' He didn't know the right way to word it. Didn't know how to express condolences for a man who had caused so much pain and grief, but was still his friend's father.

'He was gone a long time ago,' Olena replied.

Prince Jaxon took her hand, nodding. 'A father who takes away his children's mother is no father to me.'

'Nor me.' Olena squeezed her brother's hand back.

Dash was glad they had each other. Families should always stay together. At that thought, he couldn't help but glance to Commander Swinton. He was standing with Captain Murphadias by the fire, deep in conversation. Somehow, though, he sensed Dash's gaze and met his eyes

across the hall. Swinton dipped his head in acknowledgement, before turning back to the captain.

Bleak appeared at his side. 'Here, drink it all.' She handed him a vial of tonic.

Dash took it, hesitating when he put it to his lips.

'Go on,' Bleak said. 'Casimir and I are alive, aren't we?'

Olena squeezed his hand and he readied himself. There was nothing for it. Dash downed the bitter liquid. A hot, tingling sensation spread across his body in a thick wave. And then ... he looked at his hands, his arms ... The markings had gone.

Dash looked up at Bleak. 'That's it? We're —'

The doors of the hall burst open and General Nicolai staggered inside. 'The prisoner Farlah has been sprung from her cell. She's escaped. And an entire unit of our army has been murdered in cold blood.'

Queen Eydis stood and descended from the dais. 'How?'

'We don't know, Majesty.'

'Then show me. Show me what she has done.'

'Your Majesty, you don't want to see this.'

'Don't presume to tell me what I do and do not want. You will show me her cell. You will show me the dead guards. You will show me the unit of Havennesse soldiers who have died in my service.'

Dash had never seen such a cold expression of fury. He said nothing as he stepped into his unofficial place alongside the winter queen.

Nicolai bowed his head. 'As you command.'

Inside the dungeons, four guards lay dead on the icy ground, their throats slit open, their blood already frozen in puddles by their necks. A heavy set of keys lay by Farlah's cell door.

'She had help,' Eydis said, moving to the next cell. 'I see Mariette has escaped as well ...'

Even in the dark, Dash saw Nicolai flush with shame. 'Yes, Majesty.'

'Show me the others.'

Nicolai led them to the gatehouse, where the bodies of a dozen of Eydis' soldiers, men and women, were sprawled across the floor. White foam had formed at their mouths, and their eyes, open with terror, were bloodshot.

'Poison,' Dash murmured. 'Someone poisoned them.'

'That's what we've deduced as well,' Nicolai replied.

‘Nicolai.’ Eydis’ voice was sharp as ice. ‘You will bring these soldiers’ families to me. I will be the one to tell them what has happened here.’

‘Yes, my queen.’

‘Then you are to fetch my armour,’ she said, her eyes clouded with rage. ‘We wait no longer. The time has come to make our final stand.’

CHAPTER 23

Swinton had never seen such fire in the winter queen's eyes. Gone were the sweeping gowns and longing gazes at her lover. Here was a ruler whose home had been threatened, whose people had suffered, whose rage was incensed. Swinton understood. All his life the people dear to him had been in peril, and he'd let it go on far too long.

Now, the rulers of the realm crowded around the oak table in the council room one last time. Queen Eydis stood beside Nicolai in gold-plated armour, though her eyes wouldn't meet his. Henri and Sahara were side by side, looking as fierce as ever. Prince Jaxon was seated next to Sir Caleb, who was acting as adviser to the young Ellestian heir, while Princess Olena and Prince Nazuri were at the head of the table. Bleak stood by the far window, looking down into the courtyard, her expression distant. Princess Olena had insisted that Swinton and Fi join the council, commending their insights and quick thinking when things had turned against them in the Janhallow Desert.

'There you are,' Queen Eydis said.

Swinton held his breath as Dash entered the room.

Eydis motioned to him. 'Come in, come in. We need to start.'

'Sorry, Your Majesty,' Dash replied with a quick bow, and to Swinton's surprise, went to Bleak by the window. She gave him a fleeting smile before turning back to the snowy grounds.

For a moment, Swinton couldn't take his eyes off his son. A mirror of his younger self, much changed from the mischievous boy from Heathton. Now, he was the young man who'd come up with the ruthless strategy for

using the Battalionian resources. *His son.* Swinton still felt the pride swelling in his chest.

Queen Eydis cleared her throat, her gold armour glinting as the flames in the hearth flickered. 'We go by sea and bypass Cape Lunaris. It's where Ines will expect us to hit her. Instead, we'll aim to anchor south of the cape, in the bay near Westerfort.'

Swinton had seen the maps, and it made sense to moor there, further away from the capital. It gave them a better chance of escape, should they need to retreat.

'We will make our stand in the open fields before the gates of Freyhill,' Eydis told them, pointing to the spot on the chart atop the table.

'We're to cross the Northern Passage?' Sahara asked.

'We are.'

'Wonderful. It was such fun the first time, right, Bleak?'

Bleak gave a grim smile, and Swinton's stomach churned at the thought of those waters. He knew them only by reputation, but that was enough. He looked around and couldn't stifle his disbelief. This group of unlikely companions was about to cross the deadliest passage in all the realm to wage war in a foreign, mist-covered land. The odds were stacked against them any way he looked at it.

Eydis clasped her hands together and surveyed the council before her. 'Geraad and his Oremian rebel forces will meet us on the battlefield. The remaining Valian forces will charge from the south. We are to gather our forces and make for Port Avesta by dusk. Allied ships from Battalion await us there, and we shall depart.'

'All of us?' Swinton glanced at Dash and the two Ellestian royals. They were but children. Far too young to see the carnage of war. Far too young to be in the heart of a battle. Far too young to die.

But Olena stood and faced him, her clouded eyes full of determination. 'All of us,' she said.

'Well, all of us except Bleak,' Eydis corrected, dipping her head in the mist dweller's direction.

'What?'

Bleak simply shrugged. 'There's something I have to do.'

SWINTON AND FI didn't talk as they made their way into the village towards the armoury. These final hours in Wildenhaven would be the last moments of quiet they had; the calm before the onslaught of war. Nausea twisted Swinton's insides. He'd gone to battle before. He'd killed men before. But this ... this was different. If they failed in Oremere, all would be lost. The future would be one of mist and blood blooms. And Ines' face scarring the flesh of thousands. The enormity of their task was not lost on him.

He glanced at Fi. His usually chatty friend was sombre, eyes glassy, his attention far away. No doubt he, too, was processing all they were about to undertake. Swinton had no words of reassurance to offer him. The only reassurance there was, was that they were in this together. No more secrets between them. Despite whatever fate lay ahead, Swinton was glad for the time they'd had, grateful for the brother the gods had given him.

Fi caught his eye and smiled. He reached across and gripped Swinton's shoulder with a thickly gloved hand. 'I told you once, old friend: my place has always been, and always will be, by your side.'

THE WILDENHAVEN ARMOURY WAS PACKED. EYDIS' soldiers and Henri's Valians were clamouring for the best weapons and the spare whetstones. The poor armourer stood in the far corner, his hands shoved into the pockets of his apron and his eyes wide with shock.

Swinton cursed himself for not thinking ahead as he and Fiore squeezed through the narrow doorway.

'This is different, eh, old friend?' Fi surveyed the chaos before them.

Swinton suppressed an exasperated sigh. 'I just needed a new sword.'

'Well, it's not looking promising.'

'Commander,' a voice called. 'Captain!' There was a flash of red hair, and the young Valian, Athene's daughter, appeared at his elbow.

'This way,' she said with a grin.

Swinton raised a brow at Fi, but followed her as she pushed through the throng of weapons enthusiasts. She led them to the far side of the armoury.

'Here.' Luka pointed to a table covered in dozens of weapons.

'What ...?'

'Take your pick,' she told them. 'Wouldn't want Dash's father going into battle without the proper equipment.'

Dash's father. It was the first time he'd heard it aloud. His shock must have shown on his face, because Luka nudged him.

'Go on. I can't hold the vultures off all day.' She motioned to several irritated-looking Valians.

Fi was already testing the balance of a pair of fighting knives, and so Swinton followed his lead, choosing a longsword from the selection and drawing it from its scabbard. It was elegant, and beautifully crafted. Despite the constraints of his surroundings, Swinton could wield it easily enough; its weight was perfect.

'Luka?' He spotted the redheaded Valian chatting to a group of Havennesse soldiers. She turned at the sound of her name.

'Thank you,' he said.

She dipped her head with a satisfied smile and turned back to her comrades.

With their new weapons strapped to their bodies, Swinton and Fi stepped out of the armoury and into yet another blizzard. One thing Swinton would be glad for when the war was over, one way or another, was saying goodbye to this icicle of a continent.

'Dash is a popular lad, eh, old friend?' Fiore grinned.

'Unlike his father, you mean?'

'Like his uncle, I mean.'

A laugh burst from Swinton's mouth. 'Whatever you need to tell yourself, Fi.'

When they reached the icy courtyard, Fi elbowed him. Waiting at the gatehouse was Sir Caleb, battleaxes in hand.

'Sir.' Fiore bowed his head in the knight's direction, and made for the middle tower.

Swinton watched his friend go, before turning to his father. 'Sir,' he echoed Fi's greeting.

'We haven't had a chance to talk,' Sir Caleb said.

'No.'

'I want you to have these.' Sir Caleb held out the battleaxes. Swinton had asked a servant to give them to his father after they'd returned from Heathton.

'I don't ... I don't deserve them,' he managed.

But Sir Caleb didn't pull away. 'You're a Swinton.'

'Father, I disgraced us. Our family name. I —'

‘You think you’re the only man in the realm to make mistakes? To make sacrifices for those you love?’ As the words left his mouth, Sir Caleb’s gaze caught on something – someone – across the courtyard.

Dash. He was carrying a box of belongings from one tower to another. A tattered toy bear hung over the side.

‘Bryson Bear,’ Sir Caleb muttered. ‘How ... how did he get that?’

Swinton smiled sadly. ‘I gave it to him. When he was a baby.’

Sir Caleb didn’t take his eyes off Dash. ‘I knew something had changed you, Dimitri. I always hoped you would come to me, or your mother, but you walled yourself up in your own grief.’

Dash paused in the middle of the courtyard to speak to Bleak. She pulled Bryson Bear from the box with a gleeful expression and proceeded to tease Dash mercilessly. They made an odd pair.

‘When he was younger,’ Sir Caleb continued, ‘I would see him running around the castle. I would think it was you. That I’d gone back in time and you were a boy again.’

‘I’m sorry, Father. Sorry I didn’t tell you.’

Sir Caleb shook his head, and he pressed the battleaxes into Swinton’s hands. ‘Don’t let shame and fear govern you anymore, Dimitri. What matters is what happens now, what happens next.’

They watched Dash bid Bleak goodbye and disappear into the middle tower.

‘I met him once before.’ Sir Caleb smiled at the memory. ‘He was posing as Princess Olena’s distant cousin, trying to get into a feast thrown in my honour. My grandson ... We will make this right, Dimitri. When the war is done. We will make it right, together.’

SWINTON ENTERED the stables as dusk approached, axes strapped across his back, longsword sheathed at his waist. It was time. He knew Xander was going to appreciate another journey by sea as little as he was, but there was nothing for it. Their forces needed all the cavalry they could get, and Swinton wouldn’t ride into battle on any other steed.

Therese was in the tack room, Xander’s saddle already waxed.

‘You’re not coming with us?’ Swinton said by way of greeting, closing the gap between them.

‘No,’ she replied.

Swinton nodded, a small wave of relief rushing through him. He had enough people to worry about in the upcoming conflict, and at least he would know Therese was far from the fighting.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ she said, her hands trembling as Swinton brought them to his chest.

‘Then don’t say anything,’ Swinton told her, and he kissed her.

CHAPTER 24

The violet stone resting between Bleak's breasts was warm against her skin. It was an odd sensation, as though there was some element of life trapped within it, as though it wanted to speak to her. Despite her initial experience with it, she knew now that there was nothing untoward about it. What she'd seen before was a rare memory captured by the stone when Ines' magic had been taken. At least, that's what Casimir thought. They'd soldered each of their pieces to new chains, and it now offered a surreal sense of comfort, particularly in the absence of the two Oremian princes as Bleak trudged through the snow to the nearby village. She gritted her teeth, dreading her duty to oversee the final distribution of Lyse's tonic amongst the affected Ashai. The groundling had worked with Maman to replicate the tonic for the masses. One drop of Allehra's herb-infused blood made one hundred doses. They had more than enough for those affected, though there was nothing to be done for those who had already fallen.

Bleak pushed up her sleeve to reveal the unblemished skin beneath. All that remained of the elaborate markings now was a small flourish across her scar, where the disease had started. She reached the hall where the Ashai had been housed, and pushed open the doors. Inside, all eyes went to her, and she had to stop herself from squirming under their gazes. A woman rushed to her side.

'We're so grateful you've come, Lady Alarise,' she said, taking Bleak's cloak from her shoulders.

'Of course,' Bleak said stiffly.

‘Lyse has already started administering the tonic.’ The woman pointed to where a line had formed before the groundling healer.

‘Very good.’ Bleak was already making her way towards her friend, the eyes of the Ashai following her. How did Henri and Sahara deal with this? With people watching their every move?

‘Lady Alarise, would you care for a refreshment? Something to eat?’ another Ashai asked upon approach.

Bleak shook her head. ‘I’m fine, thank you.’ Though, the thought of a cup of wine was increasingly appealing to her ... She straightened her shirt and tried to shake the niggling craving. This benevolent treatment was a far cry from the sneers and taunts she’d endured back in Angove as the village drunk, but it was unnerving nonetheless. Nothing had prepared her for this role.

‘Bleak!’ Lyse greeted her with a broad smile.

Bleak nearly sagged with relief as she reached the medical station. ‘Hello, Lyse.’

An additional chair was brought for her, and Bleak took her place beside the groundling. The dozens of vials of tonic before them rattled as she pulled her seat in.

‘You’re looking well,’ Lyse said, handing a vial to the next person in line.

‘I’m feeling well. Thanks to you.’

‘Nonsense. I just mixed the stuff together. Mother Matriarch is the real problem-solver.’

‘You both are,’ Bleak replied. ‘How’s it all going here?’

‘Good. We’ve administered about twenty doses so far. More people from all over Wildenhaven have come forward as well, so there are more to treat than expected, but we’ll manage.’

‘You’re sure?’

Lyse smiled. ‘I’m sure. Your people are well looked after, I promise.’

‘And what about you? Have you rested? Have you eaten?’

‘Yes, don’t worry. Maman and I have taken turns treating the afflicted.’

Bleak nodded. ‘Good.’

‘Lady Alarise,’ said a voice from the line.

Bleak’s stomach dropped. ‘Yes?’

A young woman came forward. ‘We were wondering ... Where are Prince Casimir and Prince Ermias?’

The hall fell silent, as though the Ashai were holding their breath in anticipation of Bleak's reply. She cleared her throat.

'Prince Casimir and Prince Ermias are abroad, preparing for the upcoming conflict,' she said, her voice projecting to the far corners of the space. 'They asked me to oversee your treatment and wellbeing until their return.'

Bleak waited for the crowd to object. Who was she in the stead of two princes? What did she know about leading people?

But the woman bowed her head. 'I speak for all of us when I say: we're grateful for your presence, my lady. Grateful that you sought a cure for us.'

Bleak didn't know what to say to that. She dipped her head in the woman's direction and motioned for the line to keep moving. The sooner everyone was treated, the better.

As the hour passed, she watched on in pride as the Ashai around her began to heal. She listened to their exclamations of joy and relief as the markings faded from their skin. But as she leaned back in her seat, content to watch the quiet moments of happiness amongst her people, she heard it.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...

Bleak whirled around. *Where is she?* She hadn't seen the mad Ashai woman since Allehra's imposter had been identified.

One ... Two ... Three ...

'There,' Bleak muttered, spotting the woman staring at her from a nearby corner. Bleak got to her feet and made to approach her. During her time in Wildenhaven, the Ashai woman had gained no weight on her emaciated frame and her withered skin had kept its greyish tinge. Bleak didn't know her, and yet there was something familiar about her, something that tugged a forgotten thread in Bleak's mind, niggled at her, telling her there was something missing.

'Bleak,' a voice called from the entrance. Luka jogged towards her, cheeks tipped pink from the cold. 'Eydis said to fetch you.'

Bleak glanced back to the Ashai woman, but she was gone. She waved Luka away and scanned the hall, spotting one of the doors to the side street swinging.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ...

No, this had gone on far too long. 'Gods,' Bleak muttered as she burst through the door and into the icy alley, fresh snow falling about her shoulders.

There. The mad Ashai woman hadn't gone far. She was standing with her back against the cold brick wall, weathered face tipped to the sky, flecks of snow landing softly on her skin, as though she was savouring every breath of fresh air.

It dawned on Bleak as the dark and horrific confines of Farlah's mind flashed before her. The torture chamber and the lashes the Ashai had been forced to count. Bleak went to the woman and slowly, so as not to startle her, took her hands in her own.

'I'm sorry,' Bleak told her. 'I'm sorry for what she did to you. I wish I knew how to help you.'

The woman looked down at Bleak's hands and gripped them tightly.

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ... Each number was clear as day in Bleak's mind, as though the woman was speaking directly to her, not just repeating the same mad chant.

'I'm sorry.' Bleak tried to let go, but the woman held fast and suddenly, Bleak was falling into the passages of her mind.

THE FISHERMEN WERE PACKING up their wares after a day of selling fresh produce to the local marketers. The woman screwed up her nose at the smell, and winced as the hem of her skirts dragged through the muck. They were a long way from the comforts of home. She and her husband wandered along the wharves, their little girl giggling between them as her father gave the ships silly names. She was glad they'd ventured out today. Their daughter needed some semblance of normal life returned to her. The briny wind danced in both mother and little girl's ash-blond hair, and the woman's husband reached across to tuck a strand behind her ear. She gave him a warm smile.

Suddenly, skin prickling, the woman glanced behind her. A pair of guards were eyeing them from the city gates. Panic surged within her, but after a pointed look at her husband, she kept smiling as she crouched before her daughter.

'Let's play hide-and-seek,' she said.

Understanding her distress, her husband squeezed her shoulder and made for the guards. The woman swallowed the lump in her throat. She had to get their daughter out of here. Her husband would buy them as much time as he could.

She looked to their little girl. ‘Quick,’ she said, her face a mask of enthusiasm. She turned around to face the sea and started counting. ‘One ... Two ...’

Her daughter bolted, eager to make the most of the game she wasn’t usually allowed to play down by the docks. The woman turned back, glancing towards her husband, who was trying to reason with the guards. The woman took a deep breath. There would be no reasoning here.

‘Three ...’ she called out, watching her daughter sprint towards the stacked crates where the fishermen were washing their hands and faces in big barrels of water.

‘Four ... Five ...’

Her little girl was weaving between the fishermen, ducking under tables and crates. She’d found a hiding spot just as the clang of steel pierced the air.

She kept her voice steady. ‘Eight ...’ The woman didn’t look back. She had to keep their daughter safe, whatever the cost. She scanned the docks, desperate to find someone to help, someone they could trust. She cast her net of magic wide, filtering through the minds of the men around them, until – a weathered fisherman caught her attention. Rough around the edges, but she could sense the good in him. From afar, the woman crafted a seed, an instinct that just needed the right trigger. She cast aside the objections of her conscience as she did this. For her daughter ... For her daughter’s life, there was nothing she wouldn’t do. And the man ... He would never know she’d been there.

The woman looked around, unable to see her daughter. Relief flooded her. ‘Nin—’

Someone hit her from behind, a blunt object to the back of her head. All went black.

Now, Bleak stared at the woman before her, still gripping her hands.

‘Perhaps you’ll find what you’ve been looking for all these years at Moredon ...’ King Arden’s voice echoed in her mind. Her knees trembled.

‘Y-you,’ she stammered. But there were no words. Not for this. Tears tracked down her cheeks as she drew her mother into an embrace and held her tight.

CHAPTER 25

Bleak was still in shock as she made her way to Queen Eydis' private chambers. Gesa Thornton couldn't speak; she was unrecognisable as her former self. But she was here. She was alive. Bleak couldn't bear the thought of leaving her mother now, but she had no choice. Fellow Moredon Ashai, Agnes, had vowed to take care of her, and Gesa had seemed to calm down now that Bleak knew who she was.

Bleak gripped the staircase railing, feeling faint. All this time. Her mother had been alive all this time. And what of her father? What had happened after the docks? She steadied herself. As much as she yearned for answers, as much as she wanted to stay by her mother's side, it wasn't possible. Not if they were to survive the war. Answers and time together would have to wait. Ignoring the churning guilt in her stomach, Bleak straightened up and at last found herself at Queen Eydis' door. She had never been to Queen Eydis' private chambers before, but the wintry monarch had summoned her.

When Bleak entered the apartments, Eydis was pacing the furred rugs before the fire, a tattered dressing gown wrapped around her. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, her hair in a simple plait down her back, and her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. Bear, her constant companion, paced alongside her.

'Your Majesty?' Bleak said, tentatively entering the room.

'Shut the door,' Eydis said, not looking up.

Bleak did as she bid. 'Are you alright?'

At last Eydis looked up, dark circles looming beneath her eyes. 'No.'

Bleak waited.

‘Nicolai ...’ Eydis trailed off.

‘Do you want me to get him, Your Majesty?’ Bleak started for the door, alarmed.

‘No.’ Eydis stopped moving and rested her elbows against the mantle above the hearth. After a long moment and a deep breath, she put her fingers between her teeth and whistled softly. Another of her dogs appeared from the next room. ‘What I want is for you to take Bear *and* Kadi on your journey.’

‘I couldn’t take Bear from you!’

‘You can, and you will. He’s the alpha. Where you’re going, only an alpha will suffice. Kadi is to keep him alert. I’ve no idea how long you’ll travel before ... before you find them. Or they find you.’

Bleak glanced between the two great canines. In truth, she’d be grateful for any number of Eydis’ dogs, but especially Bear. She knew he was special. And it meant that there was a sliver of hope that Eydis thought she’d see them again.

‘Thank you,’ Bleak said.

‘I will do anything to give us an edge in this war, Bleak. No matter the cost to me.’

‘I know.’

Eydis gave a sad smile. ‘We have that in common, so it would seem.’

Their gazes met.

‘So it would seem,’ Bleak replied.

BLEAK’S HAND stilled at the knocker of another door. Bear and Kadi were silent at her side as she debated whether or not this was a good idea.

‘I know yer out there,’ Bren’s voice called from within.

Bleak swore softly and pushed the door inwards. Bren was sitting on the edge of his bed, lacing his boots. He frowned at the dogs.

‘Not yer usual companions,’ he said, getting to his feet.

‘No, not quite.’ Bleak didn’t know what to say. The last time she’d seen him ... Her cheeks flushed and she silently cursed herself.

‘Are you fighting?’ she asked, looking around the chamber for signs of packing.

Bren shook his head. ‘I can’t.’

Bleak nodded. She understood – was glad for it, even.

Bren eyed the pack on her shoulder. 'Where are ya going?'

'I can't say.' It stung to say it, reminding her of all the secrets that had wedged between them a lifetime ago. But this was different.

'Are ya coming back?'

A sardonic laugh escaped her, but the sound died on her lips. 'I hope so,' she said. 'But in case I don't ... I'm sorry, Bren.'

'Don't worry about it.'

'No. I want to say it. I'm sorry for everything.'

'Everything ...'

'I know, it's a lot.'

'No, it's just that ...' Bren trailed off, his blue eyes suddenly distant. 'Everything is changing.'

Bleak thought of her mother. 'Everything is always changing,' she said.

'I suppose yer right.'

Bleak stepped forward and pulled Bren into a tight embrace. After a moment of hesitation, his arms wrapped around her. He felt strong, reassuring. She wanted to stay, wanted to feel that comfort for a while longer, wanted to tell him that she'd found her mother after all these years. But she was out of time.

She pulled away. 'Take care of yourself, Bren.'

He took a deep breath. 'And you.'

HENRI AND SAHARA were exactly where Bleak thought they'd be. In the war-council chamber, arguing over a chart. Bleak watched them from the doorway, the two fiercest women she'd ever known. They both wore Valian leathers, with weapons strapped to their bodies. Henri leaned onto her palms on the table, her eyes focused on whatever strategy was at hand.

'Bleak.' Sahara looked up and beckoned her inside. 'What is it?'

But it was to Henri that Bleak turned. 'I need your help with something,' she said to the warrior queen. 'Will you come with me?'

Henri studied her for a moment, and Bleak prepared for the barrage of incoming questions and demands. But Henri simply nodded. 'I'll get my cloak.'

On horseback, the two women followed Bear, Kadi and Raven through the Forest of Wolves, to the Valley of Twisted Trees. Rion and his pride of panthers stalked silently behind them. The women didn't speak, only

focused on the treacherous path ahead. For a moment, Bleak was brought back to when she first met the Valian queen. Silent, stoic and untrusting. Things were different now. *They* were different. Bleak wanted to say something, to tell Henri that she was glad to have known her, that it had been an honour. But it wasn't the time for such words. Bold declarations had no place here. Perhaps if they made it through the war to come ...

When they at last reached the entrance to the East Sea Underpass, Henri glanced at Bleak. 'What do you need me to do?' she asked.

Bleak smiled grimly. 'I need you to shift snow and earth.'

CHAPTER 26

Henri's magic coursed through her and surged from her palms. A relief. It was a relief to use it, to feel it come alive at her command, completely and utterly in her control. She did as Bleak bid, shifting the snow, earth and ice to her will, creating a larger entrance to the passage below the tree.

When she was done, she turned to Bleak. 'Well?'

Bleak surveyed her work, and then sized up the teerah panthers behind her. 'It's perfect,' she said.

Henri gave a nod. 'You going to tell me what this is about?'

'No.'

Henri laughed. 'I expected as much.'

The Angovian didn't quip back. Instead, she handed the torch to Henri, her expression solemn. 'See you on the battlefield, Valian.'

Henri hesitated. She didn't like seeing Bleak like this. Their tradition was to laugh in the face of adversity. This felt different.

'Bleak,' Henri said, as the mist dweller started down the passage.

'Yes?'

'Be careful.'

Bleak nodded. 'You too.'

Henri watched Bleak follow Bear and Kadi into the darkness, the pride of teerah panthers disappearing after them. The magical energy that Henri had become so accustomed to in Bleak's presence began to ebb away. She stood there, the torchlight casting shadows across the snow until the energy disappeared altogether.

Eydis' dog, Raven, was watching her, his gaze intent. It was time to get back.

When Henri reached the Wildenhaven towers, the Havennesse and Valian forces were ready and waiting. She dismounted her horse, handing the reins to a nearby attendant, and approached on foot. Sahara held the reins of a fresh horse for her, Henri's pack already tied to its saddle. Her kindred were assembled; Tilly, Marvel and Luka all wore thick palma furs over their leathers, but they looked no less fierce as they greeted her. Commander Swinton and Captain Murphadias waited with the Battalonian and Ellestian royals behind them, while Eydis sat straight-backed atop her stallion in gold-plated armour. Henri did a double take. Though the queen was as regal and forceful as ever, she looked tired. Henri also noted that it was Jarel at Eydis' right side. He wore armour that matched his sister's, and in the glow of torchlight, he looked older. Nicolai was nowhere to be seen.

'What are we waiting for?' Henri asked.

'You,' Eydis replied.

Henri accepted the reins from Sahara and mounted her new mare. She nudged the horse up alongside Eydis'.

'Are you ready?' she asked the wintry queen in a quiet voice.

Eydis' tone was steely as she said, 'More than anything.'

Henri turned back to the army behind her. 'Move out,' she shouted, her voice echoing between the three towers. She squeezed her horse's sides with her heels and lurched forward into the snow.

Henri and Eydis led the host. They rode in silence. Henri didn't try to fill the quiet. She knew, as did Eydis, that these might be the final moments of peace they had.

BLUE-TINGED MOONLIGHT ILLUMINATED the ice shelves of Port Avesta. A thick blanket of white covered the lands, stretching from the foot of the mountains to the shoreline of the black sea. Floating atop the glassy water, a hundred ships waited.

'How?' Henri asked Eydis. She'd known they had ships, but not this many. 'Where did these come from?'

'Our allies across the seas,' Eydis replied, with a nod of acknowledgement in Prince Nazuri's direction.

Henri turned back to the breathtaking sight. It seemed like a lifetime ago she had sat in a rowboat that crunched as it scraped onto shore, still rattled by her escape from Heathton. Now, here she was. An army at her back, a fleet before her. She had got what she came for, but was she ready for what came next?

She was dreading sailing. She hated the slow lurch of the sea. It made her feel off balance and queasy. But there was nothing for it. She climbed into the rowboat waiting for them and gritted her teeth as they pushed off the sturdy shore and into the icy waters towards Eydis' ship.

THE PREPARATIONS TOOK FOREVER, it seemed. Getting their army onto their respective boats and transporting the cavalry was a logistical nightmare that Henri left to Sahara and Eydis. Even while the ship was moored, the slow rocking beneath her feet made Henri nauseous. Luckily, Lyse approached her with a small vial.

'Here,' the groundling healer said. 'Sahara mentioned you don't fare well on the open waters. This should stop your seasickness.'

Henri took it gratefully. 'Thank you.' She'd try anything to prevent her from hurling her guts overboard while the others strategised. She knocked it back, grimacing at the bitter taste.

'You're welcome.' Lyse smiled. She looked across the deck, surveying the elite kindred and the winter queen. 'It's quite something, isn't it?'

'What?'

'Seeing us all come together.'

Henri followed her gaze, taking in the sight of Sahara, Tilly, Marvel and Luka alongside Queen Eydis, Jarel, Commander Swinton, Captain Fiore and the royals. The group was deep in discussion about something, a lot of pointing occurring out towards the other vessels.

'It is,' Henri murmured, her chest swelling with pride. When was the last time Valia had allied with another territory? When was the last conflict that had united four of the five continents?

Sahara approached her. 'It'll be a while yet,' she said. 'May as well get some rest while you can.'

Henri shook her head. 'I couldn't sleep now.'

'I know.' Sahara touched her arm. 'Everything is feeling very real all of a sudden.'

Henri glanced at the kindred on board, her gaze catching on Luka's red hair, guilt snagging on her insides.

'Are you alright?' Sahara asked, her eyes bright with concern.

'It's just ...' Henri didn't quite know where to start.

She didn't have to. Sahara squeezed her arm. 'I know,' her twin said. 'It will never be the same after this.'

'No. It won't.'

Sahara nudged her. 'Go do something to take your mind off things. I'll come get you when we're ready.'

Henri found herself nodding. It wasn't often she accepted help, but today ... She asked a crew member to bring a straw dummy to one of the empty cabins below deck. When he was gone, she stood in the centre of the room and let her magic bubble to the surface. It coursed as strong as Valia River through her veins. She threw a katar at the dummy, the blade embedding neatly in the middle of its face. Then, she focused on the weapon, trying to draw it from its place using her power. She was still yet to master using her magic without the use of her hands, despite having practised for years. The katar remained in the dummy.

She swore. *Gods, why is this so difficult?* Bleak had mastered her powers so quickly with little to no training. She seemed to do it by instinct, and that was what Henri lacked. Instead, she'd had a lifetime of instruction and discipline, and now ... her Ashai instincts weren't as developed as they should have been. She focused again on the handle of the katar, willing it to release itself from the straw.

'You're thinking about it too much,' a familiar voice said. Allehra stood behind her, wearing a full suit of Valian armour. Her injuries had been treated by healers, and despite the vials of blood she'd given, she looked strong. The armour gleamed. Henri had only seen it once before, on a mannequin in the matriarch's grotto back home before it was put away. It was the work of Valia's most talented armourer. An intricate network of trees had been carved into the steel across the breastplate. There was probably nothing like it left in the whole realm.

'I thought it was time I got some use out of it,' Allehra said, following her gaze. 'It's been a long time since I wore it.'

'It's beautiful,' Henri admitted.

Allehra nodded to the katar. 'Try again. This time, don't fixate on it so much. Magic is fluid. It's a part of you – *feel* for it. Don't command.'

Henri couldn't remember the last time Allehra had played the role of mentor to her. But Allehra had trained Bleak. Allehra had been through a living nightmare to return to Sahara and her. She knew things; she always had. Henri gritted her teeth. She turned back to the katar, and this time, closed her eyes. She reached for the energy with her mind, felt it glimmer, but still, nothing.

'Henri,' Allehra said. 'It's an extension of you. You can access it easily if you stop thinking about it.'

Biting back a retort, Henri started over. To no avail.

'You're still thinking too much.'

'I can't help it, can I?'

'Here,' Allehra said, drawing her sword.

'What are you doing?'

'Taking your mind off it.' Allehra struck.

The confines of the small cabin made their duel a different kind of combat. Henri blocked her blow and dealt one of her own, but even after everything she'd been through, Allehra was fast and strong. Henri felt a swell of pride as her mother advanced; a Valian through and through. Henri changed stance and went on the attack, meeting each of Allehra's strikes with her own sword, the force vibrating down her arm. She ducked another swipe and then reached for her magic, the extension of herself —

A sharp clang sounded as Henri's katar soared through the air and struck the steel of Allehra's armour.

Allehra stepped back, smiling. 'See?'

Henri looked at where her katar had clattered to the ground. 'Why have you never taught me this before?'

Allehra quirked a brow. 'You have never accepted nor asked for my help before, have you?'

Henri didn't know what to say. Allehra was right. She'd always held her mother at arm's length, especially after Sahara had left. She didn't know how to close that distance after all these years.

Allehra was watching her as though the thoughts were plain on her face. 'Come with me to the captain's quarters?' she asked.

Henri frowned. 'Why?'

'Just come, will you?'

Still frowning, Henri followed Allehra down the dimly lit passage to the captain's chambers. As the door swung inwards, Henri spotted it. In the far

corner, a sheet of linen was draped over something tall.

‘I had this designed for you,’ Allehra said, approaching it and tugging the fabric away.

A breathtaking suit of armour stood on a mannequin before her. Shining plates of steel hugged the figure, forged with even more talent than Allehra’s had been. Incredible detailing rippled across each plate, the stunning landscape of the Valian treetops sprawling across the breast.

‘You’re a warrior worthy of it.’

Henri was speechless.

‘I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye. There are many things I would do differently if I had my time over again. But you’re the Queen of Valia. And more importantly than that, you’re my daughter.’

Hot tears stung Henri’s eyes, her chest swelling. She blinked them back. ‘You truly did this?’ Henri approached the armour, running her fingers along the steelwork of trees.

‘I commissioned it, yes. It was made in Valia. By the best Valian armourers. I had always intended on giving it to you.’

Henri found herself nodding. ‘Will you help me put it on?’

HOURS LATER, dawn broke upon the glaciers of Havenness. Henri stood at the ship’s wheel, donning her new armour, with her sister and her mother on either side of her. The bitter wind caught in the open sails, and at last, *Rheyah’s Prize* lurched forward, the sheets of ice groaning around the bow.

As the first rays of golden light emerged from behind the mountains, Henri looked at the fleet behind them; one hundred ships strong, sails billowing in the gale. The sheer immensity of it was breathtaking. They stretched as far as Henri could see.

‘Henri,’ Sahara said quietly. ‘Now is not the time for looking back.’ She took Henri by the shoulder and turned her to face the seas before them.

‘Look ahead.’

And Henri did.

CHAPTER 27

The hold of *Rheyah's Prize* was dimly lit, damp and cold. Dash had to clench his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. He stood silent beside Prince Nazuri as the Battalonian counted the strange glass bottles before them. The prince had his hands tucked under his arms, his brows knitted together in concentration.

'They're all there,' he said finally.

Dash stared at the stores. Inside each of the otherwise empty vessels was nothing more than a single glowing ember, almost extinguished.

'This is it?' he asked.

Nazuri nodded. 'It's all you'll ever need.'

'They don't look like much.'

'One ember is an entire firestorm well. Trust me. We have more than enough to scorch the ground in Oremere.'

Dash didn't take his eyes away from the supplies, the vision he'd had still fresh in his mind. 'Alright.'

Prince Nazuri was restless, shifting from foot to foot. 'Dash?'

'Your Highness?'

'I know you care deeply for Princess Olena.'

Dash's stomach dropped to his feet. He didn't want to talk about Olena with the prince. Their friendship was none of the Battalonian's business. And besides, Dash himself was still unsure of where they stood now that he was older, now that war was upon them all.

Prince Nazuri cleared his throat. 'I want you to know that I care for her deeply as well. I would never do anything to harm her. She is my greatest ally.'

‘Even so,’ Dash said stiffly. ‘I’ll always be at her side.’

Nazuri’s expression was grim as he gave the stores of firestorm wells one last glance. ‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’

DASH AND LUKA stood at the bow of the ship, the icy wind whipping their faces and tangling their hair. Havennesse had long since disappeared from the horizon. *Rheyah’s Prize* now glided across the choppy waves at full speed, her sails full, salt water spraying up on deck. Luka had been quiet since they’d spoken at the stables, and Dash knew why.

‘I’m sorry we didn’t get to find her,’ he said.

Luka smiled sadly, twirling her dagger between her fingers. ‘It’s alright. When the war is done, she’ll find us.’

Dash nodded, though he didn’t know how Luka could be so sure. From what he’d learned in recent months, nothing in this realm was certain.

‘Where do you think Bleak went?’ he asked, with another glimpse at his friend.

‘If she’s smart, somewhere a lot warmer,’ Luka replied, rubbing the heat back into her arms.

Dash huffed his agreement. Even though they could no longer see the snow-capped mountain peaks of Havennesse, the air was still as icy as ever. His ears burned in the cold and he tugged his cloak hood up over his head. He faced the deck and spotted Olena with Commander Swinton and Captain Murphadias. The princess’ face gave nothing away, but Dash noted her tight grip on the ship’s railing.

‘You’re scared for her?’ Luka asked, following his gaze.

Dash didn’t take his eyes from the trio. ‘I’m scared for everyone.’

‘Then there’s only one thing to do.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Let’s train.’

‘That’s your answer for everything.’

Luka shrugged. ‘So?’

Dash felt a smile tug his mouth and he unsheathed his sword. ‘So, let’s train.’

Luka’s grin matched his as they headed down to the main deck. ‘On your mark, then,’ she said.

Dash didn't wait; he lunged. The clang of steel rang across the whole ship as his blade met Luka's. The sheer confidence of her strikes had him on the defence immediately. The strength behind each blow reverberated through his sword and up his arm as he deflected. Luka feinted right, and Dash fell for it. Her blade halted just before it took his head.

'That one gets you every time.' She laughed.

Dash drove forward, trying a direct attack with a jab to Luka's middle. But she was too quick for him and pivoted. His attempt earned him a kick to the back of the knees that sent him sprawling across the deck. As he recovered, he realised that their sparring had attracted a crowd. Tilly, Marvel and some of the other Valians sat on the steps, watching smugly. Jarel and Eydis looked on from the upper deck. But Dash wasn't concerned with any of them. A pair of umber eyes met his.

'Quit stalling,' Luka said, advancing.

Dash adjusted his stance and readied himself.

Luka attacked with a flourish, no doubt for the benefit of their spectators. She sliced through the air with her sword, but the flourish cost her precious time. Dash ducked the blow, and struck her legs out from under her.

With a curse, Luka flipped back up on her feet and switched sword hands. They duelled relentlessly. The clash of their blades was the only sound that mattered to Dash as he sidestepped and countered Luka's strikes. Commander Swinton was watching.

'Stop toying with him,' one of the Valians called out.

And Luka obliged, swinging swiftly, hard enough to knock Dash's sword from his grip completely. She had her blade to his throat in an instant.

There was a burst of applause from the gathered crowd and Luka gave a mock bow before slinging an arm around Dash's neck. Dash laughed. Luka was the better fighter by a long shot, but he knew by training with her, he would only get better and better, even if it meant landing on his backside regularly.

Suddenly, the crowd grew quiet. Commander Swinton approached them. His dark eyes gleamed with curiosity as he took in the sight of Dash and Luka together, as though he couldn't quite comprehend the friendship between an elite Valian kindred and ... his son.

Dash's heart thudded against his ribs and heat crept up his neck. Was the commander ashamed of him?

'Would you care for a round with me?' Commander Swinton asked, his voice low.

Of all the things Dash had imagined, he hadn't thought ...

But Commander Swinton waited patiently, a glimmer of fear in his eyes.

Dash heard a laugh in his ear. 'I reckon you could take him,' Luka said.

'I don't know about that,' a deep melodic voice said from the crowd. Captain Murphadias stepped forward, with Sir Caleb at his side. 'We trained Dimi well.'

Dash stood almost eye to eye with the commander. He took in their similarities: their build, fair complexion and dark features. But he also couldn't forget that before him stood one of Ellest's most revered warriors. 'Alright, then,' Dash said.

Something brightened in Commander Swinton's eyes. The man drew his sword and readied himself. 'On your mark.'

Dash twirled his blade as Luka had shown him and gave a single nod. He launched his attack. Everything else faded into the background as Dash took on his father, their blades whirling and clashing. The commander's strikes were precise and brutal, the embodiment of lethal efficiency. Dash had seen this style of fighting when he'd spied on the squires: traditional, predictable. Dash parried and blocked a strike. There was nothing predictable about the commander, Dash realised, panting as a blow clipped his shoulder. The commander was making him do all the work, forcing him into a series of elaborate dodges and sidesteps.

Swinton's expression was unreadable, but Dash realised too late that noting such a detail was a mistake; paying attention to emotions instead of the slice of the blade and the stance of his opponent would be his undoing. The commander had the upper hand, and lunged forward. But then, to Dash's shock, he managed to deflect the blow, sending Swinton staggering back.

Swinton recovered, a rare smile flashing on his face for a moment, before he swung his blade in a wide circle and thrust forward. Dash leaped back, his whole body singing with the thrill of combat. How had he not been bested yet? He was duelling with *Commander Swinton*. He lunged; his sword met a hard block, and his arm shook under the impact. And then he

realised: it wasn't Commander Swinton he was sparring with. He was sparring with *his father*.

Their blades clashed again. This time, Dash leaned in. 'Don't go easy on me,' he said, gritting his teeth.

Amusement sparked in the commander's eyes. 'As you wish,' he replied. In a blur, Dash's sword was knocked from his hands, and his feet were knocked out from under him. He looked to the cloudless sky above, until Swinton's face peered down at him.

'You asked for it,' he said with a shrug, before offering his hand.

Dash hadn't even processed how he'd ended up on his back, but he took the commander's hand.

As their palms met, Dash was hit with a jolt of energy, and his magic surged.

WHERE THE LAND was not scorched black, it bled. Rivers of blood coursed across the ground, staining the earth red. Butchered bodies littered the field in heaps, the stench unbearable. Violence had seeped into the very heart of this place. A poison, a plague on all those who'd taken part.

Dash looked around to find Commander Swinton at his side, horror etched on his face as he, too, took in the fields before them. Formidable spiked gates loomed in the near distance, the gates to a walled city. Dead men hung from those walls.

'What happened here?' Dash heard himself say, his words catching in his throat.

'It's what will happen here.' Commander Swinton didn't take his eyes from the silent battlefield.

DASH CAME BACK to the present with a gasp. His hand was still gripping Commander Swinton's, now clammy. He pulled away, staring in disbelief at the man who was so much like him.

'You saw what I saw?' Dash asked softly.

'I did,' Swinton said, sheathing his sword and beckoning for Dash to follow him. 'I did, but I wish hadn't.'

CHAPTER 28

Bleak had known she was going to hate the East Sea Underpass, but nothing had prepared her for the utterly dank confines of the tunnels. She was hemmed in, with Bear and Kadi running ahead, and Rion and the rest of the pride behind her, not to mention the wet walls on either side of her. It smelled of the sea, only staler, and the further they travelled, the tighter Bleak's chest grew. She followed the dogs with trepidation, unsure of how and what Eydis had communicated to them. Eydis had warned her that there was no guarantee the plan would work, in any case.

Only time will tell, Bleak coaxed herself as she delved deeper and deeper into the darkness, her skin crawling. The only benefit to being down here was the silence. No one else's fears pummelled into her; there were no expectations, no formalities that made her squirm. For the first time in a long while, she was left with her own thoughts. She was filled with guilt for leaving her mother behind. They had only just found each other, and after everything Gesa had been through, the last thing Bleak wanted was to abandon her again. She had so many questions, so many things she wanted to know. But Gesa was in no state to travel, least of all through the East Sea Underpass. There was no knowing how things would turn out down here, and Bleak would never allow her mother to be imprisoned again.

As she breathed in the stagnant air, she realised how much she missed the quaint coastal village of Angove. She missed the crackling feeling of sea-kissed skin, and the briny breeze dancing in her hair. She longed to be seated at the Claytons' dining table, with Bren and all his brothers, and Mrs Clayton fussing over their latest scrapes. Senior would be there, too,

looking on in quiet amusement. More than anything, she missed the simplicity. Even her later scuffles with the resident bully, Maz, and the searing glares from the townsfolk had been easier than what awaited her now.

A noise echoed down the tunnel, yanking her from her reverie. Bleak froze. *What was that?* She strained to hear. Bear and Kadi had halted as well, and they sniffed the air cautiously. Rion's nose brushed her shoulder from behind, as though to ask why they'd stopped. Bleak ignored him, holding her breath, watching the dogs. After a moment, Bear and Kadi seemed to dismiss the sound. They continued on, their paws padding atop the wet ground.

Bleak pushed thoughts of the golden clifftops and turquoise waters from her mind. She needed to focus. Gritting her teeth and adjusting the pack on her shoulders, she picked up her pace. The sooner this was over with, the better.

A single note filled the air, a sound so rich and vibrant, Bleak stopped in her tracks. A melody followed, unlike anything she'd ever heard before. Her body swayed with it. All thoughts emptied from her head. She was at complete ease as the song washed over her heart like a healing salve. Her feet moved of their own accord, turning her down an unseen, narrow path. Rion and the other panthers growled their protest behind her; they were too large to follow.

It's alright, a voice within told Bleak. Bear and Kadi remained close to her ankles as the melody pulled her along through the tunnel. She didn't know where she was going, but she wasn't afraid. For the first time in a long while, she wasn't afraid. Emotion swelled in her chest as the source of the music grew closer and closer. Its notes dipped and danced around her, pulling her into its embrace. With no sense of panic, she was filled with the sudden realisation that she was dying. Death called to her, like a beacon of light out on a black sea. She felt she should say something. Something poetic, perhaps about the fleeting nature of life, something those she had left behind could remember her by. But as the song filled her soul, and her lungs filled with fire, she decided to say nothing. There was no one here to witness her undoing. A quiet death, that would be her legacy.

Then, she saw them.

Lisloiks. Seven of them glided towards her, as terrifying as they were beautiful. Like the queen from Casimir's memory, these creatures at first

glance looked like women, with long, tangled hair that hung past their waists and was matted with coral and seaweed. They wore shapeless, near-transparent silk shifts down to their calves and nothing beneath, their feet bare. Their skin was almost translucent, but it was their eyes that had Bleak utterly entranced. Like their queen, the lisloiks' irises glowed a stunning lilac, intensified by the dark scales around their temples. The creatures stared at her, waiting.

In a daze, Bleak reached out with her magic, only to ricochet off solid walls of defence in each of their minds. Her magic was useless here.

Around Bleak, the song heightened, as did the burning in her lungs. She was going to die. Her breathing strained as she accepted it, and her eyelids grew heavy. Her body buckled beneath the weight of their melody.

A violet light illuminated the entire chamber. The stone, resting against Bleak's sternum, was glowing. Behind the seven ethereal creatures stood hundreds more, waiting. Bleak touched the stone, and suddenly, the burning sensation and the pressure on her body lifted. She gasped for air, clutching the amulet.

The lisloik leader glided forward. She tilted her head to the side, a predatory movement. 'Lady Alarise,' she hissed, gesturing to Bleak with a hand tipped with black talons. 'We've been expecting you.'

How do they know who I am? But Bleak didn't voice her question. The glint of ferocity in the lisloiks' glowing eyes was enough to keep her quiet. The creatures parted in unison as their leader turned, motioning for Bleak to follow. Bleak did as she bid, a cold shiver latching onto her body as she forced one foot in front of the other. Bear and Kadi remained by her sides, their hackles raised. The lisloiks closed in after them. Bleak could feel their stares boring into the back of her head, assessing her movements, stalking her like game. She focused on the lisloik in front of her. As the leader's long hair swished, Bleak spotted the deep scars that trailed down her back, visible through the thin silk shift. She suppressed a shudder. *What happened to her?*

Bleak was led through an enormous, dark cavern that resembled the same wet grit of the rest of the East Sea Underpass. Sparse torchlight flickered across the walls, the light catching in the crystals of salt. The ground started to slope downwards, and to Bleak's discomfort, she realised they were heading deeper and deeper below the sea. At her feet, she could tell Bear and Kadi were anxious too, and the lisloiks appeared to glare at

them with dislike. Eydis' dogs had probably robbed the creatures of their share of prey over the years.

At last, they passed through a towering archway, its bright ivory tones in stark contrast to the rest of the dark cavern. Bleak realised why. It was built with ... *bones*. Hundreds, if not *thousands* of bones. Loose fragments scuffed underfoot and a wave of nausea hit her. But she bit the inside of her cheek and kept walking, heart hammering so hard she was sure the creatures around her could hear it. She stopped in her tracks as the passageway suddenly opened.

'*Gods,*' she murmured, breathless.

It was a far cry from the magnificent landscape of Lamaka's Basin. Once, the lisloiks had governed a territory of sparkling turquoise waters, snow-capped mountains and rich forests. Now, they were confined to a formidable lair far below the East Sea. It wrapped around the cavern in a massive circle, with numerous stone galleries that looked down to where Bleak now stood, seeming to stretch over a hundred feet above them. Ragged stone peaks formed bridges across the higher levels and – Bleak's breath left her lungs. In the centre of it all was a thick, rocky column that loomed high, and sitting atop it was the lisloik queen. Queen Delja.

Bleak tried to swallow, but her throat closed up as the queen floated down towards them. She landed silently on her bare feet before Bleak. A crown of coral was woven through her black hair. Bleak fought the urge to step back. Her gaze fell to the queen's glowing lilac eyes, brighter than the rest.

For a moment, the only sound was water dripping from the walls. At least, Bleak hoped it was water. This lair was worse than any dungeon she had been locked away in. She wondered if the lisloiks felt the same after having resided in Lamaka's Basin all those years ago, or if they'd come to love their new territory.

The delicate swish of silk shifts sounded as the lisloik clan gathered behind Bleak bowed deeply.

Queen Delja's gaze didn't stray from Bleak. She studied her with an intensity that made Bleak want to flinch. Her silence was even more terrifying.

Bleak took a deep breath. 'I have come —'

'We know why you have come.' The queen's voice was barely a whisper, but it wrapped around all of Bleak's senses, sending shivers across

her skin.

Queen Delja's eyes fell to the amulet around Bleak's neck. 'You have come to ask for our aid,' she said. 'The question, however, is not what we can do for you, but what you will do for us in return.'

CHAPTER 29

‘Where is she?’ Henri swiped the maps and cups from the desk. They clattered to the ground loudly, drink spilling across the parchment.

Tilly stared at her, shock etched on her face. ‘We can’t find her. We’ve searched the whole ship.’

‘Search it again.’

‘Of course.’ Tilly bowed her head and ducked from the captain’s quarters.

Henri swore loudly, kicking a cup on the floor. Where was Sahara? The kindred had been searching for her for nearly an hour and she was nowhere to be found. Anything could have happened to her.

She could be lying injured somewhere, she could have fallen overboard ... Henri’s mind raced through the possibilities, each far worse than the last. As the minutes ticked by, her sense of panic festered, feeding on the nagging sensation in her gut – a sinking feeling that she was trying to ignore. She paced the captain’s cabin, unbraiding and braiding her hair, massaging her temples, where a dull headache had started. They didn’t need this now. They couldn’t afford to —

The cabin door opened. Eydis entered, noting the mess at Henri’s feet and her wild appearance. The wintry queen closed the door behind her and met Henri’s gaze.

‘Sahara is gone,’ she said.

Henri blinked. ‘What?’

‘Ermias came and took her.’

‘Took her? Where? Why?’

‘You know where.’

‘To Geraad? That wasn’t the plan. We were supposed to do this together.’

‘Sometimes love upends the sturdiest of plans.’

‘But they’re not her people, Eydis. They’re not her *family*.’

The queen said nothing, which only enraged Henri further.

She rounded on her friend. ‘*You* let him take her? *You* let her go.’

Something dark clouded Eydis’ eyes for a moment, and she placed her hand back on the door handle.

‘Where are you going?’ Henri demanded, her magic rising to match her anger.

‘I’m going to leave. Before you say something you cannot take back.’

‘Eydis —’

But the door clicked closed once more. She’d gone.

Something within Henri snapped. The cage she’d contained her magic with was obliterated. The frames on the shelves shattered. The chairs around the table went flying and splintered against the wall. But Henri didn’t stop. Her magic poured from her in a continuous wave of fury and sorrow. It was the second time her sister had left her without explanation, without saying goodbye.

Etiam. Simuliah. No, they were not together. They had never been together. Sahara was gone. Athene was gone. Even the blasted mist dweller, Bleak, had left her. Henri sank to the floor, ignoring the shards of glass and splinters of timber. Slowly, her magic and her rage ebbed away, leaving only waves of sadness in their wake.

LATER, Henri found Eydis standing at the bow of the ship, staring at the reflection of the moon on the glassy black sea. She approached the queen, resting her elbows on the rail.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

Eydis didn’t reply, didn’t shift her gaze from the wavering reflection of the moon’s orb.

‘You were right to walk away,’ Henri allowed.

‘I know.’

‘I ruined the captain’s cabin.’

‘I know.’

The two women stood in silence for a time, looking out to the horizon. The coast of Oremere was in sight, and all of a sudden, the end of their journey would be upon them, and the last stand would be made. To whatever end, as Casimir had said.

‘Eydis,’ Henri said, turning to her friend. ‘Where is Nicolai?’

‘Gone.’

‘Gone? Gone where?’

‘He was the one who freed Farlah and Mariette.’

‘What? He can’t have,’ Henri muttered. ‘He ... he loves you, Eydis.’

‘Perhaps he did, perhaps he didn’t. I’ll never know now.’

‘Do you think he and Mariette ...?’

‘At times I suspected it, but I don’t think it was like that between them now. Not from his perspective, anyway. I think he manipulated her by using her feelings for him. I think he’s been in league with Ines ever since I rescued him from Qatrola all those years ago. She turned him, and planted him back in our midst to work for her.’

Henri couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe the breadth of the deception and the lengths to which Ines had gone. ‘What does this mean for us?’

‘I don’t know. I kept some of our strategies from him, especially recently. Something wasn’t right. But he knows a lot. He has information that, put in the wrong hands, could be devastating.’

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked slowly.

Eydis wrung her hands. ‘I’m going to go to war. I’ll carry on. As you have done. We stand to face the storm, no matter what it throws at us.’

‘And when the war is done?’

‘When the war is done ... I’ll kill him myself and feed him to my dogs.’

Henri nodded. ‘Good.’ She rested her elbows on the railing, Athene’s face swimming before her eyes. ‘Do you feel alone, Eydis?’ she asked. The question was raw in her throat.

Eydis laughed quietly. ‘You know ... I did, for a long time. Until now.’

‘Until now?’

‘I have always thought that being queens meant we were destined to be alone.’

‘Perhaps that’s for the best when we’re on the brink of war?’

Eydis looked at her and shook her head. ‘Being queen is to be alone. Unless you have another queen by your side. And we, Henri, are not alone.’

A loud crunch sounded below. Together, Henri and Eydis looked out to shore, to the misty moors of Oremere.

CHAPTER 30

Bleak could see muted light at the end of the tunnel. She was nearly free of the godsforsaken Underpass. Too long had she been cloaked in darkness, too long had she wondered if she would live or die. She shuddered at the fresh memory of the lisloiks, of what she had bargained. And even so, she knew there was no guarantee they would come. The queen had flashed her talons and stared at her for the longest time, before saying simply: ‘We will think on it.’

Now, with the hint of fresh air rippling down the tunnel, Bleak broke into a run. Bear and Kadi barked and bolted forward, while the heavy breathing behind told her Rion and the others were close. So Bleak ran. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her. Away from that horrifying lair, away from the lisloiks’ predatory gazes, away from the dank scent of the passages.

Daylight blinded her. Briny, cool air kissed her face. And for a second, a single second, she was back in Angove; golden sand at her feet, white cliffs overlooking the turquoise waters. But here, she was greeted by the broken remains of watchtowers and turrets: the rubble of Westerfort. And beyond it stretched the misty moors of Oremere, her motherland.

‘Thought I might find you here,’ said a voice from above.

Bleak whirled around, snatching her dagger from her boot.

A crimson cape fluttered as the woman jumped down from the stone wall. *Sahara*. Dressed from head to toe in Valian leathers, armed to the teeth.

Bleak’s whole body sagged with relief, and she sheathed her dagger. ‘How?’

‘Tailor. He brought me from rebel headquarters.’

Gratitude flooded her as Bleak embraced the Valian rebel. ‘It’s good to see you.’

Sahara’s face broke into a wide smile and she squeezed Bleak back. ‘And you, mist dweller. You going to tell me what you were doing in there?’ She gestured to the tunnel.

A shiver passed over Bleak and she shook her head, moving aside so Rion and his pride could come out into the open. She turned back to Sahara, adjusting the pack on her shoulders. ‘You’re supposed to be on the ship still.’

‘Yes, well ...’ Sahara looked out to the horizon. ‘Don’t let me die, alright? I expect Henri wants to kill me herself.’

AS THEY HAD A LIFETIME BEFORE, the two women set out across the moors, the two dogs bounding ahead. The journey was both like and unlike the previous one they had shared. Bleak glanced at her companion as her boots sank into the damp earth and the mist roiled at her ankles. Both of them had arrived once as strangers, strangers to Oremere, and to themselves, lost and alone. Now, they had found their places in the realm. Places that had to be fought for. Rion prowled silently beside Bleak, leading his pride through the mist. He, too, was far from the broken beast she’d found amidst the rubble of Westerfort. Despite what awaited them, she could be proud of that. She hoped that one day, when all of this was over, she could bring her mother home, too.

THE ENTRANCE TO rebel headquarters was as it had been before: an abandoned cottage in the foothills of seemingly unattended farmlands overrun by goats. Bleak hated leaving Rion and the rest of the panthers here, knowing they drew far more attention as a pride than Rion had on his own, but there was nothing for it. They had to remain above the stronghold. She took comfort in knowing that they’d at least eat their fill of fresh game. Bear and Kadi would have to remain outside as well.

Bleak ignored the musty scent of the cottage and the goat manure that littered the floor as they entered. Like last time, Sahara led her to the fire

grate and they lowered themselves down the ladder, into the belly of the rebel movement. Below, it was a hive of activity. A sense of urgency filled the air. Groups of men and women rushed past, carrying armfuls of weapons.

‘Preparations are well underway, then,’ Sahara murmured, taking in the sight before them, the tension in the air palpable.

‘So it seems.’ Bleak tried to ignore the fear that swirled in the Oremians’ thoughts around her as the women made their way to the council room. But it was potent, causing her head to tighten painfully.

‘Are you alright?’ Sahara asked her, catching her wince.

‘She’ll be fine,’ said a deep voice.

Relief swelled within Bleak as she spotted Casimir in the entrance to the antechamber, but she didn’t let it show.

Sahara raised a brow. ‘I wasn’t asking you. Bleak?’

‘I’m alright.’ She nodded, stopping herself from rubbing her temples. ‘Come on, we don’t want to keep the others waiting.’

Sahara seemed satisfied with her reply for the moment, and moved past Casimir into the chamber. The Valian’s eagerness to see a certain rebel was written all over her face.

Bleak looked to Casimir. ‘Ermias is here?’

Casimir nodded. ‘Inside.’

The council room seemed smaller as Bleak entered. Crowded around the table were the rebel leaders: Geraad, Daleren, Kye, Jaida and Fletch. Sahara took her usual place at the head, with Ermias already seated to her left. Casimir pulled up a chair for Bleak, and she accepted it gratefully. She stifled a moan as she sank into the seat, her body suddenly aching. When was the last time she’d rested?

Geraad turned to Bleak. ‘We were just discussing —’

‘More like arguing,’ Ermias cut in.

‘*Discussing*,’ Geraad insisted, ‘the strategies for the initial charge. From Queen Eydis and Dash Carlington’s visions, we know the battle will take place in the fields before Freyhill city. We still need to confirm where each rebel colony attacks from.’

Sahara crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the maps spread out before them. ‘I thought we’d already decided. I detailed this months ago.’

‘We need to give the orders,’ Geraad said.

‘Then give the orders. The plans are set. Especially now that we have allies coming from the south.’

Uncomfortable quiet settled over the group. Was Bleak missing something? Usually, the rebels worked well together. Usually, Sahara’s orders were followed.

‘We’re waiting to receive word from your Valian allies. Their march takes longer than ours. We don’t want to risk marching too early, only to alert Ines of our presence before our full force unites.’

A muscle twitched in Sahara’s jaw. ‘Then send word.’

Bleak jolted in her chair. She whirled around to Casimir. ‘Did you hear that?’ Her heart thudded hard in her chest.

Casimir frowned. ‘Hear what?’

‘I thought ...’ She thought she’d heard Rion’s roar above, but now ... now all she could hear were the panicked thoughts of the rebels. None of them showed their fear on their faces. They wore masks of calm, even as they bickered amongst themselves. But inside, their thoughts were full of turmoil, of doubt.

Bleak jumped again. This time there was no question. She’d heard him. Above ground, Rion’s roar was echoing through the foothills. She was on her feet.

‘Something’s wrong,’ she said. ‘Something is —’

But she was cut off by the deafening sound of a bell toll. It echoed through the whole headquarters, rattling the walls.

Throat closing up, she turned to Sahara. ‘What does that mean?’

Sahara was already drawing her sword. ‘We’re under attack.’

CHAPTER 31

They burst from the council room into a world of chaos. People were screaming. They streamed from their residences and into the headquarters' centre, eyes wide with panic. Bleak watched in horror as Sahara bolted across the passageway, fighting against the swell of the crowd. There was a shout of pain. A man was being trampled. Sahara, sword pointed up, battled through the throng of bodies and hauled him to his feet. The Valian shoved people off her as they grabbed at her, begging for answers, begging for safety.

Bleak pressed herself against the wall, breathless. A strange sensation rushed across her skin, sending a shot of ice down her spine so intense that she gasped. Beside her, she heard Ermias and Casimir do the same. She locked eyes with them, finding her fear mirrored there. And then she spotted it.

Mist. Mist was leaking into the headquarters through the vents.

The screams started anew.

Geraad shoved past Bleak and went to Sahara, batting people away from her as she made her way to a ladder. People clawed at her. The ladder swayed as she climbed, and Geraad braced himself against the onslaught at the bottom, trying to hold it steady. Bleak held her breath. Sahara reached for a rope and jerked it downwards. The massive bell above rang, its sound drowning out the toll of the last.

'Evacuate,' Sahara yelled above the cries of terror. 'Evacuate!'

The hysteria washed over the frantic people in a wave, and the crowd surged around Bleak with newfound strength. But Bleak's knees buckled. For staring back at her was the little girl from Heathton Castle. She was so

small, her slight build dwarfed even more by the white robe she wore. Bleak could see the freckles on her face now, her hair shaved close to her skull. The child version of Ines gazed at her, her eyes boring into Bleak's, until Bleak felt herself fall, deep into the passages of young Ines' mind. Only it wasn't the mind of a child. Not as Bleak imagined it. It was one of the most complex minds Bleak had ever seen.

'Is THAT EVERYTHING?' a faraway voice said.

Bleak peered into a chamber to see the scene she'd glimpsed once before. The little girl was nodding, tears running down her face. 'Please,' she whispered. 'It's all I have.'

'All you have is your love of Rheyah now.' A woman towered over the child, wearing identical white robes and leather sandals. 'You are a seer. Seers belong to the order of high priestesses. Always.'

'I'm not —'

'Your lies will cost you here, girl. We speak only truths in the temple.'

But Bleak could see into the girl, into her very core. She was telling the truth. She was not a seer. She was something else entirely.

A collector.

A powerful Ashai even at this young age. Who'd taken the magic of another child, accidentally. And now ... now she was trapped.

'My mama.' The little girl's voice cracked. 'I want my mama.'

'You have no mother but for the goddess Rheyah. It is her you serve now. You will have no belongings. No land, no home but for this temple.'

A sob escaped the girl, but the cry was cut short by the sharp slap of the woman's backhand across her face. 'An honour has been bestowed upon you. Be grateful.'

The girl's eyes glazed over, and Bleak saw her most recent memories – being torn from her mother's arms and hauled into a wagon. There were other little girls inside, all crying, bearing marks of struggle – torn clothes, no shoes, and some welts on their arms and bruises to their faces. Offerings. All of them. To the order of Oremian high priestesses.

The woman clamped her hand around the girl's upper arm and started to drag her away, but not before Bleak heard the little girl's whispered vow.

'I'll get it all back,' she said. 'I'll get it all back and more.'

BLEAK WAS WRENCHED FROM INES' memories, the little girl vanishing before her eyes, as Casimir snatched her hand, yanking her from the path of the panicked crowd. Mist coiled at people's feet.

'What happened?' he rasped.

'I ... I was in her mind again.'

'What?'

'In Ines' mind. I saw her. I think ... I think the amulet is connecting me to her somehow.'

Sahara reappeared. '*What are you doing?*' she yelled, shaking Bleak by the shoulders. 'We have to get out of here. *Now.*' She turned to Ermias. 'What are you waiting for? Take Bleak and Casimir and *go.*'

Ermias exchanged a look with Bleak as the terror rose up inside her. She nodded.

'I know,' she told him, his thoughts leaking into her mind. 'You're right.'

Ermias turned to Sahara. 'Where are the children? They go first.'

'No. There's no time. You have to take Bleak and Casimir,' Sahara argued. 'Without you —'

'*Children first,*' Bleak said.

Sahara swore. 'Geraad!' she yelled.

The rebel appeared, sporting a bloodied lip and a torn shirt.

'Take Ermias to the children. He'll get them and you out. I'll take Bleak and Casimir.'

The rebel baulked. 'What —'

'*Now.*' Sahara was already dragging Bleak through the crowd. 'Hold on to him,' she snapped, flinging her sword in Casimir's direction. He'd already fallen behind. Bleak reached out, and once more, he seized her hand in his.

Bleak's breath caught in her throat as Sahara hauled her through a narrow passageway teeming with panicked rebels and Oremians. Their screams were piercing as they tried to shove their way past one another, knocking people down, crushing others against the walls. Sahara brandished her sword, and the path before them opened up. Her grip on Bleak was bruising, but she didn't let go.

‘Sahara,’ Bleak called. The Valian ignored her. ‘Sahara, what about the rest?’

There was a blur of movement and suddenly, Sahara jammed Bleak against the wall with all her strength. ‘*There’s no time.* We have to get you out. You have to listen to me.’

‘We don’t know what waits above.’ Rion and his pride flashed in her mind. What had happened to them?

Sahara gripped the front of Bleak’s shirt, her eyes locking onto Bleak’s. ‘Only death awaits us here.’

Bleak was numb. They forced their way through the darkened tunnel, Casimir’s grip on her hand almost bone-crushing. There would be no war atop a field of blood blooms. The destruction of their kind, their realm, was already here. The mist crept in with no urgency; an inevitable poison latching on with no prejudice, seeping into their very beings, ready to take them all. There was an agonisingly slow violence to it as it claimed their people. There was no waking from this nightmare, Bleak realised. The screams around her became her own. Each cry of pain, each sob for help stabbed right into her core.

Suddenly, there was light ahead. Her lungs burned as they emerged from the underground onto an empty field, where the grey hues of Oremere played with the now harmless mist that swirled at their feet. At last, Sahara released her, and she in turn dropped Casimir’s hand. Sahara went to find the other rebel leaders, and while Casimir was distracted, Bleak peeled away from the group, her heart still hammering wildly. She climbed a small ridge and collapsed onto the grass. She watched on in despair as the survivors were pulled from various exits around the field. Faces were pale, hands trembled. The rebels and Oremians were in shock. As was she. How many had they lost? How many had they left behind to be swallowed by Ines’ toxic mist? Saliva filled Bleak’s mouth and her stomach heaved. Guts churning, she vomited between her knees.

Footsteps sounded on the ridge. Casimir and Ermias approached.

‘I saw her.’ The words tumbled from her mouth.

‘Who?’ said Casimir.

‘Ines.’

‘What? Where?’ Casimir’s hand flew to his sword.

‘I ...’ Bleak’s hand went to the chain around her neck. ‘When the mist spread in the headquarters. She appeared. As a child before me. A memory.’

Ermias whirled to face Casimir. 'What does that mean? Is she invading Bleak's mind?'

Casimir shook his head. 'Bleak thinks that the amulet, with Ines' magic trapped inside, is connecting them, giving her access to Ines' memories. We don't know more than that.'

This couldn't be happening. Her hands shook uncontrollably; her whole body was racked with tremors. She threw up a second time, the bile burning her throat. Eyes streaming, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, her heart filling with despair. It was all so senseless.

Bleak's mind began to spiral. Where was Rion? She needed him now more than ever. Where was he and the rest of the pride? He had roared before the chaos began. Who had found the headquarters? Had they found Rion, too? And Bear and Kadi? What had become of them? They meant as much to Eydis as Rion did to Bleak.

'They're running a count,' Casimir said quietly, handing her a kerchief. 'There are many survivors.'

'And many dead,' Bleak countered, dabbing the perspiration from her brow. 'We couldn't help them. We got out, and they didn't.'

'We did what we could,' Ermias cut in. 'The children are all safe and accounted for.'

Bleak nodded numbly.

Sahara came for them. 'We have been betrayed,' she said. 'Ines never knew the whereabouts of the headquarters. Only our closest allies knew. Only one of us could have ... We will find whoever did this ...'

Eydis' bloodshot eyes flashed in Bleak's mind. '*Nicolai* ...' The winter queen had uttered her lover's name with such devastation ... Surely not ...?

Sahara dropped to her knees beside Bleak, a gentle touch on her shoulder. 'I'll not let you give up now. Now is the time to strike, when they think we're at our weakest. The rebel colonies are ready to unite. We will march on Freyhill within the hour.'

CHAPTER 32

Dash rode at the back of the first unit, near Olena, Prince Jaxon, Prince Nazuri and Queen Eydis. Perfect lines of cavalry preceded them, a combination of Valians and Wildenhaven soldiers, straight-backed and alert in their saddles, their formation a carefully considered strategy by Henrietta Valia herself. Mist-covered moors and fields of blood blooms stretched out before them; an empty canvas, ready to be stained with the colours of war. Just like in Dash's vision. Their forces rode towards it, silent but for the clink of their armour and soft thud of the horses' hooves into the damp earth.

Luka and her horse fell back beside him. 'I'm heading up front,' she said. 'You coming?'

Fear squirmed within Dash, his stomach uneasy. He'd had his first taste of battle in Havennesse. Sometimes, he still dreamed of it, still woke with the smell of death trapped in his nose, the cries of the wounded in his ears. Before long, the moors ahead would be awash with blood, too. He glanced in Olena's direction. She and the other royals were flanked by guards, including the Swintons and the captain. He didn't belong back there, he realised. Luka was already urging her horse forward and he followed her, through the lines of warriors. The Valian smiled as he came up alongside her.

'History isn't made by those who stand idly by,' she said, offering her hand.

Despite the terror waging war on his heart, Dash forced a grin back at her as he took her hand and squeezed. He was glad for her company, glad that they'd ride into battle together.

‘Come on,’ she said.

They rode up the flanks of the force until they reached Henri and her kindred at the front lines. The Valian queen’s expression was unreadable as she surveyed the land ahead. The gated city of Freyhill loomed on the horizon. Silence lingered in the mist, and there was no movement to be seen.

Henri’s shoulders sagged as she exhaled a deep breath. Dash didn’t blame her. The same trepidation, the same fear had twisted its way around all their throats. The warrior queen called for a halt with a single raised fist. Her kohl-lined eyes slid to his.

‘Are you ready?’ she asked.

‘We’re ready,’ Luka replied.

Dash could only manage a nod.

Henri motioned for an attendant to come forward.

‘What you requested,’ Henri said.

The young man brought two pails to them, a thick, clear liquid sloshing within. A chemical tang burned Dash’s nostrils as he took one of the pails for himself, and accepted a large brush from the attendant.

‘You know what to do?’ Henri asked.

Dash met her gaze. Graphite eyes bored into his with an intensity suited to his impending task. ‘Yes,’ he told her. ‘I know what to do.’

Hooves sounded behind them, and Dash twisted in his saddle.

‘Wait!’ called a deep voice. ‘It doesn’t have to be him.’

Dash’s stomach lurched. *Commander Swinton*. He brought his stallion up short on the other side of Luka.

But it wasn’t to Dash that his umber eyes fell. ‘Henri, please. It doesn’t have to be him.’

Dash noticed the Valian’s grip on her reins tighten, but her expression betrayed nothing. ‘Dash’s choice is his own, Commander.’

Swinton’s gaze shot to Dash, and he opened his mouth to protest.

‘It has to be me,’ Dash said quietly.

‘No.’

Dash dismounted, careful not to spill the contents of the covered pail he held. He looked up at his father, the stranger who had protected him from afar his whole life. But the time for protecting was over. Now, each person had to stand and face what was to come, had to play their part.

Dash rested a hand on Xander’s neck. ‘It has to be me,’ he repeated.

Swinton shook his head. 'It doesn't. We can find someone —'

But with Luka at his side, Dash turned away and started towards the open plain.

He didn't look back at his father, knowing the fear in Swinton's eyes might unleash the terror he was only barely containing himself. Instead, he focused on the Valian's footsteps beside his as they crept across the field, crushing red blooms beneath their boots.

In a hushed, hurried voice, he explained their task once more to Luka. She listened intently, nodding. Gone were her grin and teasing eyes. There were no games now. At his instruction, they parted, Dash taking one side of the field, and Luka the other. Using the heavy brushes they'd been given, they began to douse the ground with the thick substance from Battalion. Dash's eyes watered as he worked, the chemical odour overpowering. He focused on the lines he was making in the dirt, remembering what Nazuri had said about ensuring that the sweep of the markings was consistent. The importance of his task was not lost on him. If he and Luka made a mistake, they would all die.

Dash moved quickly and efficiently, painting the ground with the chemical in long, even strokes. He prayed Luka was doing exactly as he'd told her, and tried not to think of the entire army watching them. They met at the centre of their work, back to back, pails almost empty.

'That's it?' Luka asked, surveying the wet lines across the field.

'There's one more thing,' Dash said. He tipped the remaining liquid from his pail over his head.

'What are you doing?' Luka's voice rose in alarm.

Dripping, Dash took her pail and emptied its contents on himself as well. He did as Nazuri had told him, rubbing the chemical all over himself, ensuring no inch of skin or clothing went untouched.

'Dash?'

'Trust me,' he told her. 'Just trust me.'

The internal struggle was clear in Luka's bright eyes, but she bit her tongue and nodded.

A loud screech sounded across the field, and Dash's heart froze mid-beat. Together, he and Luka turned to face the sleeping city. But the city slept no more. The spiked iron gates of Freyhill creaked open. Ines' great army, spears, swords and shields at the ready, waited within.

CHAPTER 33

At the mouth of Freyhill, war drums sounded. An insistent beat, a countdown to the inevitable. Atop her horse, Henrietta Valia took in the sight of thousands of masked soldiers at the gates and her breath caught in her throat. It was worse than she could have imagined. And at the heart of the enemy's force, Ines sat atop her horse. It could be no one else; clad in white armour, red scarves wrapped around her head, the ends dancing in the breeze.

Three riders broke away from her ranks and approached.

Henri nodded to Tilly and Marvel, and the three Valians rode out to meet them. Henri barely felt the thud of her horse's hooves beneath her, nor the cool wind on her face as the gap closed between her and the enemy general. *Farlah*. Her magic surged at the sight of the sadistic bitch, but she reined it in, pulling her horse to a halt.

'Are you here to discuss terms of surrender?' Farlah asked with a smirk. A single red bloom had been etched into the breastplate of her armour and a whip hung at her hip.

'We won't be surrendering,' Henri said, her voice steely.

Farlah's laugh sent a chill down Henri's spine. 'Good. I'd hate for this to be over too quickly.'

Henri's kindred were still and silent beside her, but she felt the hatred for the general pouring from them as it poured from her.

'There'll be nothing quick about your death,' she told Farlah.

'We shall see, Valian.'

Henri gave Farlah one last look before squeezing her horse's sides with her heels. 'On the battlefield, then.'

She, Tilly and Marvel returned to their front lines at a gallop. Henri's chest was tight. Fear had sunk its talons into her heart and wouldn't let go. This fight was different to all the rest. Forcing herself to breathe deeply, she surveyed the lines of soldiers and Valians. It wasn't enough. Their numbers paled in comparison to Ines'. Where were the others? The rebel forces Geraad had promised? And the remaining kindred due from the south? They needed those numbers, needed their support, their cavalry. But Henri was out of time. She gripped her reins hard. The masked soldiers of Freyhill were now spilling from its gates in a steady march, the war drums echoing across the moors.

She swallowed and turned back once more to face the army she was about to lead into battle. Thousands of faces stared back at her; the hardened eyes of the Valians, the fear-stricken gazes of the Havennesse soldiers. She couldn't blame them. What awaited them now was a colossal wave of pain and death.

Farlah led the enemy march, the steady surge of their cavalry shaking the ground and echoing like thunder across the field before them.

Henri held up her fist. Their horses and soldiers were restless. Each second that passed brought horror closer and closer, shredded more and more courage. But they *had to hold*. She felt as though she should say something. Something to inspire their warriors to face the gods with fearlessness, to instil hope and fire in their hearts. But as she looked out to the sea of those who would follow her, many to their deaths, words failed her. Pretty speeches had no place on the battlefield.

She galloped down the front lines, wind whipping her face, mist coiling at her horse's hooves. 'We hold,' she called out, her voice echoing through the ranks. 'Hold fast!'

She reached the centre of their forces once more, and at last, drew her sword. The scrape of thousands of swords rang out across the plain. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. This was it. This was what her whole life had been leading to. A defining moment in the history of the Valian kindred. King Arden was dead. Siv Lennox was dead. But a far worse evil charged at them now. The very essence of which made the magic in Henri's veins tremble. But she would not falter.

A horse and rider pushed through the ranks behind her. They came to stand at her side. Cheers rang out from the Valians.

'Didn't think I'd leave you to have all the glory, did you?' Sahara said.

Their forces swelled as the rebel colonies fell into line alongside them. Henri felt the relief roll through their army in a wave. United, they stood a chance. New strength barrelled through Henri; her sister was here. Late, but here. She smiled at Sahara as Ines' forces crossed the threshold. The warrior queen raised her sword above her head and kicked her horse's sides. 'Charge!' she bellowed.

CHAPTER 34

*V*alians, rebels and Havennesse soldiers surged forward, and a chorus of warrior cries drowned out the thunder of the cavalry as the gap between them and the enemy closed. Henri's own cry sounded as she charged, escaping from deep within her. The enemy's spears, swords and shields grew closer and closer.

Forces collided in a blur of mist and blood.

The impact flattened much of the vanguard, and the sharp clang of steel on steel reverberated through thousands in a colossal wave. Horses squealed in terror, rearing up and trampling the wounded as spears found their marks in riders and mounts alike.

Henri charged into their front lines, cutting down one masked soldier after another, ignoring their screams and the blood spurting into the air. She didn't stop. She urged her horse further into the fray, knocking aside injured men as they clutched at her stirrups and begged for mercy.

Where is Ines? She'd rip her apart. But the false queen was not amongst the fighting. Henri spotted her surrounded by guards at the city gates, surveying the bloodbath. A coward. She was nothing more than a coward.

Reeling back from an incoming spear, Henri rammed her blade into another soldier, his warm blood slapping against her face and armour. There was no time to wipe her eyes; a trio of soldiers advanced on horseback, circling her and jabbing at her with their longswords. She whirled her blade over her head, blocking one strike, while throwing a katar at another attacker. His cry of agony told her she'd hit her target. She lunged, running her third opponent clean through, his blood coursing down the steel of her blade in a hot, thick river. Kicking his body away, she turned her horse and

galloped towards the thick of the fighting. Her kindred were there, and she would not leave them to fight alone. They worked together seamlessly, luring more and more of Ines' forces inside their invisible perimeter. They could only do this once.

She flinched as a flying dagger sliced her arm, but she felt no pain. Not yet. The frenzy of the battle was overpowering, the clash of soldiers and horses deafening. There was nothing but the swing of swords and shouts of terror. The earth beneath boots and hooves turned muddy as more and more blood seeped into it. Horses began to slip, flinging their riders from their saddles and into the depths of close-quarter combat on the ground. Men were flattened by their own mounts, sliced open by their own comrades. But such was the chaos of war: friend and foe barely discernible amidst the dizzying blur of violence.

Henri's leathers were slick with blood, some of it hers, most of it not. Panting, she looked around wildly.

Where's Sahara? She forced her way through the chaos, blocking out the screams, cutting down the enemy soldiers in her path. *There!*

Fifty yards or so away, Sahara was surrounded. Her horse nowhere in sight, she adjusted her stance and defended herself, the onslaught of attacks laced with savagery. She parried and blocked with Valian precision and a rebel's boldness, matching strike for strike and then some, kicking mud up into her opponents' eyes. But there were too many, and they rushed forward, overwhelming her.

Panic in her throat, Henri galloped towards her sister, running down enemy soldiers in her path, closing the gap between them.

'Faster!' She kicked her horse, not tearing her eyes from Sahara.

But Sahara cried out as a blade pierced her shoulder.

All pandemonium around Henri faded away. 'No!' she bellowed. Blood spurted from Sahara's wound. Henri was too far away.

A strangled gasp escaped Sahara. Another sword found its mark in her side. She doubled over, falling to her knees. An enemy soldier towered over her.

Henri couldn't breathe. She kicked her horse frantically, but the distance between them was too great.

The soldier raised his sword, aiming for Sahara's heart.

A choked shriek came from Henri. '*Sahara!*'

The wet crunch of pierced flesh and bone sounded.

A spear shot through the man's chest from behind, chunks of skin and muscle dangling from the tip. His blood soaked the earth as he looked down in surprise. He spluttered red and his sword clattered to the ground as someone kicked his body aside.

Athene.

Henri's former first-in-command wrenched Sahara to her feet, cutting another attacker down in a single swipe of her sword.

Henri fought through the onslaught of soldiers, and finally reaching them, leaped from her horse. She heaved Sahara's arm around her shoulder, taking some of the weight from Athene. Her sister's breathing was ragged, blood flowing fast from the wound in her side.

'Get her out of here,' she told Athene, pushing Sahara up onto her horse.

'I will. Then I'm coming back for you.'

Henri's heart caught in her throat. 'I banished you ...'

Athene pulled herself up onto Henri's horse behind Sahara. 'I was never any good at following orders.'

Before Henri could reply, Athene was charging back through the formations, leaving a trail of lifeless enemy soldiers in her wake.

'Henri!' a deep voice called. 'Henri!'

From halfway across the battlefield, Commander Swinton rode towards her, whirling his battleaxes. He brought down guard after guard, his hacks precise and effective. He sliced clean through one man's neck, the decapitated head rolling across the mud.

'Henri,' he said again as he reached her.

She blocked an incoming blow and dealt a death strike with her katar. 'What is it?'

'It has to be *now*,' he told her. 'Where are your supplies?'

Henri's stomach lurched as she looked around. She'd tied what she needed to her horse.

'Gone,' she said.

Swinton reached down, offering her his hand. 'Come with me.'

Henri hesitated.

'We're out of time,' he snapped.

Her hand clasped around his, and she hauled herself up onto the horse behind him. He didn't wait. He urged his stallion into a gallop across the battlefield. Henri looped her arms around his waist and held on tight. His

horse was a force to be reckoned with, and Swinton didn't stop tearing down the enemy as they charged through the centre and rode hard towards their own back lines. There, Sir Caleb and Fiore flanked Dash. The boy was pale but wore a determined expression.

Swinton pulled his horse up in front of his son and reached across, gripping his shoulder. 'You still as fast as you were when you were a boy?' he asked.

Dash locked eyes with him and nodded.

Henri could feel Swinton's body trembling against hers, but the commander handed his son a battle horn.

'You best put that speed to good use, then,' he said, voice steady.

'Now?' Dash asked.

Swinton nodded, urging his horse to face forward once more. 'Now.'

Without more warning, they launched themselves back into the fray. Swinton and Henri rode, clearing a path before Dash, who ran on foot into the heart of the battle. Fiore rode on the other side of him, deflecting incoming attacks. The boy was fast. A blur amidst the gleaming swords and cries of pain. Henri marvelled at the way he wove between deadly duels and leaped over the bodies of fallen men and horses. When they reached the centre, Dash skidded to a halt. And with one final glance at his father, he put the horn to his lips and blew three times. Before Henri knew what was happening, Swinton threw something dark and heavy over them and the horse.

Suddenly, the world was black.

Outside, the song of steel ceased, and then, a blaze of heat hit.

CHAPTER 35

The world was on fire. Flames roared across the battlefield, devouring everything in their path. Molten heat seared Dash's lungs and the glare from the blaze blinded him. He smashed the second jar, and the firestorm well within sparked and exploded. An inferno raged, a whirl of orange-and-blue flames, engulfing the enemy's men and horses, drowning out their screams. Coated in Battalion's fire-resistant chemicals, Dash watched Freyhill burn. Skin melted from enemy faces. Shrieks of pain died on charred lips.

Trapped within the circle he and Luka had painted, the storm was insatiable, tunnelling through Ines' forces with a deafening hiss. Their own forces lay low on the ground, cloaked in fireproof canvases and blankets, waiting for the fire to swallow the masked soldiers of Oremere. Outside the circle of towering flames, the remaining units looked on in horror, watching as men impaled themselves on swords and spears rather than face the agony of death by fire. Onlookers gaped at the young man standing in the heart of the blaze, immune to its devastating wrath. The firestorm was a greedy beast. Seemingly endless, it raged on, plumes of choking smoke the only things that escaped its clutches.

It was as though time had stopped as Dash walked through the blazing battleground. He prayed that everyone in their forces had heard the warning blasts from the horn. If they hadn't ... He pushed the thought aside. He couldn't think of that now.

Suddenly, pain seared his shoulder and he cried out sharply. He'd missed a patch with the chemicals. Flames had burned away his shirt and kissed his skin raw and blistering. He clenched his jaw. Around him, the

fire spluttered and crackled. Having devoured all possible fuel within its cage, the inferno was weakening. It gave a final hiss. Glowing embers floated down onto the scorched earth.

It was done.

Dash raised the horn to his lips. At the sound of the blasts, their forces emerged from their shelters. Dishevelled but unharmed, they staggered from beneath the thick canvases. Dash spotted Swinton, Henri and Xander, the commander's eyes latching onto his instantly, flooding with relief. Dash started towards them, but froze when he heard a shout in the distance.

The thud of spears and shields falling into place around them echoed through the circle.

No!

They were surrounded. Dash's teeth rattled as the enemy struck their shields and advanced. Their white masks were smudged with blood and dirt, and eyes full of hatred glared from the slits. A sizeable chunk of their unit had been burned to a crisp, and now the rest of Ines' force was enraged, thirsty for more death.

Gods, what have I done? Dash gaped at the host closing in on them, spears pointed inwards, ready to skewer the best of the Valians and Eydis' soldiers. His heart was in his throat. The enemy converged, forcing them backwards into one another. Dash stumbled. Ines had endless numbers. They poured from the city gates anew. Where had they all come from?

An arm shot out across Dash's chest and pulled him back, just as a spear struck out. It missed him by an inch. Commander Swinton shoved Dash behind him. Henri shielded him as well, standing at his father's side.

'I don't like our chances,' Swinton muttered to her.

The Valian queen palmed a new pair of katars. 'The gods didn't bring our people together only to have us die in the ashes.'

Dash jumped as a mighty roar shook the earth. It sounded again, echoing off the hills.

Sixteen teerah panthers charged from the ridge, their powerful paws pounding the blood blooms into the ground. Screams of terror pierced the moors. The great beasts barrelled through the surrounding enemy, sending their soldiers flying through the air and sprawling across the charred dirt. Rion led the attack, Bleak sitting high on his back. He roared again and swiped a row of guards from the front lines with his giant claws. The

formidable panthers brought a new reign of horror to the battlefield, tearing strips of flesh from the enemy, spraying Ines' army with blood.

But as relief flooded Dash's body, he staggered suddenly, head spinning.

A firm hand gripped his arm. 'What is it?' But the Commander's voice was distant.

A shimmering mirage appeared. Luka, brandishing her sword. Her mouth was set in a determined line, her eyes full of fire as she lunged.

'Dash? What is it?' Henri's voice this time.

'Luka,' he croaked. 'She's in trouble.'

He whirled around, trying to spot the familiar red braid. The chaos of battle made it near impossible. Everything was a blur; the flash of a panther darting across the field, the gleam of a blood-smeared blade, the thud of horses' hooves. He searched for her, the sights before him dizzying.

'There!' Swinton shouted, pointing at the crest of a ridge where the panthers had appeared. Sixty-odd yards of duelling soldiers stood between them and the young Valian.

Dash didn't think. He couldn't feel his legs as they pounded the blackened earth. In the orange afterglow of the blaze, he soared past bodies, incoming attacks and rearing horses. He sprinted towards his friend, who staggered back from her opponent.

Farlah. Fear surged through Dash's entire body, his magic singing as he drew closer, sword drawn, shield ready. He could hear his name being shouted in the distance behind him, but he wouldn't stop now. Luka ... Luka needed him.

The young Valian was on the attack, whirling her sword above her head and striking out at her enemy in a series of practised spins and jabs, fast and precise. Farlah leaped back, brandishing her own blade menacingly. The two women spun and pivoted, matching each other blow for blow, the clang of steel echoing down the ridge and across the rest of the battle.

Dash raced towards them, still not close enough. He had to get there. He *had to*.

Their shadows flickered across the ground as the deadly dance continued. Luka lunged and Farlah blocked, driving the Valian back with a violent slash at her middle. Luka tripped back, tumbling into the grass. Farlah leaped forward, her blade poised for the killing stab.

Dash was nearly there.

Luka flipped up onto her feet and dropped to one knee, blocking the strike from below. She advanced, eluding Farlah's weakened thrusts, forcing her back, the song of steel louder than ever with each slash. Luka's fist collided with Farlah's middle and the enemy stumbled, teetering on her heels before falling, arms flailing.

It was a feint.

Farlah straightened, and in a blur of movement, plunged her sword through Luka's chest.

The world stopped.

The sound that escaped Dash was primal; a noise from deep within, as though his soul was being ripped from his body.

Farlah darted towards him, but he barely saw her. Only heard the crack of her face against his shield as he knocked her aside with a powerful blow. He skidded in the dirt, at last reaching Luka. He pulled her into his lap, the Valian's breaths coming in short, shallow gasps, a trail of blood trickling from her mouth.

'Luka,' he said, his own breathing ragged.

Her face lifted over the sword protruding from her chest, to meet his gaze. She convulsed as she gulped for air, her lungs straining. Dash gripped her bloodstained hands in his.

'It's alright,' he told her. 'You're going to be alright.'

Something akin to laughter crossed Luka's watery eyes, before they grew wide as she rasped, struggling to breathe. Her hands clutched his, desperate, as though clinging to him would keep her in this realm.

'*Luka ...*' Dash's voice broke.

'Tell my mother —'

Her hands slipped from his. And at last, the light left the young Valian's eyes.

CHAPTER 36

Swinton was fighting his way towards the ridge when, over the clash of the raging battle, he heard Dash's cry. The sound sliced through the chaos and hit him hard in the chest, tearing the breath from his lungs.

Gods above. Is he hurt? Heart hammering, mouth dry, Swinton slammed another opponent into the ground, whirling around to spot his son collapsing atop the ridge where he'd seen Luka only moments ago. Something awoke within Swinton. Masked warriors became mere obstacles to him. He cut his way through the ranks, desperate to reach Dash. He felt none of the blows that landed on him, only the surge of magic in his veins, drawing him along that iron chain, not thread, that now linked him and the boy.

The young Valian was dead, Swinton realised, as he finally reached Dash. His son was clutching the girl so tightly his body shook, and his breaths were coming in hard and fast and panicked. Blood still flowed from the wound in Luka's chest, seeping into the sleeves of Dash's tunic as he held her, smears of it across his ashen face.

'Dash,' Swinton said, crouching beside him, glancing worriedly at the anarchy around them. 'There's nothing you can do for her now.'

But Dash didn't move. He gave no signs that he'd heard Swinton at all. Tears tracked down his grimy, soot-covered face and his eyes were glazed over. *Shock.* Swinton knew it well. But war stopped for no one. The forces were closing in again, the thunderous noise of it ear-piercing. Swinton's heart froze as a masked warrior cut down a Valian opponent and spotted him and Dash. Swinton stood and squared his shoulders, changing sword

hands. No one would touch Dash. *No one*. He'd slay every last one of them before that happened. The masked warrior made to charge for them, as a shout pierced the turmoil. And something whistled through the air. *Spears*. An influx of spears soared across the battlefield, thudding into the soft earth at their feet.

'Dash!' Swinton's blood went cold. His son hadn't moved. 'Dash!' Terror laced the name on his lips. He had no choice. He launched himself at the boy, hauling him up under the arms, trying to drag him to cover, any cover, as the unmistakable creak of bows being drawn sounded.

'I can't leave her,' Dash sobbed, rigid in Swinton's arms, still clinging to Luka's body.

Swinton took a ragged breath, panic clenching around his throat as he wildly scanned the bloody pandemonium below, searching for a familiar face and seeing none.

'Henri!' he yelled into the void, unsure why her name had come to him in that moment. There was a flash of a katar sailing through the air, and Swinton's eyes latched onto her. She was too far away, on the other side of the battlefield. He had to get her attention. He looked around frantically for something, anything – the horn tied to Dash's belt. He ripped it from its tie and put it to his lips. Three sharp blasts sounded.

Henri's head whipped around in his direction.

'Henri!' he shouted and waved madly to the enemy. 'Archers!'

But the warrior queen's gaze had gone to the dead girl in his son's arms. Her face went pale, her jaw slack.

'Henri!' he yelled again.

Whatever she was feeling in that moment, Henri tore her gaze away from Luka and launched into action. 'Fletch!' she called to the rebel across the chaos as she charged towards Swinton. 'Archers in formation, *now!*' Her voice was a steel blade of its own, cutting through the anarchy.

She had nearly reached Swinton and Dash now. Her forces leaped at her command, rows of archers springing from the depths of the ranks, readying their bows and arrows. Brows crinkled in determination, the Valians' faces were fearless as they looked to their queen.

'*Shields!*' Henri bellowed above the madness. Fletch tossed her a quiver of arrows, and Henri, now only a few yards from Swinton, gave him a final nod.

It was all Swinton could do. He heaved a shield in place before himself and Dash. Just in time. The flutter of fletching rustled in the wind as enemy arrows soared, raining down on them. Two – no, *three* embedded into the face of the shield Swinton held with heavy thuds, their impact reverberating through his arm. He squeezed behind Dash, making sure he was completely covered. Their forces were nearly at the city walls, but the sweat on his skin turned icy as the sounds filled his ears: snarls from the panthers, terrified neighs from the horses, and shrieks of pain as arrows found their marks. Swinton held the shield steady, another arrow bursting through its surface, the arrowhead dangerously close to Swinton's cheek.

'Archers!' Henri cried. 'Nock!' She looked around wildly and her eyes found his again. Visibly gritting her teeth, she sprang from cover and snatched a spare bow and quiver from a fallen rebel. Her focus was ferocious as she moved like water through the kindred. She tossed the weapons to Swinton, and they landed at his side. By the time he looked up, the warrior queen was already gone, vanishing into the front lines. There was no time to think. Swinton let his training, his instincts, take hold. In a single motion, he embedded the shield in the soft earth before him so that it protected Dash. Then, on one knee, he swiped the bow and arrows from the ground, and waited for Henri's command. He positioned an arrow in the string and pulled it taut, feeling the muscles in his shoulders strain.

'Loose!' Henri yelled.

Swinton's arrow flew with the rest. It found its mark in a soldier taking aim from one of the watchtowers. The looming walls surrounding the capital were crawling with soldiers. Every time one fell, another stepped forward to take his place; an endless line of attack. On Henri's order, Swinton shot arrow after arrow at the enemy. But the enemy had a new strategy. The masked warriors had tied themselves to ropes and now launched from the tops of the walls, swinging across the face of the great stone structures, firing from the best vantage points, hitting the Valians and rebels where they least expected it.

Moving targets were harder to strike. Swinton nocked another arrow to his bow ... But it also meant that they were exposed. He fired. His shot flew through the crowded sky, and pierced a swinging target. An arrow shot into the shield covering Dash. Swinton didn't flinch. His fingertips skimmed the fletching as he nocked yet another arrow and fired. Even from the great distance, the tip found its mark in the throat of the enemy archer.

‘Again!’ Henri called.

Swinton fired over and over. His body relished the draw of the bowstring and the whip of the fletching along his jaw as he released each arrow. His quiver was empty, and he surveyed the field below. He couldn’t believe it – it looked as though Ines’ forces were retreating ...

Henri’s voice echoed across the moors. ‘Nock! Draw. *Loose!*’

They rained arrows on the enemy, many piercing the flesh of those still sailing across the city walls. Was it possible? Were they gaining ground? Were they —

‘Henri!’ a familiar voice shouted. ‘Henri, *stop firing!*’

Swinton scanned the madness, spotting Bleak. She jumped from Rion’s back at the matriarch’s side, desperation leaching any colour from her face.

‘What?’ Henri snapped, releasing an arrow from her own bow.

‘They’re not real! *It’s a trick.* You’re just *giving them* ammunition, and depleting our supplies.’

Swinton stared at the Angovian. *What? It couldn’t be —*

‘I rode to the gates,’ she yelled. ‘It’s a *trick!*’

He squinted across the moors to the city walls, to where the enemy was still swinging across the stone. Only ... His breath snagged. Straw dummies, clothed in Ines’ colours, embedded with dozens of Valian arrows, were now being reeled up. Swinton watched in horror as the arrows were yanked from straw torsos and divided into enemy quivers.

Ines herself stood atop one of the watchtowers, untouchable. She pointed to their unit: the Valians and rebels positioned at the base of the ridge.

They were a sitting target.

‘Take cover!’ Swinton screamed, diving for Dash, praying that the shield was big enough and would hold against the incoming assault.

Arrows blocked out the sky.

Dash covered Luka’s body with his, and Swinton threw himself across Dash, shielding his son as best he could from the onslaught of arrows. Around them, screams of pain drowned out the rest. Oremians, rebels, Havennesse soldiers and Valians fell as arrows hammered into their forces.

Swinton could see Henri taking cover behind a fallen horse. She was yelling, but the storm of arrows smothered her words. Swinton spotted Fiore riding behind Bleak atop of Rion. He was firing into the enemy, but

his single attack was nothing against their unified wave. And Ines' attention snagged on them, her focus honing in on the Oremian heir and Battalonian.

Swinton's voice was hoarse. 'Fi!' he cried out as a sharp pain seared through his upper leg, like a red-hot poker had stabbed through all the skin and muscle. He didn't look down. He knew he'd been hit.

'Father,' Dash murmured. His voice was frail, but ... *Father*.

The boy looked at him. 'You're hurt.'

'I'm fine,' Swinton muttered, ignoring the rippling pain and the blood trickling down his thigh. He had to focus. They were losing, which meant he had to get Dash out of here. With a muffled moan of pain, he snapped the fletching from the shaft in his leg and made to stand.

'Swinton!' Henri cried.

He looked up, and his heart sank.

New soldiers on horseback were marching from the gates of Freyhill. Their faces were bright and hungry for glory, shields and swords held high. Their flags fluttered in the wind – they were different to the others. These flags bore the crest of Qatrola. Swinton's mouth went dry as he scanned their ranks, his eyes falling to the commander at the head. For leading the Qatrolan army was Eydis' lover and general, Nicolai.

No. Not after everything ... No. The general had helped plan their tactics, he'd been at every war-council meeting. This *couldn't* be happening.

The soldier to Nicolai's right handed him his helm. The traitor surveyed the bloodbath before him, his eyes cold. With a final glance up at Ines in the watchtower, Nicolai took the helm and placed it over his head, before raising his sword. He seemed to look right at Swinton as he bellowed: '*Charge!*'

The cruel word rang out across the already broken battlefield.

Swinton collapsed beside Dash. There was no escaping death now, not even for his son. The thunder of the enemy cavalry charging across the moors shook the earth. Swinton couldn't look, couldn't watch the slaughter of their people. But their cries rang out, clear as any vision, as they were cut down. Butchered like animals. He tried to focus on the mop of dark hair pressed against his chest. His son had known him. Fleeting, but he *had* known him. A roar of pain echoed across the field. A spear had found its mark in the flank of a teerah panther. Victorious shouts from Nicolai's host mocked them as they continued their charge.

In that moment, a single note of music filled the air. The entrancing sound drowned out all other noise of battle; the cries of pain, the thuds of arrows into shields were lost. Swinton craned his neck to see.

Gliding down onto the field were the most beautifully terrifying women Swinton had ever seen. Clothed in transparent shifts, they descended, and the war around them seemed to pause. He had heard this song before. In another time. Another lifetime, it felt like. The melody was breathtaking, dipping and rising towards a crescendo Swinton knew would be his undoing. He felt himself being drawn to their hypnotic song, the lure of it filling a hole in his heart. He was on his feet again, the pain of his wound gone, the rest of the world falling away as he walked towards the glorious creatures and their melody. Around him, others did the same. Swords and shields fell to the ground. The charge of cavalry slowed to a halt. Swinton felt a well of contentment inside him like never before. This was what it was like to be at peace.

Until a heavy blanket was thrown over his senses and he froze.

CHAPTER 37

Bleak stood transfixed as hundreds of lisloiks flooded the battlefield, their enthralling song echoing through the ranks. They had come. *All of them.* Across the sea of soldiers, Queen Delja wore a breastplate of coral, her crown sitting high on her head. Her glowing eyes found the Angovian, and she gave a single nod.

‘Feed. Have your fill of the masked men,’ Bleak had told Delja in the depths of her lair. *‘When the war is done, you’ll be freed from the darkness. Lamaka’s Basin will be yours once more, to govern as you will.’*

Now, Bleak held her breath and reached into the abyss of power within her. She had been preparing for this; she only hoped it would be enough. She grasped her magic and threw it out across their forces, like casting a net across the sea. Her magic swept into the minds of Valians, Oremians, rebels and Havennesse soldiers, protecting them from the lisloiks’ hypnotic melody. She held the edges of the magic net with all the strength she had as the battle below lulled. The masked guards of Freyhill were suddenly dazed, their weapons clattering to the ground.

The formidable lisloik queen glided at the apex of their formation, glorious and horrifying. Ines’ army swayed towards the creatures and their song. But the lisloiks’ lilac eyes went black, and their talons flashed. Their song was drowned out by screams.

Bleak was shaking. She didn’t watch as the creatures tore apart Ines’ men. Didn’t want to know what the lisloiks did to leave nothing but bones behind. Bones with which they could build an entire lair. Tears streamed down her face with the effort it was taking to protect their forces. On the verge of losing control, she concentrated on the moors, only to see —

Nicolai? What's he doing? She watched, transfixed, as he dismounted his horse, his usually stern expression dreamy and aloof. He drifted towards the lisloiks, his eyes on the beguiling Queen Delja. Bleak didn't cast her net wider to include him. She had seen him lead the Qatrolan forces. He deserved what he got. But suddenly Eydis was there, her gold-plated armour gleaming. She placed herself between Nicolai and the lisloiks, her expression unreadable. She took a step towards her lover. Bleak could have sworn her eyes softened for a moment, before she closed her fist and her gauntlet crashed into Nicolai's face. He crumpled to the ground, blood flowing from his nose, knocked out cold.

Tremors racked Bleak's whole body as she refocused. The power she wielded was more than anything she'd held before. The amulet she wore pulsed against her skin, as though it was reaching out to something – someone.

Ines.

The false queen emerged from the foot of the watchtower, her eyes latching onto Bleak and the stone now glowing against her sternum. Bleak's magic crackled in her veins and her knees buckled as Ines stepped onto the battlefield and reached for the straps of her white armour. Slowly, she began to remove her gauntlets and shoulder pieces, dropping each carelessly, mud splattering on the white robes beneath as she did. Her steps were slow and deliberate, another form of torture. She studied the lisloiks and the shimmering net of magic Bleak was struggling to hold in place. She roamed across the battlefield as though it were a mere garden. Trapped by her efforts to protect the others, Bleak could do nothing to stop her approach.

While the lisloiks swept across Ines' army, devouring the soldiers in their path, Bleak saw Henri gathering the Valian, Havennesse and rebel forces. She ordered them back in formation, back in line for the final stand.

It was not over yet.

Bleak adjusted her stance, her magic trembling in her grasp, threatening to burst from its confines altogether. Listening to her instincts, she drew power from the stone at her chest, from Oremere itself, and the mist swirling at her ankles. She felt it in her bones that her homeland wanted to help her, wanted the poison sapped from its earth. But even with the additional magic, she couldn't hold on much longer. She was filled with utter desperation to survive. This couldn't be it. She had only just been

reunited with her mother. After all they had gone through, it couldn't end here.

A single scream pierced the night. A sound unlike any other Bleak had heard before. A bloodcurdling cry wrenched from the very soul of a mother. The lisloiks' song fell silent as Athene tore across the battlefield. Bleak's magic snuffed out completely as she found the reason for Athene's scream.

Dash. Cradling Luka's body on the other side of the moors.

'*Luka ...*' But the young Valian's name died on Bleak's lips. For across the field of bodies and blood blooms, now only a few dozen yards away, was Ines. She stood before the bloodbath, stripped of her armour, the hem of her white robes soaked red. She was triumphant as the sea of masked men parted for her, dropping to their knees, as though under a new spell. A shield of power glowed around the false queen as she walked towards Bleak.

'Fire!' Geraad's voice shouted into the awed silence. The creak of bows and the hiss of dozens of arrows flying through the air sounded. Ines' shield sparked as the arrows tried to pierce it, but they disintegrated. Flecks of dust in the wind.

'Now!' cried another voice, and the rebels charged. They ran at full pelt towards her, wielding swords and spears madly.

Ines waved a graceful hand, and her army sprang into action, colliding with the rebels in a clash of shields and blades. As though the world were not in deadly turmoil around her, Ines continued through the chaos, stepping over fallen soldiers with little care, her eyes fixed on Bleak. But Henri stepped out into her path, katars gleaming in her fists. Bleak could feel the magic thrumming from her, her raw hunger for vengeance. The Valian warrior launched herself through Ines' wards, her grey eyes brimming with hatred as she broke through the shield.

Somehow, Ines' quiet voice projected to the farthest reaches of the battlefield, yet still sounded as though she was whispering right into Bleak's ear: 'I have searched high and low for you, Henrietta Valia ...' A trickle of sweat ran down Bleak's chilled spine.

Henri palmed her katars. 'Well, here I am.'

Bleak could feel the power pouring from Ines' body. The power she'd stolen from Casimir, from her mother, from so many Ashai people, *Bleak's* people. The stone thrummed against her skin, as though it had a will of its

own, *searching*. Heart in her throat, Bleak scanned the grounds for Casimir and Ermias. She needed them. Henri needed them.

She spotted a tall figure in the heart of the battlefield. Casimir was duelling Farlah. He lunged at Ines' general with a mace, and she leaped back, escaping the blow. Her face was bloodied and swollen, but her answering attack on Casimir was unhindered. She launched herself, slicing at him with her longsword. He blocked her strike and took another swing at her, the end of his mace already bloody. He managed to grip her arm with his bare hand. There was a flash and a streak of silver shot through her white-blond hair. He'd used his power. Farlah shoved him off, swinging at him again, relentless. She drove forward, her blade carving the air between them, Casimir only just managing to sidestep the blow. He was not a trained warrior like so many of the others.

A rasping breath tore Bleak's gaze away from the duel. Inside Ines' glowing shield, the foreign queen had Henri by the throat. She lifted the Valian matriarch with extraordinary strength, until Henri's boots dangled above the ground.

Weapons shot of their own accord towards Ines and Bleak's heart soared. Henri had mastered using her magic without her hands. But the spears and swords bounced uselessly off the shimmering shield.

From behind Bleak, Rion and his pride charged for their former captor. But the wards of power around her were too strong. The panthers ricocheted off as though they weighed nothing.

No.

'Casimir!' Bleak shrieked above the calamity, despair latching onto her insides as she watched Henri's feet kick inches from the ground. But Casimir couldn't hear Bleak over the clang of steel and the clash of the forces fighting. Gold light glimmered at her side and Ermias appeared. He grabbed her arm, and suddenly they were soaring. They reached Casimir just as he fell. Just as Farlah made to plunge her sword into his chest.

Hot blood splattered across Bleak's face. Farlah's head tumbled from her neck in a spurt of red, her mouth now forever parted in shock. Bleak nearly gagged, but instead, her gaze found the figure behind, as the body buckled and fell to the ground with a thud. It was *Dash*, a battleaxe gripped hard in his hands, blood dripping from the blade.

How did he get there so fast? There was no time. Ermias hauled Casimir to his feet, and Bleak clung to both of them as golden light glimmered once

more. Suddenly, they were inside Ines' shield. The intensity of the magic within was immense. Bleak felt as though her heart was about to punch through her chest.

At the sight of the trio, the false queen dropped Henri. The Valian warrior crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap. Terror clawing at her insides, Bleak dived for her, but Casimir wrenched her back. Ines' gaze fell to the stones glowing at each of their throats before settling on Bleak.

'Here we are again, Alarise.' Her voice crept over Bleak's skin like a thousand tiny insects, pincers ready to sink into flesh.

Bleak swayed on her feet. The tide of Ines' mind was lapping at her, sucking her in now that the stone was in her presence. Bleak staggered forward. There was nothing she could do. She was falling, falling into the passages of Ines' mind ...

WHERE FARLAH'S memories had been sick with dark thoughts, Ines' were different: colder, more calculated. Bleak took a tentative step, fear surging at the thought of what might be occurring in the shield above. Down here, though, time was different. Suspended somehow as she moved through thoughts and events that once were. Hearing whispers coming from the chambers down the corridor, the familiar tug at her navel jolted Bleak. She was here for a reason. Following the invisible thread down the passage, she was brought to an open door, and froze at the voice sounding from within.

'I have been waiting weeks to see you again,' King Arden said, looping his fingers through the sash around Ines' waist and pulling her to him.

Ines smiled. 'As have I, my king. But we had work to do.'

'My work is done.'

'Then take me to them.'

'Now? My queen, what of your promises?'

Ines touched her fingers to Arden's chin. 'All that was promised will be yours. But first, take me to them.'

Bleak suddenly found herself in a familiar underground chamber ... The holding pen where Allehra had been imprisoned. Dozens of prisoners were huddled below the platform on which Ines and Arden stood. Ines surveyed them as though assessing cattle.

'Bring them to me, one at a time.'

Arden nodded to a guard standing in the far corner, who, after a terrified glance between the two, disappeared into an antechamber.

Ines leaned on the railing overlooking the pen. 'You did well, my king.'

'I did it all for you.'

She turned and offered a sultry smile. 'That you did.'

A cry sounded as the guard reappeared, a young male prisoner in his clutches. He shoved the boy, no older than sixteen, to his knees before Ines and Arden.

Ines turned to the king. 'Those who resist,' she said in his ear, 'go to Moredon Tower.'

Arden swallowed. 'As you wish, my love.'

Ines crouched so she was at eye level with the prisoner. Her robes pooled at his feet, the white silken fabric in stark contrast to the boy's filth-covered skin. 'I'm here to help you,' she said softly. She trailed her fingers down his face, a cruel and possessive caress. 'You see,' she breathed. 'Every Ashai has a pressure point ...'

POWER LASHED AT BLEAK, wrenching her from Ines' mind.

'Get out,' Ines spat at her.

Bleak couldn't move her legs or arms. She was rooted to the spot, as were the others beside her. Ines' magic had them pinned helplessly within her shield. Bleak could do nothing to fight the panic filling her airways. They were trapped. Smirking, the false queen thrust her hand outwards, not towards Bleak, Casimir and Ermias, but to the force of lisloiks outside her shield. Screams sounded as an invisible wave of power barrelled through them, sending the creatures flying, slamming them into one another, slamming them into the stone walls of Freyhill.

Which poor energy shifter had Ines ripped that magic from?

'I want you to watch,' Ines hissed at the Oremian heirs. 'Watch as your comrades fall, one by one. And when I'm done ...' Her eyes slid to Casimir's. 'When I'm done, *you* can watch your beloved Ermias and Alarise die.'

Bleak felt the slip again. Nothing could tether her to the present; fighting against it was no use. She was dragged back under.

‘I KNOW WHAT YOU DID,’ Ines said to Queen Delja, standing before the great lake of Lamaka’s Basin.

Queen Delja’s face revealed nothing, but her lilac eyes glimmered.

‘You know what I am, what I am capable of,’ Ines continued. ‘You will undo what you have done with Casimir. Or I swear to all the gods, I will take your magic, every kernel of it, for myself. I will find your pressure point. Imagine: a lisloik queen stripped of all her power.’

Queen Delja’s eyes bored into Ines’. ‘I know what you are. But I also know what I am.’

‘Speak plainly,’ Ines snapped, her nostrils flaring.

‘I am a lisloik,’ Delja said evenly. ‘Not an Ashai. You cannot take my magic.’

Bleak had never seen Ines look so unhinged.

‘Then I will take what I can from you.’ She gestured wildly to the surrounding mountains and forest, to the lake in which Delja stood. ‘Undo what you’ve done, or I will rob you of this place. Of your home.’

The crystal waters around Delja rippled, as the lisloik queen turned her back on Ines.

‘Your kind will perish!’ Ines shrieked.

But Delja gave no response as the lake parted once more for her and she disappeared into its embrace.

AN ENRAGED SCREAM pierced Bleak’s mind. Her eyes flew open to see Ines send a blast of wind across the battlefield, knocking down Maala, the teerah panther, as though she were a toy, sending Valians and rebels sprawling across the blood blooms. Bleak stared at Ines in disbelief. How much magic had she stolen from the Ashai people? How much power had she *collected* over the years?

‘You had no right,’ she heard herself say hoarsely. ‘No right to take what you did.’

*‘Right?’ Ines snarled. ‘And what right did *they* have? When they took everything from me?’*

CASIMIR HUNG in thick chains before her, bloodied and broken. His breathing was ragged and his body was covered in grime. Who knew how long he'd been down in the dungeons?

Ines stood before him, her eyes dancing with impatience. 'You're making this hard on both of us, my love.'

She reached out to touch him and Casimir moaned in pain, perspiration beading at his brow.

'What lesson shall we learn today?' she asked, gently pushing the damp hair from his eyes. Her face was a mask of serenity, almost as though she truly thought they were sharing a deep moment together, as though she truly did love the Oremian prince. 'I thought I'd tell you a little secret this afternoon. Would you like that?'

Casimir was silent, but Bleak could see the goosebumps spill across his flesh as Ines continued to stroke his face. 'Do you remember that little prophecy I told our esteemed monarchs about all that time ago? The one about Alarise and Ermias falling in love and upsetting the balance of Oremian rule? Well ...' Ines smiled, her fingers trailing down Casimir's cheek to his bare chest. 'That wasn't the entire truth. I may have ... altered some details.'

Casimir flinched from her touch. 'What do you mean?' he croaked.

'Well, the vision didn't concern Ermias. It concerned you. You and Alarise.'

'She's a child.'

'Not forever. And I couldn't have that, could I? You're mine, Casimir. Always.'

Casimir shuddered. 'What good does a false prophecy do, Ines? It achieves nothing.'

Ines laughed. 'It achieves everything, my love. It took the suspicions away from you and me. It panicked the monarchs into making rash decisions about their heirs and whose council to heed. And, my love, if anything, prohibition is the seed of revolution. You know that, Casimir.'

Like a bolt of lightning, her power struck the Oremian prince, and he cried out, red running from his nose. Panting, he met his tormentor's gaze. 'Just end it,' he hissed.

'End it?'

'Yes,' he spluttered, his voice thick with desperation.

'Have you had enough?' Ines asked, her voice sickly sweet.

Casimir dribbled blood.

‘Then share it with me,’ Ines leaned in, so her words tickled Casimir’s ear. ‘Your magic. You’ve done it before, you can do it again.’

‘I’m done doing things for you.’

Ines laughed softly. ‘Now, we both know that’s not true.’

INES WAS LAUGHING NOW, her eyes manic, drinking in the sight of Bleak. ‘Did you enjoy that one?’ she said madly. ‘I used to have him cleaned up and brought to my chambers, too.’

What little magic Bleak had left flared furiously. She could feel Casimir shaking beside her. She couldn’t fathom what had been done to him. What had been done to so many of her kind.

Her vision went black. That remaining ember of her power shot down through her entire being, and she honed the kernel of darkness that lived within her. The kernel that had wrought death upon the realm before. It burst outwards.

Ines staggered, and her invisible hold on them weakened. ‘It’ll take more than that ...’

INES SAT straight-backed at a dressing table, with Casimir standing behind her. In the mirror, she studied him. He was thin and gaunt, and his hands trembled as he tied a long, flowing silk scarf around her bald head.

‘Another,’ she commanded.

He took another piece of fabric from the basket by her feet and layered it atop the other. He tied it slowly and carefully. Ines watched him intensely as the silk threaded through his trembling fingers —

‘*PRESSURE POINT,*’ Bleak rasped, clutching Casimir’s arm. ‘She’s an Ashai — get to her pressure point.’

‘I don’t ...’ Casimir croaked. ‘I don’t know where.’

Ines steadied herself and lurched forward. Bleak’s magic wasn’t strong enough to deliver the blow they needed.

‘You *do*,’ she begged Casimir. ‘You know her better than *any* of us. The scarves! They’re there for a reason!’

‘Casimir!’ Ermias yelled. ‘You can do this. After all she’s put you through, you can end it here.’

Casimir froze for a moment, staring at the woman who’d been his lover, his captor, his torturer for so long. Then, his eyes flew to the silk flowing from her head.

He launched himself at her.

‘Casimir!’ Bleak cried out, but he was already on Ines, clawing at the long stretches of fabric as she struggled against him.

The stone at Bleak’s chest pulsed as Casimir clamped his hands over Ines’ bare scalp. The false queen shrieked. Magic thrummed around them – Casimir’s magic. And Bleak watched on as lines began to form across Ines’ face.

‘Casimir!’ the false queen screamed. ‘Stop!’

But Casimir didn’t stop. Ines’ skin grew thin and loose, almost translucent, with blue veins visible beneath.

‘There was never another collector,’ he said savagely. ‘You *were* one of a kind. But now ... now you’ll be nothing.’

‘After everything I built for us ...’ Ines’ voice was ragged.

Casimir gaped at the foreign queen, disbelief etched on his pale face. ‘For *us*?’

The glowing stone around Bleak’s neck was pulling her towards Casimir. Seeing this, Ermias grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her towards the other Oremian prince.

‘The stone needs to be whole,’ he muttered to her, not taking his eyes from Casimir.

‘We could have ruled together,’ Ines was saying.

Ermias snatched Bleak’s stone, and seeing what he was doing, Casimir reached out, one hand still gripping Ines. He joined his stone with Bleak’s and Ermias’. They fused together with a hiss.

Violet light exploded. It cracked Ines’ shield of power, swelling around the three Oremian heirs and the false queen. Ines opened her mouth to speak, but Bleak had heard enough from their tormentor.

‘You wanted this realm for yourself,’ Bleak spat. ‘You infected this land and its people with hate and darkness, a poisoned kingdom for a poisoned queen.’

‘Little Alarise,’ Ines wheezed, wrinkles now crowding her sagging face.
‘Grand words for a drunken pickpocket.’

‘That’s not me anymore.’

‘No? We are who we are.’

‘Some of us, perhaps.’

Bleak’s power flickered, and suddenly, as though Casimir’s and Ermias’ magic was feeding her own, she felt it filling her veins, her lungs, her heart. It spread from her chest where the stone glowed between her fingertips. Magic coursed through her like an unending wave.

Above them, the cracks in Ines’ shield fractured completely, her magic shattered.

An arrow whistled through the air.

And plunged into Ines’ heart.

Swinton stood on the edge of where the shield had been, nocking another arrow to his bowstring. The false queen’s mouth opened in surprise as she looked down at her chest. Blood seeped into her white robes and slowly, red flowers appeared at her wound, blossoming one after the other, creeping down her body.

‘Oremere itself is fighting back,’ Casimir murmured. ‘You have abused its magic and its people for far too long. The very thing that once signified your strength is now your downfall.’

‘You can’t —’ But the words died on Ines’ lips as the blood blooms swallowed her, and she ruptured into a burst of red petals.

CHAPTER 38

The clang of steel fell quiet and the ashes of the previous realm danced in the wind. The panicked shouts of slaughter had ceased and a collective gasp sounded from the remaining enemy force. Swinton's bow fell from his grip as Ines' masked warriors collapsed. Their bodies suddenly disintegrating into the same blooms that carpeted the battlefield. The same blooms that had consumed their queen.

Swinton's pain faded as he stared in wonder. The soft, red petals fluttered into the sky, a slow, graceful farewell. They were swept up in the breeze; a hypnotic mass, carried off towards the coastline, out to the dark waters of the East Sea. Dazed, he spotted Henri, crumpled and lifeless in the dirt. Terror surging, he shoved past the three bewildered Oremian heirs and staggered to her side. Sahara, who was wounded herself, was already there, pulling her sister into her arms. Henri wasn't moving.

'Henri.' Sahara's voice broke. 'Henri, please ...'

Swinton reached out, taking the warrior queen's bloodied hand in his own. Her skin was cool and a thick, purple bruise wrapped around the column of her throat.

'Lyse!' someone was shouting. 'Lyse, we need help!' Bleak skidded across the dirt on her knees, her eyes wild with fear at the sight of Henri.

Swinton stared. It couldn't end like this. Not now. Not after everything they'd been through.

The groundling leader, Lyse, darted to them, taking up position at Henri's other side. She leaned down to check the Valian's breathing. Muttering something to herself, Lyse pressed her palms to Henri's chest and started a series of compressions.

‘Come on, Henri,’ Lyse murmured, pushing down on the warrior’s heart. A rib cracked, two.

A whimper sounded from Sahara, her eyes glassy.

Swinton fell back into the mud. *This can’t be happening.*

Lyse kept her palms pulsing at Henri’s chest, but Swinton shook his head. It was no use. The warrior queen would never cross the living bridges again. Would never walk the forest floors or train in the circuits. The realm had lost —

A ragged gasp sounded.

Henri’s eyes flew open. Her body convulsed as she struggled to breathe.

Lyse held Henri’s shoulder to the ground, reassuring her. ‘It’s alright, Majesty,’ she said. ‘*Breathe*, that’s it. *Breathe*.’

The warrior queen’s eyes latched onto Lyse’s and slowly, her breathing steadied.

It was only as her grip became bone-crunching that Swinton realised he was still holding her hand. He released it.

‘Sahara ...’ Henri croaked, searching for her sister.

‘I’m right here,’ Sahara told her, twisting so her face came into view.

Henri struggled to sit upright. ‘Athene,’ she wheezed. ‘Where’s Athene? What about Luka?’ She craned her neck to survey the battlefield, her grey eyes filled with worry.

Swinton stumbled to his feet, the arrowhead still embedded in his thigh, and scanned the blood-soaked lands. His numb hand gripped the pommel of his sword tightly as he took in the sea of dead men and beasts before him. Bearded chins tipped to the grey sky, eyes glassy and blank. Discarded white masks lay trampled in the mud. Oremere was a graveyard now, a field of broken warriors.

‘There!’ He spotted the fiery red braid across the moors. Dash was carrying Luka’s body, her mother weeping silently beside them as they walked.

Suddenly on her feet, Henri shouldered past Swinton and pushed through the others, staggering across the now eerily quiet battlefield. She lurched towards her kindred, who gave a sob and collapsed at the sight of her. Henri knelt next to her first-in-command as Dash lowered Luka into Athene’s trembling arms, as though she were a sleeping infant.

Swinton watched as Henri’s arms folded over not only Athene, but Dash as well. The three of them bowed their heads together, clutching the dead

girl, soft cries escaping them, and tears spilling down their faces.

As night fell, a sturdy hand gripped Swinton's shoulder.

'Come, old friend,' Fi said gently. 'We need to get your wound tended to.'

At the mention of it, his thigh seared. The shock of it all had masked the pain, but now his head spun and he swayed on his feet. Fi took most of his weight. He studied his friend. It felt like a lifetime since they'd seen each other. The Battalionian was covered in mud, his armour smeared red.

'You're not hurt?' Swinton managed.

'Nothing that won't mend,' Fi replied, leading Swinton away from Sahara and the others. 'Come, we need to get that arrowhead out.'

'What of my father?'

Fi pointed. 'Alive.' Sir Caleb was atop his horse, guarding Prince Jaxon. Swinton's heart swelled with relief as he saw that Princess Olena and Prince Nazuri were also beside him, unharmed. Slowly, Fi led them to a medic area being set up by the groundlings beneath the bright moonlight. Bewildered, Swinton exhaled shakily and turned back to face the city they'd won. Freyhill was theirs. *Victory* was theirs. He reached for the straps of his armour, its weight suddenly too heavy to bear. But his arms wouldn't work. They were useless at his sides.

'Here,' Fi offered. Swinton said nothing as his friend's fingers worked the straps of each plate. The moans of the wounded and dying seemed to fade away as the steel pieces clattered to the ground. When at last the breastplate was removed, Fi pushed him gently onto a stretcher beneath the stars and cut away material around the arrow wound. Swinton's whole body was trembling, but he felt no fear. It was over. The war was won.

Fi thrust a flask into his hands. 'Drink.'

The flask shook in his grip as he raised it to his parched mouth. Harsh liquor burned down his throat. He tipped his head back and drained the flask.

'What's that?' he said, trying to sit up, spotting movement on the city walls.

Someone was scaling one of the watchtowers.

Fi squinted into the distance. 'He's one of ours.'

It was Geraad, the rebel leader. He clambered to the top and reached for the flag waving in the breeze, its embroidered red flower mocking them. A loud rip sounded as he tore it from its ropes. From where he stood high up

on the watchtower, he brought a torch to the fabric and set Ines' sigil alight. A quiet cheer from their forces broke across the field. But Swinton didn't have it in him to join them. The battlefield was still wet with blood and littered with the bodies of man, woman and beast. And – the lisloiks. Amidst the chaos, Swinton had forgotten about the lure of their song and the terror they'd wrought on the enemy. He looked around to find Bleak now standing at the edge of the moors. She was with a creature who could only have been the queen. She met Bleak's solemn expression with an intense, glowing stare. Dark, tangled hair hung to her waist, and as she spoke, black talons toyed with the ends.

'What are you —' Fi stopped short as he followed Swinton's line of sight. The Battalionian's breath whistled between his teeth as he, too, took in the women before them: the Oremian heir and the lisloik queen.

'I wonder what she promised,' he muttered.

'What?' Swinton's breath caught in his throat as Fi poured cleansing alcohol over his open wound.

'Everything in this realm has a cost, old friend,' Fi replied, continuing to clean the injury. 'Especially aid from a kind like theirs.'

As though sensing their attention on her, Bleak turned towards them, her odd eyes finding them across the field of dead and dying. A cool gale rushed through their forces.

'What in Rheyah's name ...' Fi trailed off.

The red flowers rooted to the earth blackened and wilted, their ashes suddenly swept up in the wind. A gentle hiss sounded, and the mist coiling at their feet began to recede. It was as though the gods were taking their first breath, inhaling the mist that had plagued the continents for so long. As the haze retreated, a rich, vibrant land beyond was revealed.

A sudden roar echoed off the city walls. The great teerah panther, Rion, crossed the moors, an arrow protruding from his shoulder. He went to Bleak and stood at her side, the violet stone still glowing in her hand. Swinton was speechless, amazed at the strange bond between the two. Bleak reached up to stroke the beast.

'You ready, Commander?' Lyse appeared, passing a pair of medical forceps to Fi, her face grave with concern.

Swinton tried to give her a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry,' he said hoarsely. 'I've had worse.'

‘I have no doubt,’ she replied, holding his shoulders down with surprising strength.

‘Dimi?’ Fi asked.

‘Ready,’ he said.

White-hot pain lanced through him and he bucked beneath Lyse’s grip with a cry of agony. ‘Gods,’ he cursed, tasting blood in his mouth.

But then, the pain was gone and his legs went warm.

‘— an artery, Captain, we can’t stop —’ Lyse’s voice sounded distant.

Swinton felt suddenly tired. The exhaustion had finally caught up with him.

‘Dimi.’ Fi’s melodic voice was panicked. *Why?*

‘Dimi, stay awake. You have to stay awake.’

‘Brother,’ Swinton croaked. ‘The war is over. There is no need for fear now. Now we can finally rest.’

‘Dimitri, no.’

Swinton’s teeth began to chatter. He was freezing. Fi’s face blurred before him, but his friend’s hand was warm on his. Somewhere in the distance, Dash was safe.

‘Stay awake, Dimi. You have to fight.’

But Swinton shook his head weakly. ‘I’ve done enough fighting, brother.’ He was tired, so unbelievably tired.

Fi’s eyes were wet as he held both of Swinton’s hands. Slowly, he nodded. ‘Then rest, old friend. You have done enough.’

Commander Dimitri Swinton took a shallow breath of the crisp night air. He studied his brother’s face and the infinity of stars beyond it, before closing his eyes one last time.

CHAPTER 39

*B*leak's boots sank into the mud. The earth was scorched with death and the quiet that settled over the battlefield was empty. The world had ended.

Rion was silent beside her, the great beast taking in all that lay before them.

'Bleak,' called a familiar voice. 'Bleak?' Lyse was running towards her. 'What is it?'

Lyse reached her and pointed. Outside one of the medic tents, a small crowd had gathered. Dash stood on the outskirts, as though he was too scared to approach, his face a mask of shock. People were staring at him.

'What happened?'

Lyse took a deep breath. 'It's Commander Swinton.'

'What?'

Lyse was already pulling her towards the tent. Bleak had only just seen him with Fi. It had been Swinton's arrow that had pierced Ines' heart.

Upon her approach, people moved aside and a chill rushed across her skin. As the crowd parted, she saw him. Commander Dimitri Swinton was lying on his back on a stretcher, a white sheet pulled up to his dark beard. His eyes were closed, his face marred with bruising, and the lower half of the sheet ... It was drenched in blood. Beside him, Fi was on his knees in the mud, his hands gripping Swinton's lifeless fingers. Tears streaked his face.

Bleak swallowed. 'How?' Her voice was raw.

'Arrow wound,' Sir Caleb said quietly, not taking his eyes from his son. The knight, still in a full suit of armour, was scarcely breathing.

Dash, Bleak realised suddenly, turning on her heel and searching for the young man's face in the crowd. He remained where he had stood before, on the outskirts of it all, peering in, his umber eyes glazed over in shock. Bleak felt a crack in her chest. First Luka, and now ... this. Everything else faded away. Bleak started towards him, but another appeared at his side. Princess Olena. The young girl threaded her fingers through Dash's, whispering something to him. He turned into her, burying his face in the crook of her neck and sobbing, holding on to her as though she was the only thing left tethering him to this world.

'It's not fair,' Bleak heard herself murmur, hot tears stinging her own eyes.

Allehra appeared at her side and squeezed her shoulder. 'War never is.'

BLEAK WANDERED the sodden fields of Oremere with Rion. She spoke with Havennesse soldiers and Oremian rebels, but her words came out thick and heavy, and she forgot them as soon as they'd left her mouth. Members from all allied units were gathering the personal items and weapons of the dead. Swords, shields and helms of the fallen were stacked in great piles at the centre of the battlefield, with a separate pile for broken items to be melted down in the Freyhill forge. At the heart of the operation was the rebel, Daleren, his eyes shining with steely determination that drove the cold, practical logistics of the aftermath of war. Mass graves were already being dug on the outskirts of the moors and the dead were being lined up in rows.

Luka's body was carried past Bleak on a stretcher. The young Valian looked as though she was sleeping: her defiant chin tipped to the night sky, her eyes closed. But the chest of her leathers was stained red and one of her hands hung limply over the side. Athene walked beside the stretcher, her eyes empty and her expression blank. Bleak knew she should say something, but there was nothing to be said. Luka was gone. Like Swinton. Nothing could bring them back now.

CASIMIR AND ERMIAS found her standing at the gates of Freyhill. The gates that she remembered from so long ago, when she and her family had fled the capital.

‘We made it,’ Casimir said softly.

She blinked. ‘Not all of us.’

‘No,’ Ermias allowed, glancing back at Dash. ‘Not all of us.’

But here they were, the three Oremian heirs, standing before the gates of their home.

‘Shall we go inside?’ Casimir asked.

Bleak chewed the flesh of her cheek. ‘I’m not sure I want to ...’

The princes either side of her waited.

‘But we’ve come this far,’ she said, and took a step forward.

THE GREAT HALL of Freyhill was dark, with its windows boarded up and hearths empty. Atop the dais stood a single, imposing throne, blood blooms carved into its back. It mirrored the grim tidings of Ines’ reign, casting a long, ominous shadow across the floor, where wilted petals carpeted the marble.

‘Remove it,’ Bleak heard herself say to no one in particular. ‘That thing has no place here.’

They didn’t linger. Casimir led them up a spiral staircase to a formal chamber Bleak didn’t recognise. It, too, was dimly lit and joyless.

‘Here,’ Casimir said, tugging her sleeve.

Bleak and Ermias followed him to a set of heavy curtains, where he rummaged with a thick cord. A loud creak sounded and the curtains opened, revealing a large stone balcony beyond a set of glass-paned doors. Wordlessly, Casimir opened these too and the Oremian heirs stepped out.

Bleak didn’t know how to feel as she went to the balcony’s edge, stepping over the discarded weapons of Ines’ fallen warriors. The mist had receded, but the damage to Oremere, to the entire realm and its people, was immense. The moors before them were seared and bloodied, their camps filled with the dead and the dying. Oremere itself had been ravaged, not just during this war, but during the years of oppression and terror.

Beside her, Casimir and Ermias took in the sight of the destruction as well.

‘What now?’ Ermias asked.

Bleak thought of the hardy rebel colonies, of the banished lisloiks, of Luka and Swinton and her mother. She thought of all of those who had suffered at the treacherous hands of the false queen. She looked from one

Oremian prince to the other, and then to the endless sky of glimmering stars above them.

There was only one answer to that question.

‘We rebuild,’ she said.

CHAPTER 40

Valia was the same and it was not. Magic still whispered around Henri as she crossed the forest floor, but the charred skeletons of the ancient trees sang songs of mourning while the warm breeze kissed her face. She took to the surviving bridges above, weaving high amongst the canopy, where gold beams of sunlight broke through the leaves. Up here, she could forget how much had changed, how much they'd lost, and how much there was to rebuild of her home. She tightened the two black bands around her arm. There would be time for rebuilding, the war had ensured that. But not today. Today was for remembering.

She walked the living bridges alone, savouring the summer wind and the familiar, sweet scent of home. Despite what had been, and no matter what came next, she was grateful to be back.

'Thought I'd find you here,' said a familiar voice.

She smiled. 'Don't tell me I've become predictable, mist dweller.'

Bleak was perched on the side of the bridge, her legs dangling over the edge, holding her usual length of rope in her hands. 'You were always predictable,' she replied. The odd-eyed girl accepted Henri's hand and pulled herself up. A black armband was tied around the sleeve of her white shirt, and another braided through her hair.

'It's time, isn't it?' she asked, following Henri's gaze to the dark strip of fabric.

'It is.'

As they walked through the treetops, the ancient magic of Henri's ancestors danced around them, trying to coax their powers awake. She glanced at Bleak. 'How are you feeling?' she asked tentatively. The mind

whisperer had collapsed two days after the battle, and had remained unconscious for a week. Lyse had said that Bleak had used her magic to within an inch of her own life, and it would be at least a month until the Oremian heir was at her full strength again.

‘Much the same,’ Bleak answered thoughtfully. ‘It’s a relief, to be honest,’ she admitted. ‘For once in my life not to have other people’s thoughts crashing into my head.’

Henri nodded. ‘I can only imagine. It will return, though, won’t it? Your magic?’

‘Lyse is confident that it will.’

‘Would you rather it didn’t?’

Bleak looked up to the canopy for a moment before turning back to Henri. ‘No, I don’t think so. It’s a part of me now. Part of who I am.’

When they reached the keep, the two women climbed down to the charred forest floor. Flowers had been draped everywhere. Wreaths had been placed around the perimeter.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Bleak murmured, as they squeezed into the crowded keep.

‘Changed,’ Henri said, unable to stop her gaze falling to the blackened trunks. ‘But beautiful,’ she allowed. ‘Fit for the occasion.’

Bleak nodded. ‘Fit for the Mother Matriarch of Valia.’

Hot tears stung Henri’s eyes as she spotted Sahara and Queen Eydis, and the group of people surrounding them. Everyone had come: Jarel, Princess Olena, Prince Nazuri, Prince Jaxon, Sir Caleb, Captain Murphadias, Prince Casimir and Prince Ermias. They all wore black ties around their arms. The rulers of the realm had gathered to farewell one of their own.

Upon their return to the forest, Allehra, Mother Matriarch of Valia, had succumbed to her injuries. She had held on, long enough to see her daughters reunited, long enough to see the realm back in the rightful hands, long enough for the ash to settle. But upon their arrival home, the ancestors whose magic now danced with Henri’s whispered to her. Her time had come, as had Luka’s and Swinton’s before her. She had gone to the matriarch’s grotto and taken her final breath amongst the canopies there.

Now, as the crowd for the memorial gathered, Henri spotted Athene amongst them. Her lover’s hair was twisted into a low, simple knot at the

back of her head and she wore a plain black shirt and pants. She had refused the set of leathers Henri had offered her that morning.

‘I’m not one of the kindred anymore,’ Athene had said. ‘It’s not appropriate.’

Henri had tried to argue with her, but Athene had just shaken her head and slipped from Henri’s chambers without another word. Henri’s heart fractured anew as she followed her lover’s gaze. At the heart of the keep, wrapped in black cloth, Allehra’s body lay upon a bed of Valian herbs atop the pyre. A stark reminder that Luka had been buried on Oremian soil, with the other fallen Valians.

Henri squeezed Athene’s hand before making her way to the wooden podium at the front. Today would be hard for all of them.

Henri took a deep breath and looked out to the sea of faces staring up at her. She cleared her throat. ‘On behalf of the Valian kindred and myself, we welcome you to our home.’ She scanned the crowd, looking for the one face she needed to get through this. No mirrored graphite eyes met hers. She took another deep breath. ‘Today, we celebrate the life of our Mother Matriarch, Allehra. For those of us who knew her, Allehra ... Allehra was ...’ But Henri’s words faltered. Her voice failed her. Instead, hot tears burned her eyes and a wall of grief hit her hard in the chest.

‘Formidable,’ a voice said.

Henri looked to her right. Sahara limped up onto the podium and came to stand beside her. ‘Allehra was formidable in the best sense of the word,’ her sister continued, wrapping a steady arm around Henri’s waist. ‘A matriarch like none we’ve had before, Allehra not only bolstered the strong as our ancestors did, but nurtured those who had something other than sheer strength. Allehra created the beginning of a better Valia, a better realm.’

Henri leaned into Sahara, knowing that her sister would carry them both as she let the tears spill.

‘But Allehra is not the only Valian we honour and remember today. Today, we acknowledge all of the kindred who were taken from us far too soon,’ Sahara continued, turning to face Athene in the crowd. The two women locked eyes as Sahara spoke of their warriors’ loyalty, the fierce friendships and unwavering courage. Sahara didn’t look away from Athene, for it was not all fallen Valia kindred she described, but one fiery youngster in particular. The words washed over Henri in a wave. She hadn’t allowed herself to feel, having wanted to be strong for the women before her. But

now, as more tears stung her eyes, she let them fall, and found Athene, Eydis, Bleak, Tilly and Marvel smiling at her through their own tears.

As the kindred came forward to pay their respects to the Mother Matriarch and their fallen comrades, Henri spotted another face across the crowd. Swinton's son, Dash. His eyes were red-rimmed and he stood with his hands clasped tightly together in front of him. Her heart went out to him. No longer a boy, and not yet a man, Dash had lost a friend and a father in a single night. Henri couldn't imagine how he felt, or what he might be going through, but she was glad he was here. He belonged here as much as anyone else did.

Henri started as her name was called, and she reluctantly pulled away as Sahara passed her a torch. The flames flickered the same colour as Luka's braid as Henri touched it to the pyre. They watched it catch alight, the blaze crackling to life, leaving them to say their final goodbyes to their Mother Matriarch and kindred.

As the pyre burned, Henri stood by Athene. Most of the guests moved on to the new keep, but it was customary for the family members to stay until only the ashes remained. Dash approached Athene, his hands clasped behind his back and his head bowed.

'It was you Luka thought of in her final moments,' he told the grieving mother.

'What?' Athene croaked.

'She asked me ... asked me to tell you ... she loved you.'

Fresh tears spilled down Athene's face as she stepped forward and embraced the young man. He held her just as tightly.

As the pyre burned on, Henri, Athene, Bleak, Dash, Sahara and a groundling girl remained. They spoke no more of Allehra. They had said their farewell in the way Allehra would have wished it. Instead, they spoke quietly of Luka, the groundling girl especially. Henri remembered her from Luka's early training days. The two had been close. Luka and *Clara*. The name came to Henri suddenly. It was a lifetime ago that they had been young girls, fighting it out in the training circuits. Sadness filled Henri. She wondered when the friends had last spoken.

As the embers glowed, Clara glanced in Athene's direction, tears streaming down her face. 'She was a better Valian than either of us,' she said, her voice raw.

Dash stepped forward and dropped something into the fire. A wreath of flowers. He looked to Athene and Clara, his eyes brimming with fresh tears. 'She was the best damn Valian warrior this realm has ever seen.'

WHEN NIGHT FELL, Henri made her way to the new keep. It was in the part of Valia that hadn't been touched by mist or fire, where the essence of her old home lingered. Even from the outer ring of trees, she could hear her guests. They had been made comfortable around the camp with plenty of wine and food. But a noise distracted her from her path. Heated voices. She followed the sound down a darkened trail before stopping in her tracks, taking cover behind a tree. It was Sahara. And Geraad.

'You don't think I know that?' Sahara snapped, her palms upturned.

'I don't want to risk it. *This*. We have been through —'

'I *know* what we've been through, that's exactly *why* —'

'Sahara, we can't —'

The palpable tension fractured as Sahara, paying no heed to her injuries, shoved Geraad against a tree and kissed him deeply. After a moment of shock, the rebel's arms wrapped around her waist and drew her in, pressing her body to his.

'War has a way of making true feelings known,' said a quiet voice behind Henri.

Henri turned to find Prince Casimir beside her. The memory of seeing Athene on the battlefield flashed before her eyes.

'I suppose you're right,' she said. 'We best get back.'

THEY CELEBRATED ALLEHRA, Luka and the other fallen kindred with a feast to rival all Valian feasts before. Athene sat at Henri's side, quiet but smiling as Tilly and Marvel told elaborate tales of Luka's brazen antics during her initial training years.

Bleak laughed as she fell into a seat opposite them. 'Try having her throw daggers at you to accept an apology.'

'What?' Tilly scoffed.

Bleak grinned. 'She was angry that I'd helped Neemah best her in your training rounds. It was the only way I could get her to believe I was sorry.'

Said it was the best apology she'd ever received.'

'She had more to say about you on that particular day, I'm sure of it,' Henri retorted.

'Well, she also said I wasn't quite what you all expected.'

Henri found herself laughing. 'She was right about that.'

Midway through the feast, someone tugged on Henri's sleeve. A young woman who looked familiar. Wild red hair framed her weary face and Henri realised with a jolt that it was the Heathton Castle maid who had been by Commander Swinton's side in Wildenhaven.

'My name is Therese, Your Majesty,' she said, curtsying awkwardly.

Henri turned her chair to face her fully. 'Therese ... how did you get here?'

'I was granted passage with Queen Eydis. I ... I wanted to be here for the memorials. I wanted to see the end of it all.'

'Tell me, what can I do for you?'

The young woman's eyes went to the fading bruise around Henri's throat. 'I want to stay in Valia. I want to learn to fight, to be one of you.'

Henri quirked a brow. 'And why is that?'

Therese pulled the fabric of her shirt down, twisting slightly to reveal a horrific scar across her shoulderblade – a brand, *the* brand, of Ines' face. It wasn't the only marking. The ends of old lash wounds also marred her skin. Anger must have flashed across Henri's face because Therese flushed and pulled her shirt back in place. She took a measured breath and visibly straightened. 'For the longest time, I've wanted to say something, to do something about what is happening to women in this world. To try to make sense of it, to try to acknowledge it,' she said, her eyes not leaving Henri's. 'But every time I try, something stops me. A deep instinct grabs me and tells me, "No. Not now. Not yet. If ever." It hurts too much. It's not one memory, or two. It's a lifetime. Lifetimes. It's not one woman. It's all of us. The ugliness of the world taints us all. For an age, the walls have been closing in. We've been raped. We've been abducted. We've been hit. We've been intimidated. Harassed. Belittled. Silenced. For far too long.'

Henri stared as a wave of memories crashed into her: Lennox's hands on Bleak in the Hawthorne Ranges, the feeling of being paralysed in Hoddinott, Athene collapsed at Moredon Tower, knuckles dripping red ... '*They had such hatred for our kind ...*' Across from Henri, Bleak was watching, and she knew that somehow, the mist dweller had glimpsed into

her thoughts, despite her weakened magic. Bleak's face was etched with understanding.

'I want to learn to fight,' Therese repeated, waiting.

Once, the notion would have made Henri scoff. A non-Valian? Learning the ways of the kindred? But now ... things were different. She wouldn't turn away those who wished to grow stronger.

Henri eyed the girl and nodded. 'Alright, then.'

Therese's mouth fell open. 'Truly?'

'Training starts at dawn.'

IN THE DARK and early hours of the morning, Henri found herself at her private training circuit. Dead leaves littered the platform, with the straw dummies and weights as they had been when she left, all that time ago. She paced the circuit, feeling oddly out of place where once she'd felt so at ease. Like Petra's passing, Luka and Allehra's deaths had left a hole in the Valian kindred, in Henri. Things had changed. It was a new dawn for her people and for the Valian Way.

Making up her mind, Henri left the training circuit and headed towards the Sticks. There was someone she needed to see.

CHAPTER 41

Dash hadn't slept. Nightmares of the battle and his part in it had plagued his sleep ever since. He relived Luka's death over and over, and he saw his father's lifeless body everywhere. In the golden light of early morning, a long shadow cast across where he sat by the unlit fire.

Queen Eydis appeared from the trees. 'Walk with me,' she said, Bear wagging his tail at her side.

He was happy to see the winter queen, as always. Both she and Captain Murphadias had stayed close during the last few weeks, for which he was incredibly grateful. Dash got to his feet and bowed his head. 'Won't we be late, Your Majesty?' Another Valian ceremony was due to start shortly, though Dash had no idea what for. While he was grateful to have had the opportunity to see Luka's home, he wasn't sure his friend would have been bothered about so much fanfare.

'We'll manage,' Eydis told him, motioning for him to join her. She wore another of her bold gowns, the glimmering fabric swishing at her slippered feet as she led them down a twisting path on the forest floor. Bear ran ahead with a joyful bark.

'Before I leave for Havennesse tomorrow, there's something I wanted to ask you,' Eydis started, glancing at him.

Dash walked beside her slowly, waiting for her to continue.

She placed a gentle hand on his back. 'I wish to offer you a position on my council, as adviser.'

Whatever Dash had been expecting, it wasn't that. 'You want me to come to Wildenhaven? To live?'

‘I do.’

Dash stopped in his tracks. ‘I ... I —’ he stammered. A queen ... A queen of the realm was asking him to be an official part of her court. Dash had never imagined such a thing. From a stable boy to a royal adviser?

‘You need not answer now,’ she said.

Tears stung his eyes as gratitude swelled within him. He was still getting used to the waves of emotions that rushed through him, was still learning how to process his thoughts and feelings. Especially after Luka and his father had died.

‘Come now,’ she said, tugging his sleeve and smiling as though she knew something he didn’t. ‘We can’t be late.’

They returned to the old keep. The pyre was gone, as were the flowers and wreaths from the day before. Everyone was waiting. It was surreal to see them all here in the forest rather than the formal halls of the Wildenhaven towers.

‘What’s this about?’ he asked.

Eydis just smiled. ‘You’ll see.’

A gong sounded, and Eydis left him to stand with Bleak as she made for the large podium at the front of the crowd. She stepped up in front of everyone, and was joined by Henri, Prince Casimir, Prince Ermias, Prince Nazuri, Princess Olena and Prince Jaxon. It was an impressive and rare sight to see: all the rulers of the realm united. Dash’s chest swelled as he spotted the black armbands they were still wearing. For Luka, for the Mother Matriarch and for Commander Swinton.

Henri cleared her throat and stepped forward. ‘Yesterday, we came together to honour our fallen Valians.’ Her voice was clear, and projected to the far reaches of the keep. ‘Brave warriors, who we will continue to honour as we live on ...’ Her eyes fell on Dash then, and she gave him a subtle nod. ‘War brings out the best and worst in people. And today, we celebrate those dead and living who, during our darkest hour, showed us their light.’

Dash craned his neck to see Henri take a strange medallion from an attendant. She held it up for all to see. Forged in silver, it was the size of her palm.

‘This was made for Commander Dimitri Swinton,’ she called. ‘One of the bravest men I have known.’

Awed silence settled across the crowd and all eyes went to Dash. Amidst them, he was surprised to see the face of the redhaired woman who'd been holding his father's hand in Wildenhaven, but she shrank back into the throng of people. Dash turned back to the podium. Nerves fluttered in his stomach as Henri continued.

'This pin represents the highest honour to be bestowed by all rulers of the Upper Realm,' she said. 'It has never been awarded before. Until now. Captain Murphadias, would you accept this on behalf of your fallen brother?'

The bewildered captain came forward and Henri pierced the pin through Fi's jerkin. 'Commander Dimitri Swinton, who died in the line of duty, who died defending this entire realm, will hereby be known as not just a knight of Ellest, but a knight of the realm.'

The crowd burst into thunderous applause. Dash joined them, fresh tears lining his eyes. He had never had the chance to know his father, but now the entire world would know him. *Sir Dimitri Swinton, a knight of the realm ...*

Each ruler stepped forward and touched their hand to Fi's shoulder. The captain's overwhelmed gaze landed on Dash and he smiled.

'Zachary Caleb Carlington Swinton,' Queen Eydis called loudly.

Dash froze. *What?* Why was she calling *him*? He couldn't go up there.

Bleak nudged him forward. He couldn't feel his legs as he climbed the steps of the podium, heart hammering.

'For your clever tactics and bravery on the battlefield,' Eydis was saying. 'For slaying the enemy general Farlah, and saving the life of Prince Casimir, we award you with this medal of valour.' She took a medallion from another attendant and placed it around his neck. 'Like father, like son, so it seems.'

Dash was lost for words. More applause erupted around him, and across the podium, Olena was smiling, her eyes filled with tears of joy.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, the two friends walked arm in arm through the forest. Dash described the trees to Olena, how they reached up into the clouds, how the living bridges above were structures of sheer wonder.

'I've missed having you as my eyes,' she said, squeezing his arm.

'I've missed being your eyes,' he told her. And he truly had. There was no one like Olena. She had barely left his side since the battle and he had

learned to accept the comfort of her touch on his arm, her warm embrace and her gentle words. They walked on in companionable silence for a time, listening to the birdsong from the branches above. They had never had the freedom to do so before. There had always been rules and guards and customs. He must have been fidgeting, because Olena sighed.

‘What is it, Dash?’

‘Well ...’ Dash took a deep breath. ‘Queen Eydis asked me to go to Havenness. To be on her council.’

Olena’s face fell. ‘Oh.’

Dash took a moment to look at her, *truly* look at her. Her clouded eyes had filled with sadness.

‘That’s wonderful.’ She lifted her chin.

A smile tugged at Dash’s lips. ‘I told her I was honoured,’ he said. ‘But it’s not at her side I belong. I belong with another queen.’

Olena bit her lip. ‘Dash ... I ... I may not be a queen. Prince Nazuri and I ... We are great friends, but we have decided to end our engagement.’

Something within Dash flared to life.

‘I want to help my brother rule Ellest,’ she continued. ‘I want to help him find a good regent for Qatrola. Perhaps one day I’ll be married. But not any day soon. I want to be free to follow my own heart, at my own pace.’

Dash grinned. ‘Queen or no queen,’ he said. ‘My place is at your side.’

Olena laughed, the sound like a light melody skimming across Dash’s tired heart. ‘Will you come back to Heathton, then?’

A stick snapped behind them, and Dash whirled around.

Captain Murphadias and Tailor – no, Prince Ermias – approached. ‘What if you stay at the Swinton estate?’ the captain said.

Olena squeezed Dash’s arm again, and he knew that she would support whatever he chose.

‘I ... I need to go back to Ma and Pa,’ he told his father’s friend.

‘What if you all came?’ Fi asked. ‘There’s plenty of room. Your ma can recuperate. Sir Caleb and I ... We can help you train. Ermias here told me it’s your dream to become a knight?’

Ermias grinned at him. ‘Don’t be shy now, little brother.’

Luka’s words came rushing back to Dash.

‘Well? What did you want? Back then? What did you want more than anything?’

‘A knight,’ Dash said. ‘I wanted to be a knight.’

'Looks to me like you've been given the opportunity to become who you wanted to become. So don't mess it up.'

He met the captain's warm eyes and smiled.

CHAPTER 42

Bleak watched the sun rise over Valia one last time. The glowing orb hovered above the horizon of treetops, spilling its rays of gold and rose pink across the forest. Rion was sprawled across the living bridge beside her, basking in its warmth. It had been a week since Luka's memorial. Many of the rulers and guests had returned home to their own lands, and now, the forest was quieter, the Valians settling back into their lives. Bleak had always felt at peace here. She loved the fresh air and the greenery, but now ... now she was restless.

'Come on,' she said to Rion, getting to her feet.

The beast huffed, but lurched onto his paws and padded silently beside her as she made her way through the canopy. She left him to his own devices when they reached the Valian lodgings. There, Ermias and Casimir were in the guest quarters they'd been given. They sat at a table, with maps and charts spread out before them, steaming cups of tea in their hands.

'Good of you to join us,' Ermias quipped with a wink, chewing on the end of his pipe.

'Who starts this early?' she countered, finding a spare mug to fill on the bench.

Ermias gave Casimir a pointed look. 'We do, apparently.'

Casimir shook his head and rubbed his temples. 'There's a lot to do.'

Bleak pulled up a chair and blew the steam from her tea. 'Like what?'

Ermias' gold tooth flashed as he laughed. 'Oh, you know. Map the lands that were hidden by the mist. Relocate the lisloiks to Lamaka's Basin. Unite our people and rule. As we were born to do.'

‘Starting out nice and simple, then, I see,’ Bleak said dryly. ‘The lisloiks must take first priority,’ she added. ‘The last thing we want is Queen Delja as a new enemy.’

‘Well, you’ll be negotiating the move, so you’ll know best how to handle that,’ Ermias said with a casual wave of his pipe.

Bleak said nothing.

There was a pause as Casimir met her gaze. ‘You’re not coming with us, are you?’

The grin on Ermias’ face faded and he rounded on her. ‘What?’

‘No,’ Bleak said, shaking her head. ‘Not yet.’

FI WAS WAITING for her in the clearing. His weary expression broke into a broad grin at the sight of her.

‘Bleak,’ he greeted her warmly, wrapping her in a tight embrace.

‘Hello, Fi,’ she said, returning his smile. Grief lined the Battalionian’s face. She knew there was nothing she could say to ease his pain, so instead she returned his embrace tightly.

When he pulled back, she gestured behind her. ‘There’s someone I’d like you to meet ...’

One ... Two ... Three ... Four ... Five ... Gesa Thornton stepped into the clearing and came to stand beside Bleak, taking her hand in a firm hold.

‘This is my mother,’ Bleak explained, waiting for the shock to settle on Fi’s face.

But Fi didn’t miss a beat. Instead, he offered his hand. ‘A privilege to meet you, Lady Gesa.’

Bleak could have sworn she saw a glimmer of a smile on her mother’s face. Savouring the flutter of hope in her chest, she turned back to the captain. ‘It’s my understanding that you know a great healer?’

Fi was still smiling as he nodded. ‘My grandmother, Healer Ethelda.’

Healer Ethelda ... Where have I heard that name before?

Clearly noting her confusion, Fi added, ‘I believe you’ve had dealings with her before in Heathton.’

Then it dawned on her. The bookshelves that lined each wall and the thick, cracked spines of hundreds of volumes, the simple wooden table covered in countless small glass vials, and the mortar and pestle, a fine white powder crushed within.

‘You’re a mind whisperer, an Ashai. The magic in you is potent, passed down from your mother, if I’m not mistaken,’ the woman had said. Apparently, she’d been right.

Bleak shook the memory from her head and focused. ‘Ermias said you might be able to take us to her? Healer Ethelda, I mean.’

Fi studied her mother more closely this time. ‘Did he, now?’

Bleak locked eyes with him and nodded. ‘Something about debts and duties?’

She had no idea what that phrase meant between the two men, but to her surprise, Fi laughed. ‘That sounds about right.’

‘Is that a yes?’

‘It’s a yes, old friend.’

Gratitude and relief swelled in Bleak’s chest, and her mother gave her hand a squeeze. ‘Thank you.’

Fi waved her off. ‘When do we leave?’

‘It depends. Where are we going?’

Fi winked. ‘The fire continent, Angovian. Home.’

Bleak looked at her mother. ‘Then we leave from Angove in three days.’

BLEAK FOUND Henri at the matriarch’s grotto. Hidden amidst the highest branches of the tallest trees, Bleak knew how sacred this place was to the warrior queen. Even more so now that Allehra had chosen it as her final resting place. But something was different. Bleak frowned. She couldn’t pinpoint what.

‘It’s the doors,’ Henri said, appearing on the vast balcony and noting Bleak’s confusion.

Sure enough, the doors to the quarters were new. Well, not *new*, exactly. Bleak recognised the elaborate and intricate carvings. They were the Valian oak doors that had adorned the entrance to the library in Heathton Castle.

‘They didn’t belong in the capital,’ Henri told her. ‘I asked Olena for them back.’

Bleak ran her fingers across the patterns.

‘You coming in?’ Henri asked, pushing open one of the doors.

Bleak stared open-mouthed when she saw who stood inside. It was the groundling healer, Lyse.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked, as Lyse greeted her with a hug. This place was special to Henri, to her ancestors. She never let anyone up here, least of all groundlings.

Henri went to the window and looked out, arms crossed over her chest. ‘Lyse and I were just discussing the future of Valia.’

Bleak looked from one woman to the other, confused. She was missing something. A lot of somethings, it seemed.

Henri met her gaze and smiled. ‘I’ve named Lyse my heir.’

Bleak’s knees knocked. ‘What?’

‘Lyse is the heir to Valia,’ Henri repeated, still smiling.

Lyse elbowed Bleak. ‘I was as shocked as you are. More shocked, even.’ She gave Bleak another squeeze. ‘I best get back, there’s a lot to organise.’

Bleak watched the groundling go, and finally, looked back to Henri. ‘Much is changing in Valia.’

‘True,’ Henri said. ‘We’ve needed change for some time.’

Bleak huffed a laugh. ‘True.’

Henri eyed the pack Bleak had dropped by the doors. ‘You’re leaving?’

Bleak nodded. ‘It’s time. I need to help my mother.’

‘And if you can’t help her?’

‘I have to try.’

Henri crossed the room and stood before Bleak, shifting from foot to foot. The weight of what they had shared together hung heavily between them. To Bleak’s surprise, Henri pulled her into a tight embrace.

‘I don’t regret it, you know,’ she said roughly. ‘Meeting you in the Hawthornes all that time ago.’

‘Nor I,’ Bleak managed.

‘You brought my sister back to me. I’ll be forever in your debt.’ Henri cleared her throat. ‘I hope we meet again, mist dweller.’

‘So do I.’

Henri pulled back, her graphite eyes meeting Bleak’s odd pair one last time. ‘Know that you’re always welcome in Valia.’

A knock sounded at the door. Bleak looked up to see Sahara leaning against the frame.

‘You weren’t going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?’ she said.

Before Bleak could reply, the rebel Valian strode into the grotto and threw her arms around both Bleak and Henri. ‘It’s been an adventure,’ she muttered. ‘One I’d be happy not to have again for at least a lifetime.’

CHAPTER 43

*S*he coastal village of Angove was much the same, Bleak realised as she and Rion walked through into the town square. The briny sea breeze tangled her hair, and the hot sun bore down on them in glorious gold rays. The markets were in full swing: traders sold their wares from crates on their chests, and stalls overflowed with goods. As Bleak and Rion approached, the crowds parted in awed quiet. No one dared to question her presence now, no one hurled abuse in her direction. The thoughts of those around her were ones of utter astonishment at the beast prowling silently beside her. Bleak savoured the familiar smells of home. The sea air, the freshly baked bread. She'd never appreciated it before, always too fixated on finding her next drink, or avoiding a brawl.

A shout of alarm sounded from nearby. Bleak turned to see Maz, the blacksmith's son, being shoved to the ground. He scarpered back into the dirt, the shadow of a larger man cast across him. The man advanced, reaching down and clutching a fistful of Maz's shirt, the fabric tearing.

Without thinking, Bleak approached. 'Leave him be,' she heard herself say.

'What —' The man was silenced at the sight of Rion behind her, teeth bared.

Bleak cross her arms over her chest. 'Get out of here.'

The man let out a whimper of fear and bolted, leaving Maz in the dirt at her feet.

He looked up at her, mouth agape in disbelief. 'Bleak?' He staggered to his feet, blood dripping from his nose. 'Is that you?'

But Bleak was already walking away. ‘Goodbye, Maz,’ she muttered.

MRS CLAYTON WRENCHED OPEN the front door, dusting her hands on her apron. Her face fell at the sight of Bleak.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I didn’t expect to see you.’

‘Hello, Mrs Clayton,’ Bleak replied, trying not to let the hurt show on her face. Once, she’d been a welcome visitor at the Clayton family home. ‘Is Bren here?’ she asked.

Mrs Clayton shook her head. ‘No, he’s not.’

‘Oh ...’ Bleak wrung her hands. He was supposed to be there. The thought of not saying goodbye ... It didn’t feel right. But the door had already clicked closed. Mrs Clayton left her standing alone outside. Bleak blinked back tears. How could she blame her, really?

DOWN BY THE MARINA, the sun was still high as Bleak prepared to set sail. Fi was loading the last of the supplies onto the ship and her mother sat patiently with Rion, who basked lazily on deck. Bleak looked back once more at Angove: the white cliff faces and sapphire water lapping at the gold, sandy shore. It would be some time before she saw it again, if she ever did. Her heart was heavy as she began to untie the mooring ropes. This wasn’t how she’d wanted to leave this place. But there was nothing for it, she thought, as Fi gave her the all-clear and her fingers found the last knot.

Footsteps sounded on the wharf.

‘Bleak!’ a familiar voice shouted. ‘Bleak, wait!’

Bren stopped short in front of her, cheeks pink, panting for breath. ‘Here,’ he said, holding something out in an outstretched hand.

Senior’s waxed coat. The one she thought she’d lost in the fire.

‘Managed to save it,’ Bren told her breathlessly. ‘Knew how much it meant to ya.’

Her fingers closed over the worn fabric, and she brought it to her face. Hot tears stung her eyes as she breathed in the faint, lingering scent of Bleaker Senior.

‘Thank you,’ she croaked.

Finally, Bren’s ice-blue eyes met hers.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m truly sorry, for everything.’

‘I know. Me too.’ He gave a shrug. ‘Maybe in another lifetime, things would’a been different.’

Bleak pulled the coat around her shoulders. ‘Maybe.’

‘But he’d be proud of ya, ya know. Senior, I mean.’

‘You think?’

‘I know.’ Bren smiled. ‘Yer off, then? Another sailing expedition?’

Bleak curled the last length of rope around her hand and elbow, and climbed aboard the ship as it started to drift. ‘Someone told me once, we *have to play to the strengths we’re given*,’ she called to him.

Bren’s answering laugh was like music. ‘Bye, Bleak,’ he said. ‘Safe travels.’

The wind caught in the sails and the ship surged forward, picking up speed. Fi adjusted the ropes at her instruction and her mother was smiling as the briny breeze caught in her silver-streaked hair. In spite of everything, chest full, Bleak stood at the wheel with Rion at her side. The spray of salt water kissed her skin, and filled with a grand sense of adventure, she steered them towards a new tomorrow.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER

The morning was crisp and bright as *The Daybreaker* moored off the coast of Oremere. The mist had receded. All of it. There was not a feather of it to be seen, anywhere. From the water, Bleak took in the sight of the rolling green hills, the mountains in the distance and the vast, flourishing land that stretched beyond Westerfort. The fortress, too, had changed. It was no longer a husk of its former self, but was now a hive of activity. Even from the ship, Bleak could see the dozens of workers amidst the new scaffolding, hammering support structures in place and passing stone blocks along a production chain. Rebuilding. They were rebuilding Westerfort, and the whole of Oremere.

Bleak turned to her mother and Rion, who stood beside her on deck. ‘We’re home,’ she breathed. ‘We’re finally home.’

Gesa Thornton smiled and squeezed her hand. Healer Ethelda had done everything she could to help ease her trauma, but Bleak’s mother still hadn’t uttered a word. Theldie had said that she likely never would. Gesa had other ways of communicating. Ines had lied about her not being an Ashai, or hadn’t known the extent of Gesa’s power. Ethelda had known, though, all those years ago in Heathton when Bleak had sought a cure for her own abilities.

Now, an image flashed before Bleak’s eyes. The great hall of Freyhill Castle, awash with candles and decorations, fiddles playing from the dais, and at its heart, Gesa and Gabriel Thornton, dancing. A kernel of a memory, shared from one mind whisperer to another.

‘Was it really that beautiful?’ Bleak asked her mother.

Resting her elbows on the railing, Gesa nodded and looked back out to the landscape. Beside her, Rion huffed and followed her gaze, as though he, too, had remembered. Bleak still didn't know what had happened to her father – she hadn't asked. She knew all too well that these things took time, and when she was ready, her mother would share that tale with her.

'Lady Alarise, Lady Gesa,' announced one of the deckhands, sidestepping the great teerah panther. 'Your boat is ready.'

Rion growled in his direction, and the deckhand jumped back. Only to find Rion's companion, Maala, behind him.

'Rion,' Bleak warned. But the two panthers leaped from the deck, into the lapping sea below, and began swimming to shore. For a moment, Bleak marvelled at their powerful torsos pushing through the current. They truly were incredible creatures. With a sigh, she linked her arm through her mother's and led her towards the rowboat that awaited.

Bleak insisted on rowing them herself. She had never been one for sitting inactive while someone else did the work. She had captained their journey from Angove to Battalon, and from Battalon to Oremere. Senior wouldn't have had it any other way on *The Daybreaker*. On their voyage, she had shown her mother snippets of the old fisherman and their life together. Though at first she'd been hurt that Senior's initial kindness to her had been planted in his mind by Gesa, Bleak had chosen to focus on the rest of their time together. She liked to think that they'd been good for one another, that Senior had been happy knowing her.

As though sensing her thoughts, Gesa scooped a handful of water from the side of the boat and splashed Bleak, the cold water hitting her right in the face. Dripping, Bleak laughed. The sound still surprised her when she did. At last, their boat crunched atop the gritty, wet shore of Oremere, Bleak's arms burning with the effort.

Gesa pointed. Behind Rion and Maala, on the crest of the shore, stood the rest of the teerah-panther pride, waiting. She had never seen a more majestic sight. They had survived. All of them. And they were all here, for her and Gesa.

'Lady Alarise,' called one of the attendants. 'We'll have the horses ready for your escort shortly.'

Bleak smiled. 'We have an escort,' she said. 'Tell Captain Murphadias we'll meet him and the crew at Freyhill.'

The attendant bowed. 'Very good, my lady.'

On the sand, Maala lowered her belly to the ground so Bleak could help Gesa get atop her back. Her mother looked at home sitting astride a teerah panther, and Bleak wondered if Gesa had known the beasts as cubs. Yet another thing she would have to wait to learn. Bleak swung herself up behind Rion's shoulders, their first meeting flashing before her as she did. He'd been an injured, malnourished beast, full of anger, lying in the rubble of Westerfort. She hadn't understood the bond between them, why deep in her bones she'd felt so connected to him. But now she knew they belonged together. That they always had.

'Come on,' she said, scratching him behind his ear. His great body lurched forward with enthusiasm. He, too, was ready to return home.

Bleak and her mother rode Rion and Maala across the luscious green stretches of land, with the rest of the pride flanking them, a guard like no other. Bleak gaped at how much the misty moors of Oremere had transformed. Now, amidst the rich greens were bursts of yellow across the vast hillsides; Oremian wattle had thrived in the mist's wake. An array of trees peppered the sloped land, exploding with vibrant green leaves, while wild lavender spilled from the earth around their roots. There was so much life, so much colour. A great contrast to the muted greys that had once been.

Bleak savoured the sound of the sparrows singing and a nearby stream flowing steadily. This was what they had fought for. What her friends had died for.

When they grew closer to the gated capital, Bleak saw it. The battlefield she still remembered so clearly. The white-hot pain and chaos of it all. The clashing of swords and armour, the cries of agony. But now, it was just a field, with something unique at its heart.

Where they had released the firestorm wells, where they had lured scores of their enemy to their fiery deaths, was a giant circle marked in the earth, the one Dash and Luka had outlined with the special Battalonian chemicals. In it was a garden of blood blooms. Their violent red stood out against the sage-green grass of the surrounding land. Bleak knew they grew nowhere else in Oremere, nowhere else in the entire realm, only within that circle before the gates of Freyhill. In a recent letter, Casimir had requested that they destroy the garden, that it was too painful a memory to display at the entry to their city. But Bleak had advised against removing it. No more would they wipe Oremere's history clean, no matter how bloody. And so it remained.

The great gates of Freyhill swung open as Bleak, Gesa and the teerahs approached. Bleak caught her mother flinching at the sight of them, knowing all too well how they'd looked the last time she'd been here. Heads spiked, blood dripping down the iron.

Bleak slowed Rion beside her mother. 'Never again,' she said, following her mother's gaze to the repaired, clean gates.

Gesa Thornton met her daughter's eyes and nodded.

They rode in silence through the high street, where Bleak and Sahara had once posed as guards to trick their way into the castle grounds. A lifetime ago. Where before it had been deserted, it was now bustling with people. Oremians. True, loyal Oremians who'd lived underground for over a decade. They smiled and waved at Bleak and her mother as they passed, ducking out of the way of the pride, staring at them in awe. The flogging posts had been removed from the town square, and the market stalls were open and flourishing. Bleak couldn't believe how many people were here. Around them, people bore the scars of war, but she saw no fear, only relief, and gratitude. *Freedom.*

The gates were down across the moat and they crossed into the castle grounds, the guards bowing as they passed. In the courtyard, the gardens thrived, though there was not a single blood bloom in sight. On her orders, the teerah pits had been filled in, with more garden beds planted in their place. Yellow Oremian wattle flourished here, too.

'Bleak,' called a familiar voice.

She jumped down from Rion and ran to the regal figure descending the castle stairs. 'Casimir!'

He wrapped her in a warm embrace. 'It's good to see you,' he said. The prince looked younger, more at ease with himself than Bleak had ever seen him.

'You, too,' she replied, giving his arm a squeeze as she withdrew. They hadn't spoken of what Ines had revealed to them about the priestesses' prophecy in her final moments. Bleak had never believed in fate, anyway. If something were to happen between her and Casimir, it would be their choice and their choice alone.

Her mother dismounted Maala and approached them.

'Lady Gesa,' Casimir greeted her, bowing low. 'It's an honour to have you return to us.'

Bleak's mother took his hands in hers and smiled.

‘Please,’ Casimir said. ‘Come inside. You’re just in time.’

As they entered the great hall of Freyhill Castle, Bleak’s breath caught in her throat. Through stained-glass windows, warm light poured in and colour danced across the long tables that ran to the dais at the end. Upon the dais sat three simple thrones, the one in the middle slightly smaller, a teerah panther carved into its apex.

Mine, Bleak realised with a start. *That seat is mine*.

There was no need for fires in the great hearths either side of the hall, nor any formalities, it seemed. For at the end of one of the long tables sat a familiar group of rebels. Casimir led Bleak and Gesa to them: Geraad, Jaida, Kye, Fletch and Daleren, all in one piece, all smiling back at them. And standing at the head of the table was a grinning, gold-toothed man, the crown of his head dusted with fresh snow.

‘Greetings from Wildenhaven, Bleak.’ Ermias gripped her shoulder with a wink. ‘Good of you to join us at last.’

‘Hush, Tailor. You’re hardly known for your punctuality,’ quipped Fletch. ‘Welcome back, Lady Alarise. Lady Gesa.’

Bleak laughed and embraced the archer. ‘My friends still call me Bleak,’ she said.

‘Thank the gods for that,’ Ermias retorted, spraying them with wet snow as he shook off his furs.

Casimir slid onto the bench beside Geraad and motioned for Bleak and her mother to do the same. ‘Ermias was about to give his report on his recent travels.’

Bleak sat down with Gesa to her right. An attendant came forward and placed a board of cheeses, dips and breads before them, as well as two full goblets. Bleak’s mouth went dry. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a drink, but the thought of liquor still sent a wave of craving through her body. It likely always would. She peered inside the goblet. *Water*. Casimir had clearly notified the castle staff of her problem. Once, she might have been angry for the interference, but now, she was filled with gratitude. Unspoken support – that was what it was.

‘Eydis sends her regards,’ Ermias was saying between mouthfuls. ‘It appears that those in Havenness who were branded and affected by Ines’ brainwashing have seen the light. Since her death, it’s as though the trance or enchantment has lifted. While they still bear the mark, their minds have returned to their former states. Eydis has soldiers guarding Direbreach,

Hallowden and Briarfort for any signs of relapse, but so far, the people are recovering well.'

A sigh of relief sounded around the table.

'What of Nicolai?' asked Casimir. 'Last I heard, Eydis intended on feeding him to her wolfdogs.'

Ermias gave a grim smile. 'As much joy as that would have given me, I convinced her to put him to trial instead. The Wildenhaven forces have recaptured the traitor Mariette. Both are locked up and heavily guarded in the dungeons there and will likely face the original sentence Mariette was given.'

'Is Eydis ...' Bleak was suddenly unsure if her question was appropriate, but she ploughed on. 'Is Eydis alright? How is she?'

'Eydis is strong,' Ermias said. 'She has Jarel, she has Bear and she has us.'

Bleak nodded. If anyone could get through the challenges ahead, it was the winter queen.

'Prior to Havenness, I visited Battalon,' Ermias continued. 'It seems King Roswall has also recovered from his trance. Prince Nazuri is now ruling alongside him, and keeping a close eye on his father's progress. The refugees have returned to their homes in the city, and the clans in the Janhallow Desert have been recognised with awards of valour, for protecting the people of Belbarrow during the war. The prince has also renewed old trade agreements between all continents, of which Oremere already is seeing the benefits.'

'And the prince's engagement?' Jaida asked, topping up her and Kye's goblets.

'Officially revoked. By mutual agreement between him and Princess Olena.'

Bleak couldn't help smiling at this. She knew a dark-eyed knight-in-training who would be particularly pleased by this development.

'Ellest has undergone some significant changes these past few months,' Ermias forged on. 'The mist has vanished from both the West Farmlands and the southern parts of Valia. Henri has also sent word that at last, the Forest of Ghosts has started to regrow. Heathton has been restored to its former reign of prosperity. Princess Olena is currently ruling in her brother's stead. There has been speculation that she will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, as Prince Jaxon has forgone his coronation to

travel to Qatrola, where he is overseeing a new electoral policy. Qatrola will be the first continent to select their own leader, who will rule instead of King Arden's regent. And you'll be pleased to learn that Ines' followers there have emerged from their trance, also.'

Bleak breathed a sigh of relief. Ermias' reports were more than she could have hoped for. While the realm was very much scarred by what had happened, life, it seemed, went on.

'What of your coronations?' Daleren spoke up. 'Isn't it time you were *kings* of Oremere?'

'There have been some slightly more pressing matters, don't you think?' Ermias shrugged, producing his pipe from his pocket.

'Even so, a joint coronation would solidify your places in Oremere, would represent some semblance of permanent rule.'

'Within the month,' Casimir said firmly. 'But for now, Ermias, Alarise and I are dedicated to returning Oremere to its former reign of prosperity. That is our first priority.'

Bleak's mother touched her hand, sending an image into her mind.

A rocky path, leading to a dark, stone tower.

'What of my orders regarding Moredon Tower?' Bleak asked, her voice sounding steelier than she'd intended.

It was Casimir who answered. 'It has been destroyed,' he told her. 'Along with the dungeons below it. Supply ships from each continent are docking on the island as we speak. Your plans for a new lighthouse with them.'

Bleak glanced at her mother. Gesa's eyes had glazed over, as though she was far away from the comforts of Freyhill's great hall. Bleak squeezed her fingers, knowing there was nothing she could do but simply be there.

THAT NIGHT, a feast was held in honour of the Thorntons' return to Oremere. Bleak had been introduced to many noble families, whose names she'd already forgotten. Now, she sat next to Casimir, not quite able to believe that she was here after all this time. The tables were overflowing with food and drink, and light music echoed through the hall. She turned to the prince beside her.

'Casimir,' she whispered. 'How in the realm can we afford all of this?'

Casimir smiled. 'Well, it turns out, Ines didn't touch the royal coffers.'

‘What? How is that possible?’

‘She used her magic for everything,’ he told her. ‘She never paid for a thing. Just manipulated everything to suit her purposes.’

‘Oh.’

‘It doesn’t sit well with me, either, but all we can do now is try to right her wrongs.’

Bleak nodded. ‘I suppose so.’

‘There you are!’ said a deep, melodic voice. Fi.

The Battalionian squeezed onto the bench on Bleak’s other side. ‘I see you’ve settled in?’ He smiled at Bleak and reached for a plate of beef. Fi was making the best of things in the wake of Swinton’s death, but Bleak had been privy to some of his inner thoughts and she knew he was still in the throes of his deepest grief.

She wasn’t sure what to say to him, his question hanging out in the open between them. She, too, was still processing the events of the war. While Bleak enjoyed being here and seeing people she cared about healthy and happy, she wasn’t sure ‘settled’ was the right word to describe how she felt. Not when she still had one last task to do.

But Casimir saved her from answering. ‘How is our young knight-in-training?’ he asked.

Fi’s face broke into a wide grin. ‘Already top of the form, Prince.’

Bleak’s chest swelled with pride. ‘That doesn’t surprise me in the slightest. Luka trained him well. Swinton would be proud,’ she added.

Fi gave her a grateful smile. ‘I think he already was, Bleak.’

Later that night, Bleak finally found her way to her new chambers. Her few belongings and pack had been brought into the rooms that were far more decadent than any she’d stayed in before. They consisted of a bedroom, a lounge area, a bathing chamber and a formal study with a massive oak desk. She had tried to swap to smaller, simpler rooms, but these were the apartments assigned to her. Exhausted, she shrugged out of her clothes and pulled on an oversized nightshirt. She sank into the soft mattress of the huge, four-poster bed and stared at the ceiling, mulling over the day’s events and reports, wondering about what came next for them all. Once more, she felt restless.

THE ORANGE-AND-PINK HUES of the early-morning light woke Bleak before dawn had fully broken upon the horizon. She got dressed quickly and left her chambers as she'd found them.

After checking on her mother, who was still sleeping soundly, Bleak slipped past the guards without being detected and picked up the pack she'd prepared the night before. She didn't know how long she'd be gone; she had rationed for a few days and hoped it would be enough. Checking the front pocket, she saw that Casimir had left the map she'd requested. An old map, from well before the mist had covered their lands. She'd need it to get to where she was going. Finally, she found Rion stalking the outer grounds of Freyhill.

'I've been looking for you,' she said by way of greeting.

Rion huffed in reply, as though he already knew where they were headed and wasn't sure how he felt about it.

'There are promises I made that I need to make sure are upheld,' she explained, swinging herself up onto his back. 'We go south.'

Woman and panther travelled across the sweeping green plains in silence. They passed the hillside where the rebel headquarters had once been, now no more than grazing pastures for livestock. A number of cabins were in the process of being built for farmers and those who tended the herds of goats and sheep. But Bleak and Rion didn't stop. They continued south, until they reached unregulated territory. No one had seen these parts of Oremere for over a decade now. A great mountain range loomed in the distance, with thousands of pines covering their bases, their peaks disappearing into the white clouds above. Pine cones crunched beneath Rion's paws as they drew closer and Bleak saw that the forest floor was covered in an array of wild tulips and daisies, with tiny Oremian sparrows dipping amongst them, stealing their nectar.

At the foot of the mountain, Bleak consulted the map. What she was looking for was on the other side of this range, but Casimir had said that there was a shortcut through. She hoped he was right, unsure of how thrilled Rion would be at the thought of carrying her over a mountain. She spotted the secret trail Casimir had mentioned, and crossing her fingers that it was still there, she hauled herself back behind Rion's shoulders and urged him forward.

He didn't budge.

'Rion, it's a shortcut, I swear ...' She tried again.

He refused to move.

‘What is it?’ she asked, frowning as she scanned their surroundings. Rion wasn’t being difficult; she sensed that now. Something wasn’t right.

There was a blur of movement in the tree above. Something – *someone* – jumped to the ground.

‘Still think it’s every woman for herself, hey?’ said a familiar voice.

Henrietta Valia had landed soundlessly on her feet before Bleak and Rion.

‘What ... what are you doing here?’ Bleak managed, sliding off Rion and greeting the Valian queen with a hard embrace.

Henri gave a conspiratorial smile. ‘Ermias told me your plans.’

‘And?’ Bleak said. ‘Don’t you have a territory to run?’

Henri shrugged. ‘I’ve been taking some liberties, now that I’ve named an heir. Athene and Tilly are taking Lyse through the day-to-day runnings of the forest.’

‘What about Sahara?’

‘No doubt you’d find her on her way to Freyhill to see Geraad.’

‘Oh.’

‘That’s all you have to say?’

Bleak shrugged, feeling a wide grin break upon her face. ‘Hope you brought a horse.’

Bleak would never admit how happy she was to see the Valian warrior, but suddenly, her task felt lighter; less daunting than it had before. Henri had, in fact, brought a horse, and the two women wove through the dense forest atop their mounts with ease, past the scores of shrubs sprouting at the base of the great trees, past the clear, babbling brooks. The air was fresh and cool, and there was a quiet beauty here that Bleak hadn’t experienced for a long while. An Oremian wilderness that called to the magic in her veins. She was glad Henri was here to experience it with her. The sun was still high as they found their way out through the other side of the mountain and Bleak stopped short. It was as she remembered it from Casimir’s mind.

Lamaka’s Basin.

Framed by the snow-capped mountains around them, the lake stretched to the horizon, mirroring the mountains and sky above across its glassy, turquoise surface. Jagged boulders speckled with pale-green moss littered the lake’s shore, stacked precariously atop one another, while the water lapped calmly at the sand and stone beneath Bleak’s feet.

‘You sure about this?’ Henri asked, frowning at the lake.

‘I’m sure. Wait here?’

Henri nodded, and sat down on a nearby log.

Bleak turned away, and walked with Rion to where the water kissed the shore. She crouched and, as Casimir had once done before her, lowered her fingertips to its cool surface. She sent out a kernel of magic to the centre of the lake, watching the water ripple as it travelled outwards.

She waited.

Henri muttered a curse from behind her as the lake seemed to shake. The water parted in a smooth motion as someone emerged from its depths. But it was not who Bleak anticipated. Though she wore the same near-transparent silk shift, and her hair was long, dark and tangled ...

Bleak stood to address the lisloik. ‘Where is Queen Delja?’

The creature tilted her head, in curiosity or anger, Bleak didn’t know. She stopped herself taking a step back as a crown materialised atop the lisloik’s hair. It was not a crown of coral like Delja’s, but a crown of bones.

‘There is a new queen now,’ the lisloik said, her lilac eyes unblinking. ‘You are the Lady Alarise?’

Bleak swallowed. ‘I am.’

‘You have called upon me. Why?’

‘To ensure you and your clan are happily returned to your former home. That the bargain between us has been fulfilled.’

‘We are. You have fulfilled your end of the bargain, Oremian.’

Bleak dug through her pockets and held something out to the new queen. ‘I also have something for you.’

‘A gift?’

‘Of sorts.’

She felt the lisloik’s impatient magic tug the object from her hand, and Ines’ amulet floated towards the creature. The new queen caught it in her black talons. It was void of power now, Casimir had assured Bleak, but according to legends, the gesture might prove valuable to their alliance in the future.

Bleak watched her examine it. ‘We thought you might like to keep it. As a tribute to what we achieved together. As a reminder of our gratitude.’

The lisloik gazed at her for a time, taking in Bleak’s odd eyes and the teerah panther at her side, studying her as though committing her to

memory. At last, the creature placed the chain over her head, the amulet and stone settling between her breasts.

‘I know who you are, Alarise Bleak Thornton,’ the lisloik queen whispered, as the waters parted once more and she disappeared below the surface.

Bleak stared after her. *What? What in the name of the gods did that mean?*

Henri approached her, frowning at something in the sand.

‘What?’ Bleak demanded, having had more than enough mystery for one day.

Henri pointed.

Washed up at Bleak’s feet were three different lake reeds. Tied into three different knots.

A king sling. A bimini twist. And a spider hitch.

Bleak crouched once more to pick them up, and turned them over in her hands, awe-struck. *How do they ... How do they know about these knots?* These were *Senior’s* knots.

Henri squeezed her shoulder gently. ‘She does know who you are, after all. We all do now.’

‘I guess so,’ Bleak muttered, still staring at the knots.

Henri laughed. ‘Tell me you’re ready to go home now, mist dweller.’

Bleak looked up and locked eyes with her friend. For the first time in her life, the restlessness within had settled. She laughed.

‘I’m ready.’

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Apparently, summarising gratitude doesn't get easier the more books you write. It's as overwhelming as always, but particularly as these acknowledgements not only represent the end of a book, but the final chapter of an entire series. *The Oremere Chronicles* has now spanned across four years of my life and there have been countless individuals who've supported me throughout that time.

First, to Lisy and Eva, the two courageous women this book is dedicated to. I am forever grateful for our lifelong friendship and the support you have shown me over the many, many years. Through every high and low, you've been there, and for that I know I'm incredibly lucky.

As always, my most heartfelt thanks to my beta team: Aleesha, Claire and Kelly. You've been with me since the very beginning of this series and have poured so much love, time and energy into giving me feedback and encouragement. It has never been lost on me how much you've contributed to these books and these early years of my career. I couldn't have done any of it without you.

This book (and those before it) also wouldn't have been possible without my incredible publishing team: Alexandra Nahlous, Alissa Dinallo and Claire Bradshaw. Thank you for your hard work and dedication.

To my little sister, Yas: thanks for always cheering me on and for all the laughs along the way. And to the rest of my family: Mum, Dad, Larn, Laura and Lily; much love and many thanks.

Thank you to all my writing and publishing friends: Ben (contracts and blurb-writing extraordinaire), Kyra, Aleesha, Hannah, Emily-May, Les, Kristin, Zita, Holly, Lorin, Jenny, Gilly, Melissa, Jordan and Sofia. Your

encouragement, your company and your love of books is nothing short of inspiring.

To my street team: the wonderful reviewers, book bloggers, bookstagrammers and readers who took a chance on *Oremere* and helped spread the word, I'm so grateful for everything you've done. Special shout-outs to @shutupshealea, @abookishpeach, @theliterarycasanova, @thesloanranger and @beautifulbookland.

In the final stages of reworking this book, I travelled to New Zealand and met some amazing people along the way. To Auty, Jess and the folks at River Valley Lodge, thanks for showing me one of the most beautiful places I've ever been, and for making a stressed-out author laugh till she cried. Auty, nothing beats a horse ride and beer on the top of a mountain.

Speaking of New Zealand, in the very final stages of this book, I moved to Queenstown to be with someone incredibly special. Gary, every day is an adventure with you. From dodging giant sea lions in The Catlins and diving into glacial lakes at Bob's Cove, to dancing on tables and enjoying far too much cheese and wine ... You've influenced my life in the biggest and best possible ways.

Some more special shout-outs to these friends and family: the Mulhollands, the O'Shea family, Lou, Annie, Nim, Dave and the Hickman family, the Meshie family (Gina, Ed and Sooz, Charlotte, Andrew), Sidnei and Ally, Tori, Ellie, Lucy, Margot Butler, Helen and Andrew, Erin, Snez, Jess C., Liam, Fay, Mira, Natalia, Corkin, Natasha P. and Mel D.

And of course, last but never least, thank YOU, lovely reader. We've been on a hell of a journey together, haven't we? I can't believe we're at the end. Thank you for staying the course with Bleak and the gang. I truly hope you've loved reading this series as much as I have loved writing it.

Until we meet again,
Helen

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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, she 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 holds a Bachelor of Creative Arts, majoring in Creative Writing, and a Master of Publishing. She is also the Founding Editor of Writer's Edit (www.writersedit.com), one of the world's largest online learning platforms for emerging writers.

She is now a full-time author living amidst the mountains in New Zealand.

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