

KENLEY DAVIDSON



THE
SUNDERED
BLADE

LEGENDS OF ABREIA

BOOK 6

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KENLEY DAVIDSON

PAGE NINE PRESS

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Published by: Page Nine Press

Edited by: Theresa Emms

Cover Design by: MoorBooks Design

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Thank You

Acknowledgments

About the Author

To all who read fantasy looking for light in the darkness...

This book is for you.

PROLOGUE



It was exactly the kind of day Captain Voorley liked best—warm and sunny, but not too bright, with an assortment of fluffy white clouds casting shadows on the water and a brisk wind to fill the sails. The *Crimson Lady* was but two days off shore and soon to be bearing in a westerly direction, her destination the trading ports of Katal. The clipper’s hold was filled with grain, fabric, crates of dried herbs, and several dozen bushels of walnuts—an expensive delicacy in the desert kingdom.

The captain expected to turn a neat profit and—with fair weather—be back in port in little more than a month. He’d been promised a bonus if this trip proved to be successful, and was but six months or so from having saved enough to purchase his own ship.

A smile creased his bearded lips as he considered the glorious vision. Her name would be *Marlen’s Dream*, and she would be fast and sleek—designed to outrun the competition. He would have the fastest ship on the western trade route, and no one...

“Sails to the south, Captain!” the lookout in the crow’s nest called down, and Voorley abandoned his pleasant daydreams with a regretful sigh.

All in good time.

“Merchants?” he called back up. It had been many years since privateers prowled the waters so close to the Abreian

coast, but the *Lady* was fast and nimble, and well able to outpace a larger ship laden with crew and heavy guns.

“Frigates,” the sailor replied, his spyglass trained on the still distant ships. “Three of ‘em with guns, and a fourth with empty ports. Riding low in the water, bearing north by northwest.”

Coming from the south, they were likely to be Zulleri, but Zulleri traders tended to use faster ships, and they did not sail into Abreian harbors with a full military escort.

It was just as well to be wary. Their own path led dead west, so they could add a bit more sail and be out of the way shortly. Unless the unknown vessels chose to give chase—in which case their purpose would be obvious—but the escort formation seemed unlikely to belong to privateers.

Captain Voorley turned to his quartermaster, intending to give the order to increase sail. But the man had gone ashen beneath his tan, and his mouth hung open as he gazed not out across the water, but up.

“Captain!” The lookout’s scream echoed with shock, terror, and warning. Every eye turned up just as a gargantuan winged shape plummeted from the clouds, swooped low, and snatched the man off the crow’s nest with wickedly fanged jaws.

The dragon hovered for a moment, beating the air with wide, leathery wings. Then, with a quick twist of his serpentine neck, he threw the luckless man skyward, snapped once more, and... The sailor was gone.

There was no escape. Captain Voorley knew this as surely as he knew how to read the wind and the waves, but he screamed at his crew anyway, and they lurched into motion, as if by some miracle they might manage to avoid this unlikely death that had fallen from the sky.

At first, the creature merely watched as they scrambled to adjust the sails and alter course and pretend there was a chance they could get away.

And as the sailors worked at a frenzied pace, each with the skill and discipline of hard-won experience, the captain realized that he had never been more proud.

Turning his gaze to the hovering serpent, he prepared to spit his defiance into the creature's face, but something odd caught his eye.

A harness.

As the monster finally turned in the air, descending towards the doomed ship, the captain saw a human figure clinging to its back.

“What in the name of all...”

His final words ended in a scream as flames engulfed the quarterdeck.

Within less than an hour, the last of the *Crimson Lady* sank beneath the waves, and there was no one to mark her passing but the fish.

CHAPTER 1



Prince Vaniell of Garimore plucked at a loose string on the edge of his sleeve and asked himself for perhaps the millionth time where he had first gone wrong.

His intentions had been entirely good. Well, *mostly* good.

After all, someone had to be responsible for determining the identity of the mage who'd stolen his father's throne, and once that was done, someone had to stop that same mage from destroying the world.

But after those two simple tasks were finally complete, Vaniell had always imagined himself running away. Leaving all of those pesky responsibilities behind and studying enchanting in a place where there was nothing to remind him of his family history. Where his identity could be safely concealed and no one would ask him to save anything ever again.

He'd managed the first, but that was when everything started to fall apart.

"And how certain are you that your contact received your message?"

The deep, rumbling voice jolted him out of his thoughts and back to the present. Back to the creaking, uneven deck of the ramshackle ferry making its ponderous, lurching way across the narrow gulf that separated the Irian peninsula from Garimore.

"About as certain as one can possibly be when it comes to pigeons," he responded dryly, not bothering to turn from his

contemplation of the dark waters slipping by beneath the ferry. Even the bright, full moon was not enough to illuminate anything beyond the surface of the waves, and for that mercy, Vaniell was entirely grateful. He was no fan of deep water, nor of whatever things might prove to be swimming in it. The captain had assured them that there was nothing worse than eels, dolphins, and the occasional giant shrimp, but Vaniell remained unconvinced.

Much like Kyrion.

“I do not care to risk my bondmate’s safety on your possibles or your pigeons.”

Which was a fair assessment. There was a reason pigeons were rarely used to deliver messages outside of Iria—aerial predators often picked them off like tiny feathery snacks.

But the Wyvern King of Dunmaren had a way of making every sentence sound like a threat. And given that he was quite masterful at lurking, his presence behind Vaniell’s left elbow was beginning to cause a distinct ache between the prince’s shoulder blades. The sort of ache that portended a potential sword between the ribs in his near future.

“Leisa will be traveling with Karreya,” Vaniell said, turning around and leaning against the rail with entirely feigned indifference. It was really a tossup whether he was more nervous about Kyrion’s glowing stare or the likelihood that the ferry’s railing would collapse under his weight. “Between the two of them, I doubt they are likely to encounter any enemy they cannot stab or pummel into surrender.”

Kyrion’s lips drew downward in evident distaste. “Am I expected to find it comforting that she will be in the company of an imperial assassin? As they make their way to the very last place that is safe for either of them to be?”

“That’s why it’s such a perfect plan.” Vaniell shrugged and crossed his arms as nonchalantly as possible. “No one there knows them, and no one would expect an enemy to waltz right into the high sanctum of villainy like that.”

Kyrion’s glare did not abate.

“Relax,” Vaniell said with a crooked grin. “Karreya can do this in her sleep. And Leisa knows the place inside and out.” He’d been more than a bit startled to find out *why* she knew it, but her experiences while masquerading as Princess Evaraine now made her the perfect person to accompany Karreya on this mission.

Which would begin the moment they all disembarked from this boat.

Their little group would be splitting up—each of them with a task to fulfill, all of them heading into certain and undeniable danger. And no matter how skilled and deadly Karreya was, the thought of being separated from her filled Vaniell with a complex set of emotions he’d seldom really grappled with before.

For the first time in his life, he’d gone and fallen in love. There was no longer any point in denying it. He would be perfectly happy to spend the rest of his days appreciating his favorite assassin’s bone-dry sense of humor, her straightforward approach to life, her matter-of-fact competence, and her gift for seeing straight to his heart. He wanted to tell her how he felt, but there was also no point in denying how impossible their relationship would be. To tell her might only cause them both pain in the end, and anyway, what could she possibly want with him? He had none of the strengths she’d been taught to value, and not even a hovel to call his own.

For all of those reasons and more, his courage had deserted him each time he’d had the opportunity to speak, and now she was about to leave. He might never see her again, and the thought had snarled both his body and mind in knots of tension, frustration, and confusion.

And because he was all tangled up inside, he fell back on old habits that had always served him well in the past. He knew Kyrion was the last person in Abreia that he ought to be needling, but that only made the urge stronger.

“Perhaps what you are really afraid of is that the two of them will storm the castle and this entire battle will be over

before we have our chance to shine.”

The night elf was not noticeably amused by Vaniell’s attempt at humor. “Considering that you shine brightest when exercising your considerable gift for irritating people, I don’t believe I have any reason to worry.”

“What can I say?” Vaniell grinned cheekily. “If one’s enemy grants them a weapon, it would be downright ungrateful not to use it. When people are irritated, they make mistakes, and I...”

With a loud crack that echoed out over the water, the railing behind him gave way, and he fell. Back and down towards the cold, dark waters of the gulf. Into the deadly embrace of whatever slimy, tentacled monsters lurked in its depths...

A sudden jolt stopped his inexorable descent, as a silver-gray hand caught the front of his shirt in an iron grip. Vaniell was too startled to do anything but fight for breath.

“Thank you,” he gasped out, trying not to look at the water still churning beneath him. “I’m not actually that great at swimming, so...”

“Well then, Princeling. Perhaps this is a good day to learn a new skill.”

And that was all the warning Vaniell had before Kyrion’s hand opened and he hit the water with a resounding splash.

“What was that?”

He heard Leisa’s voice, and then others, but only in snatches as he bobbed up and down, doing his utmost to stay above the surface while trying not to think about what might be sharing the water with him.

Kyrion stood by the broken railing, his arms crossed over his chest and his lips quirked as if he finally found something amusing.

It was Karreya who tossed Vaniell a rope and hauled him back aboard, dripping and shivering, while Kyrion watched,

Leisa tried not to laugh, and Senaya seemed little better than resigned to their youthful idiocy.

“There are simpler ways to tell me that I smell,” Vaniell managed to say between chattering teeth, as Karreya threw a blanket around his shoulders with a curiously blank expression.

“But no simpler ways to induce you to listen.” Kyrion’s eyes gleamed balefully in the darkness, and Vaniell couldn’t suppress the sudden urge to grin.

“I must admit,” he announced, while using the corner of the blanket to squeeze the disgusting gulf water out of his hair, “it is a tremendous relief to discover that you aren’t nearly as stoic and otherworldly as you look. The fact that you’re capable of being petty and underhanded actually makes me like you a great deal more.”

“I don’t need you to like me, Princeling.” The night elf’s glower intensified. “Only to promise that Leisa will be safe with your ‘allies.’ Do not think it has escaped me that you are only this annoying when you are trying to distract someone from the truth. In this case, I suspect that someone is me.”

Vaniell reminded himself that he would do well to be mindful of Kyrion’s past. After his years as the Raven—King Melger’s deadly assassin—Kyrion would know Vaniell better than anyone else in the party. And thanks to those same circumstances, the night elf had far more justifiable reasons to dislike him.

Kyrion had said he bore no grudge and considered all debt between them absolved. But that didn’t mean he would forget Vaniell’s past actions, nor that he had any interest in a relationship of respect or cordiality.

Rather than annoy him, perhaps Vaniell ought to try the unthinkable and be brutally straightforward instead.

“I think we both know I cannot promise you anything of the kind.” Vaniell dropped all pretense of humor. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to be serious, it simply didn’t serve him well on a majority of occasions. On this one, however... “I

share certain goals with my allies, but none of us truly know one another, and I have accepted the risks of our association. To the best of my ability to predict, they will offer no harm to your bondmate, but beyond that, the specific circumstances are out of my control.”

“Which Kyrion knows perfectly well.” Leisa offered her husband a fond but chiding look. “This is just his way of dealing with the fact that *he* can’t control it either.”

With a tug on his hand, she drew him away towards the other side of the boat. Senaya, too, melted away into the shadows, leaving Vaniell essentially alone with Karreya. Well, alone but for their horses and the crew—three middle-aged sisters who seemed more interested in smoking their pipes than in anything their passengers might be getting up to.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. They could hear the murmurs of other conversations, alongside the slap of the waves against the hull and the occasional shifting of the horses’ feet, but in a way, it was almost too quiet.

Words presented themselves for consideration—flippant remarks and flirtatious comments alike—and all of them went unsaid. In a sense, Vaniell had already bared his heart to her. He’d told her that nothing would make him happier than to have her beside him, but he did not yet know whether she shared those feelings.

“You are still a fool,” she said flatly.

That would be a no, then.

“But I find I am uneasy at the prospect of leaving your foolishness behind with no one but the night elf to look after it.”

That sounded like a maybe.

“First of all, I am not entirely helpless,” Vaniell returned, unable to suppress a surge of happiness at her words. “While our impending separation does not fill me with delight, I feel confident I can survive long enough for you to complete your mission. But afterwards...”

And that was where he stopped, because what then? What if their mad plan succeeded? What if they deposed Melger and sent him back to Zulle? What if they all survived the coming war, and at the end of it, Karreya felt she had to return home and face her punishment for leaving?

“My aunt told me I cannot keep you,” she said abruptly, and Vaniell’s mouth fell open.

How did she always manage to surprise him like that?

“Do you even... want to keep me?” he asked, feeling horribly apprehensive and also quite painfully hopeful.

“I...” She sounded almost as hesitant as he felt. “I know that I respect you. I admire your skills. And I feel a strong urge to stab the night elf for risking your life.”

Coming from Karreya, that was practically a declaration of love. Or at least that’s what Vaniell would have liked to tell himself. But judging from the stories of her past, she’d spent most of it without even a hint of normal human affection. Her mother had disappeared, her father ignored her, and she’d had no one else who cared. During her training, she’d been encouraged to cast aside all feelings and emotions and regard them as weaknesses to be overcome.

Even if she did care for him, it might be a long time before she truly understood those feelings. Any pushing on his part would only take advantage of her confusion and possibly press her towards a future she was not prepared to accept.

But was it any more fair to keep her in doubt of his own feelings at a moment like this?

“I meant what I said, you know,” he replied finally. “I wish you did not have to leave me. And no matter what happens, there will always be a place for you in my life.”

She turned to face him, arms tightly crossed. “As what?”

He blinked.

“I wish to know what role I would be expected to fulfill,” she continued impatiently. “If you are king, will you require me to be your bodyguard? Will you employ me as your

assassin? Or do you simply desire me to be present, like a pet bird or a dog?”

“A... *dog?*” Vaniell sputtered, torn between amusement and frustration. Not at her, but at himself. How could he have failed so spectacularly at something he was normally quite good at?

And yet... Like a second dunking in the waters of the gulf, her words washed over him anew.

If you are king...

She was right, and he hated that she was right. If he were to be king—though that was by no means certain—he would have no position that he could offer to a Zulleri assassin, let alone the third in line to the Zulleri throne. And how could he make promises now when he did not know what the future would hold? It would be unfair to give her any hope, even though all he wanted to do was tell her the truth. To beg her to be there waiting for him at the end of this.

He did not want to be without her, and yet he could not imagine a world where they could be together. And it would almost be worse if she were in his life, but he was forced to hold her at a distance.

“Stop thinking and speak,” she told him. “You are only silent when you argue with yourself, and such arguments are without point or merit.”

“Then what would you have me do?” he asked quietly. “I know the answer in my heart, but I cannot see the future, or promise that it will lead where I wish it to go.”

“All you can do is act,” she replied, unperturbed. “You cannot guess what will come. If you know what you must do in the moment, then that is your answer.”

It was so unlike him to hesitate. Such an unfamiliar impulse to hold back from seizing the opportunity of the moment. But with Karreya, he did not want to be wrong. Did not want to have any regrets.

Which would he regret more—telling her everything or telling her nothing?

“You are not a plaything to me, Karreya. Nor are you a tool to be used. I would never ask you to kill for me, let alone to die for me. What I want is...”

The deck lurched underfoot, throwing him off balance and sending him reeling right into Karreya.

Fortunately, she was far more agile and caught him before they both went down in a tangled heap.

Curses echoed from the far side of the boat, and for the first time, the stout, placid form of the captain actually seemed to move with something approaching haste.

Still pressed tightly against Karreya as she steadied his balance, Vaniell peered into the darkness, looking for whatever had disturbed their passage. They were not near to shore—there was some time yet before they should reach the other side.

Could it be a sandbar? The captain had sworn that the night passage was safe, but if it were not a sandbar...

Oh, dear gods, not a sandbar at all.

Over the edge of the deck, right where the rail had broken beneath his weight, a single glistening tentacle oozed its way silently forward, caressing the uneven surface as it came.

Vaniell opened his mouth to call out a warning, but he was too late—cries of alarm went up from all around him as more tentacles appeared, shooting out of the water and curling around the boat with a loving and possessive grasp. The horses began to snort and squeal and kick, sensing the danger as the water boiled turbulently and the deck lurched again.

“Stand back!” one of the captain’s sisters called as she barreled towards them, an ancient and rusty pike in hand.

But she was far too late. Karreya had already drawn a sword and sliced through the nearest tentacle, leaving the tip of it flopping on the deck like a newly caught fish. Vaniell tried not to gag as he kicked at the lopped off appendage, hoping the creature would quickly get the message and leave them alone. There were more than enough steel blades on this boat, and the monster could only have so many legs.

But no sooner had Karreya turned to slice at another tentacle than the first crept out of the water again. Under Vaniell's horrified gaze, the tip simply regenerated itself until it appeared completely whole and undamaged, then wrapped around Karreya's boot. She cursed and sliced it off a second time, but it was clear that steel and stabbing were not going to be the answer.

Behind him, Vaniell heard a familiar roar as Kyrion shifted into his wyvern form and took to the air.

Unfortunately, this resulted in new cries of terror from the crew as the wyvern belched flames in the direction of the largest tentacle that now fully spanned the deck.

"Don't ye be setting my ship on fire!" the captain shrieked, but her protests seemed pointless. Was it really that much worse to die by fire than by sea monster?

Leisa, too, had joined the fray, stabbing at the nearest slime-covered appendages with a dagger, though her efforts seemed to gain her little. The creature was healing its injuries as fast as they created them, and if they did not find a better method soon, the creaking hull would collapse under the pressure of the monster's embrace.

Vaniell shook off his terror and paralysis and plunged both hands into the pockets of his coat, fumbling through the contents with frantic haste. Light and noise were unlikely to help, as the wyvern was providing both of those already. The string was not long enough, nor was the creature likely to be impressed by flowers or fireworks.

Only the more deadly enchantments remained, and those were, of course, untested. Meant for the direst of circumstances, which, unfortunately, this was. He needed to injure the creature badly enough that it couldn't regenerate, while hoping desperately that his efforts didn't backfire...

Selecting the largest of the steel marbles—the size of a walnut with an uneven, spiky surface—Vaniell turned and raced to the far side of the boat, peering into the water while dodging the dripping appendages that periodically attempted to knock him off his feet. He needed the body... the head...

Whatever a tentacled sea-monster had. It was not a piece of knowledge he had ever expected to need.

“Come on then, you bastard! Come up here and face me like a...” The challenge fell flat when he couldn’t figure out how to finish the sentence. Not that an overgrown octopus would understand him anyway, so why had he felt the need to yell?

Somehow, he had to convince it to surface. But how could it be drawn out except with... bait.

He needed live bait, or this ferry was going to sink, along with everyone aboard.

Vaniell shrugged out of his still-wet coat, dropped it on the deck, and dove into the water.

Well, jumped in, with an awkward splash and a gasp as the cold and the darkness enveloped him once more.

But that was the point—splashing and noise and fighting for air. He heard Karreya yelling his name as he bobbed to the surface, but turned his attention away from the ferry, focusing on the surrounding water, thrashing his arms and legs to stay afloat while waiting for a hint. For any sign that his ruse was working.

Even though he was looking, it still caught him by surprise. The water heaved and boiled, tumbling him backwards, and when he bobbed to the surface, he found himself facing a creature that robbed him of all speech or courage.

A bulbous head, a single eye, and a wide mouth ringed with teeth... The monster gazed at him with mindless hunger before a tentacle suddenly wrapped around his waist and pulled him forward, lifting him out of the water on his way towards that toothy maw.

This was not, he decided, how he’d pictured his day going. But at least he was no longer drowning.

Grasping the steel ball in icy, trembling fingers, Vaniell filled it with magic, feeding it more and more until a white-hot rush of power flooded the etchings on its surface. And as the

tentacle carried him nearer and nearer, he pulled back his arm, preparing for the moment...

The mouth opened wider, revealing even more teeth, and as his feet lowered inexorably towards that gruesome doom, Vaniell tossed the enchanted marble down its gaping throat.

The monster paused. Squirmed. Retched.

And exploded.

The tentacle that was holding Vaniell went limp at the same time the explosion threw him backwards, smashing him into the side of the boat. He had only a moment to register what had happened before he slid into the water, stunned and in considerable agony. His limbs refused to move, even as he began to sink beneath the waves. A piece of tentacle the size of his torso fell on him, and he would have gone under had he not been seized by the outstretched talons of a black wyvern.

Kyrion yanked him out of the water like an osprey taking off with its catch, then dropped him unceremoniously on the deck of the miraculously still floating ferry.

There... Karreya was racing towards them. Leisa, too, was still alive, and Senaya hovered nearby. The enchantment had worked, everyone was safe, and he hadn't even blown himself up.

Perhaps the day had not turned out so badly after all.

CHAPTER 2



They reached the far side of the gulf, disembarked, and were making preparations to depart before Karreya's hands stopped shaking.

He'd just *jumped in*. Without warning and without weapons.

How could he be so careful with his words and so completely careless with his life?

This feeling... She considered the turmoil of her thoughts and decided it must be anger. She was angry with Niell—so angry that she wanted to yell, or to hit him—and that frustrated her further.

She did not want to be angry. Anger dulled her senses and disturbed her focus. But so, according to Madame Inci, did all the other emotions, and Karreya was not ready to give up on all of them.

Not now that she had discovered hope. Friendship. Family. Not once she had seen them in action and experienced the power they could wield. She'd always understood the ways that they could hurt, but it seemed such bonds were not entirely simple.

Much like her feelings about Prince Vaniell of Garimore.

"Sit," she told him icily, when his efforts to help proved rather more disruptive than otherwise. His teeth were still chattering, and he listed heavily to one side thanks to his collision with the side of the ferry.

“I swear I’m not broken,” he insisted, his familiar crooked grin looking a bit more pained than usual. “Just very, very”—he winced as he raised one arm to brush his sodden hair out of his face—“bruised. In several places.”

“Because you did not stop to plan before you leaped overboard,” she replied tartly.

“Be mad if you want to.” Niell did not seem to be taking her anger very seriously. “But at that moment, it seemed that planning was not what was called for. Other methods weren’t working. I had to *do* something. Though I should probably confess that I didn’t expect it to explode *quite* so spectacularly.”

Karreya regarded him askance. “How could you not know what to expect? It was your own enchantment, was it not?”

“Well...yes?” He shrugged as if in apology. “But isn’t as if I can go around testing things like that. I create enchantments with an idea of what I intend, but the more dangerous ones sometimes go a little sideways. There’s really no way to know exactly what they’re going to do until I actually use them, so I don’t even attempt it unless I’m forced to.”

He’d told her once before that he was not good in a fight unless he was in deadly earnest, and it seemed he’d spoken the truth. And once again, he’d proven that his audacity was perhaps his most effective weapon. Where others would stop to think, he simply trusted his instincts and jumped, and Karreya could not fault him for it. Not when she had literally just admonished him to know what he must do in the moment and then act.

So why was she so angry?

Kyrion’s rumbling voice intruded on her thoughts. “We should hasten. You’ll want to be on the road before the sun rises.”

On the road. By sunrise. The faint gray light of dawn already illuminated this grim, forested shore, which meant she would soon be riding for the city called Hanselm, with only Leisa and Senaya for company.

Ah. There was her anger. Her worry. And her fear.

They were all about to embark on the next leg of their journey, and there was no guarantee they would ever be together again. And once they pursued their individual paths, there would be no more denying how twisted their connections truly were.

Her people and Niell's had been enemies for centuries. Niell had once thought her father to be his own, and many of his subjects had suffered for years under the man's tyrannical thumb. And Karreya's grandmother, Empress of Zulle, would likely send an army to destroy these lands if she did not carry so many other burdens nearer to home.

Karreya knew this path was the right one—she had seldom felt more convinced of anything. It was her task to confront and distract her father while the others attempted to either outright prevent or win the war he had been planning for over a decade.

But what if her future never again converged with that of a certain gray-eyed prince? What if the warmth she'd sensed from him faded, leaving nothing but the starched formality of diplomatic acquaintances? Worse yet, what if she'd imagined everything, and he truly did not think of her as anything more than a temporarily fascinating acquaintance?

“Time for a review.” Leisa called their little group together, glancing around at each person with a tiny crease between her brows that suggested she was not as cheerful and unaffected as she seemed on the surface. “Kyrion, do you still intend to wait and depart tonight?”

“It will be safer to move under cover of darkness,” he returned grimly. “But our plans now depend on the Garimoran prince's fitness for travel.”

“Pfft, I'm quite all right.” Niell smiled encouragingly, and Karreya suspected she was the only one who could see how much pain he was actually in. “I will be ready whenever you are, Your Majesty.”

“Then I suppose it is time to wish one another a pleasant journey and...” Leisa stopped, lips pinched as she seemed to choke back some powerful emotion. “And to recall what we are all fighting for.”

Indeed, it was sobering to remember that these people—these *friends*, Karreya reminded herself—were not simply fighting for honor or family or personal survival. They could well be facing the end of their world should they fail. A victory for the King of Garimore would mean the fall of not only the Five Thrones, but of everything their ancestors had hoped for when they fled the Zulleri Empire for Abreia so long ago.

And Karreya... What exactly was she fighting for? It was no longer as simple as her father’s safe return to Zulle, where she’d once hoped he would take her place as her grandmother’s heir. Now she knew only that his present course was wrong, and that she felt herself to be responsible for stopping him.

She’d deliberately not thought too deeply about what would happen after he was stopped. At least, not in the sense of heirs or empires or diplomacy. It had been no part of her training to consider such consequences. And yet, she knew she would have to consider such things eventually. What would become of her father and herself if this mission were successful?

No. It was too soon to think of that. Now was for remembering her purpose—to build a world where mages like herself and Niell and Senaya could live without fear of enslavement, death, or control. A world where ordinary people could exist without fear of her grandmother’s cruelty or her father’s hypocrisy.

“Freedom from fear,” she said abruptly. “That is what we fight for. Not that we will never be afraid, but that we need not fear merely because of who we were born to be.”

“Well said.” Leisa nodded in agreement. “We all know the plan. The more swiftly we move, the less chance that the Empire will realize what has happened and send troops.” She

paused, her eyes dropping to the ground as her hands clenched into fists. “We will see one another again soon, so...”

Before she could finish the sentence, the night elf crossed the distance between them, curled a hand around the back of her neck, and pulled her in for a kiss that bled both fear and desperation.

Leisa’s fingers curled into his collar and clung there as she kissed him back, eyes closed, knuckles white, pressing into her husband as if trying to memorize the very shape of him.

It was shocking and fascinating and Karreya knew she ought to give them privacy for this painful moment of farewell, but she could not tear her eyes away.

She had seen kisses before. Not many, to be sure, and they were always small, private, stolen moments, hidden in the shadows, wary of watching eyes. She had always thought the participants to be foolish, taking pointless risks and bringing pain on themselves for very little gain.

But this time... This time the sight of such unwavering devotion—such intimate pain—woke a deep pang of longing.

No matter where these two traveled, no matter how far apart or how great the trials that faced them, they would know that somewhere was another soul who would move heaven and earth to find their way back together.

Despite the agony of parting, such love seemed like a priceless gift.

“Here.” Niell had somehow lurched to his feet and now stood beside her, holding out a small leather pouch—narrow and flat, with loops for a belt. “After the money changers tried to cheat you, I meant to change some of your imperial coin, but we never remembered to do it, so... Take this. You may need it on your journey.”

Karreya took the pouch, eyeing the creases of pain that marred Niell’s forehead and tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“I’ll be fine.” He managed a smile. “I will be with friends, more or less, so I will have time to recover. But you...”

He seemed uncharacteristically bereft of words.

“Be careful,” he said finally. “Once you reach Hanselm. I know that you lived with him longer than I did, but I feel like I should warn you anyway. Not to let your guard down. Not to trust him. I know he is your father, but still...”

“I do not lower my guard for anyone.” A statement that Karreya would once have been proud of, but now found frustrating. Limiting. It was true, and for the first time, Karreya wished she felt as if she had a choice.

“I know.” Niell’s lips curved slightly in defiance of his pain. “Except maybe a little for me, I hope.”

Not really. It was more that he’d found his way inside the walls around her heart, and she’d awakened one day to find him there in spite of her defenses.

“Do not die, Abreian.” Karreya glared at him fiercely. “And do not let anyone else stab you.”

“Don’t worry.” Niell grinned crookedly. “The only one who gets to stab me is you.”

Yes. She would make sure of it.

But before she could offer any answer, a high-pitched whistling sound cut through the pre-dawn quiet.

With a sharp *thunk*, an arrow embedded itself in a tree not more than an arm’s length from Leisa’s head.

Leisa dropped flat on the ground, searching the dimly lit forest around them for the source of the attack, while Senaya darted to secure the horses. Kyrion, too, crouched low, his eyes glowing with bright, silvery light as he scented the air.

“Go!” he growled. “Whoever it is, I will hunt them until there are none left to follow you.”

With an oath, Leisa leaped up, seized her pack, grasped her horse’s reins, and flung herself into the saddle. Senaya, too, made ready to leave in a swift, efficient fashion, and then it was only Karreya who remained standing there, staring at the self-named Wastrel Prince of Garimore.

Who was staring at her in turn, eyes wide and lips parted, but without any form of jest or words of farewell.

Was this goodbye? The last memory she would ever have of him?

But even as another arrow whistled overhead, Niell's lips turned upwards in a smile, and he nodded once.

“Don't even think about disappearing,” he said. “No matter what happens, I will find you.”

He would not be able to find her unless she wished it, but he would try, and the thought warmed even the deepest, frozen corners of her heart.

Even if she could win no other part of this war, even if nothing else she fought for was possible, she would do whatever was necessary to ensure that Niell would be safe. Even if she could not keep him for herself, he would be alive and someday he would be happy.

Karreya swore it to herself even as she leaped onto her horse's back, threw one last glance over her shoulder, and then urged her mount into a run. Leisa led the way down the faint forest track, followed by Senaya, as Karreya brought up the rear, racing away as swiftly as the dim light allowed.

Into an unknown future. Towards a shapeless, shadowed destiny.

She had confronted the unknown many times, but never before had she feared that neither her training nor her daggers would prove equal to the task ahead.

CHAPTER 3



*K*yrion glowered after the racing horses for a mere instant before turning to glare at Vaniell.

“Stay,” he growled.

Vaniell was only too happy to agree, but the night elf had already disappeared between the trees before he could murmur his assent.

He turned to assess his surroundings and decided that these woods were more than a little unsettling. There was nothing to see but gnarled trunks that dripped with moss, and the air was thick with the smells of damp, swampy earth. It was still quiet this early in the morning, but for the occasional call of some mysterious swamp creature and the meaty thud of a body hitting the ground. He heard a quick cry of pain, the thwack of an arrow against a tree, and then silence.

He probably should have moved somewhere else—dropped to the ground, hidden behind a tree, anything but stand in the middle of the clearing like a useless lump—but Kyrion *had* said to stay. And everything hurt.

Perhaps his pride in particular. Vaniell had considered the King of Garimore to be his own personal burden for so long, and yet, he’d just watched three other people ride off to confront the man. The plan made sense when they’d plotted and discussed it with the Irian Royal Council, and he’d even agreed with his own part in it. So why did it now feel as if he’d abdicated his responsibilities and sent others to clean up his mess?

As if he were so useless and untrustworthy that he'd been left under Kyrion's watchful, glowering eye.

It was not true... At least, not exactly. Vaniell would have his own part to play soon enough. He simply wasn't very useful when it came to protecting himself from an ambush in a strange forest right after expending most of his magic to kill a tentacled monster that had wanted very badly to eat him.

After a long, heartfelt sigh that was really more of a groan, Vaniell shuffled to the nearest tree, set his back to it, and slid to the ground, leaning his head against the rough bark before closing his eyes and wondering whether there was time for a nap. Kyrion had wanted to lie low until nightfall, lessening the chance that his wyvern form would be seen.

But that had been before the attack. Before...

Something sharp jabbed Vaniell in the stomach, jerking him out of his exhausted stupor and back to the reality of an unfamiliar forest that seemed to have vomited people.

More specifically, Garimoran soldiers.

The question was, which side of the border were they on? And why would they be lurking here on the shores of the gulf, miles from anywhere that should have required their presence?

"Good morning," Vaniell said, allowing a lazy smile to cross his lips as he peered up into the hard, narrowed eyes of the man currently holding a sword to his chest. "I don't suppose you have any tea? Cream and sugar? Bread with butter and preserves?"

"How did someone as stupid as you manage to get here without weapons or baggage?" the man demanded. "You must have friends. Where are they?"

The words stabbed a little. *He must have friends...* But that was one thing he'd never quite managed. The one thing he could not afford. Not until recently, and now that friend was gone. Perhaps she would even forget that she'd been foolish enough to consider him as such in the first place.

"They've left me." Vaniell offered the sword-wielder a bewildered look and a shrug. "Took all the food, too. Almost

as if they didn't like me. But I really am a likable sort of fellow, so long as you don't mind my bad habits."

"You mean like talking too much?" The words were accompanied by a sneer and an eye roll.

"Oh, and much worse," Vaniell assured him, wishing that Kyrion would hurry up and come back. He was capable of obfuscating at some length, but these gentlemen seemed rather short on patience and he did not want to actually have to *do* anything about it. For one thing, he had no idea whether he had enough magic left. For another, he really did not care for a repeat of what had happened on the ferry.

"I snore quite loudly, I tend to eat more than my share of sweets, I whine if I'm forced to walk very far, and my socks smell rather terrible by the end of the day."

One of the men laughed. "Don't everyone's?"

"Oh, not like this," Vaniell replied cheerfully, and reached for his bootlaces.

"Stop!"

The sword point jabbed him once again, and when Vaniell looked up innocently, the wielder's eyes widened.

"I know you," he blurted out.

"You do?" Vaniell silently cursed his luck. Most of the Garimoran army was unlikely to recognize him, as he had little to do with military matters. Where might he have encountered this man before?

"There's a reward for your capture!"

Oh, that.

Perhaps he'd best figure out whether he had enough magic left to weasel his way out of this.

Nonchalantly sliding a hand into the still damp pocket of his coat, Vaniell slumped back against the tree and tried to appear as relaxed as possible. He was reluctant to use another one of the steel marbles, but perhaps the chalk or the shell...

An ear-shattering roar sent the soldiers staggering backwards, just before the dark, angry form of Kyrion's wyvern exploded into the clearing.

"Dragon!" one of the men shrieked, turning and scampering into the trees without stopping to see whether his commander preferred to fight.

Thankfully for all concerned, the commander did not. But he did retreat with considerably more dignity than his men, sword held ready as he backed up, careful never to cross his feet and keeping his eyes on the creature that stalked him.

Kyrion's fangs were bared, and he snarled deep in his chest as he crept forward, wings tucked tightly against his body as he prepared to attack.

But the moment the Garimoran reached the edge of the clearing, he turned and ran for his life, not once looking back over his shoulder to check for pursuit.

Perhaps he was assuming the creature would satisfy its hunger by eating Vaniell.

"While I appreciate the artistry of your timing, I confess I was wondering there for a moment whether you intended to allow them to drag me off and thereby save yourself considerable aggravation."

The wyvern shot him a look that was somehow sarcastic, even on a large, toothy reptile. "And miss out on your whining and putrid socks? Perish the thought."

Vaniell very nearly grinned in response. "I swear those particular flaws were *mostly* fabricated." He pushed to his feet with a wince as his ribs informed him they were still rather annoyed with his carelessness. "Any idea why there are Garimoran soldiers lurking in these inhospitable parts?"

"I would ask you the same question." Kyrion's tone held less bite than it might have, but Vaniell still flinched.

"Guesses are all I can offer you." When Kyrion did not respond, Vaniell continued reluctantly. "But I suspect there is likely a company or two hovering near the border, awaiting a pigeon from Ambassador Grendish."

Fortunately, Irian First Councilor Faraden had ordered a halt to all aerial messages, so no hint of the Garimoran ambassador's current plight would be forthcoming. Even had the pompous wretch somehow been capable of sending any pigeons from the inside of an Irian dungeon. If these soldiers *were* awaiting word from Grendish... they would wait a very long time.

“Had the ambassador succeeded in gaining a foothold with the Irian council and delaying Torevan's coronation, these troops would likely have arrived in Viali shortly thereafter to offer their ‘support.’ As it is, the ambassador is unlikely to be released anytime soon, so these lads should be tripping over their own feet for some time to come.”

The wyvern's teeth snapped together loudly, a sound of annoyance if Vaniell was any judge.

“Then we must depart immediately,” Kyrion said, in a resolute tone that brooked no opposition. “I require rest, but I do not wish to risk them returning in greater numbers. We will fly north and break our journey somewhere in the forests of Eddris.”

Vaniell managed not to grimace outwardly, or show any other signs of his deep discomfort with their mode of travel. He was grateful, of course, that Kyrion had agreed to fly him the not-inconsiderable distance to their destination. But he reserved the right to be deeply apprehensive about it nonetheless.

Perhaps Kyrion had truly come to terms with their past association, but Vaniell could not help feeling nervous about putting himself so completely in the night elf's power. Not that Kyrion couldn't simply eat him any time he chose. But it was considerably more discomfiting to imagine flying far above the hard ground, only a single slip away from plummeting to his death. At the thought, Vaniell's chest tightened painfully, and his fingers curled into his palms as if protesting what he was about to do...

“How does it feel?” Kyrion asked softly. “Knowing that your future is in the hands of one who has no reason to wish

you well? As if your soul is being buried alive, your breath cut off, and the light extinguished from the world?”

There was only one possible answer. “Yes.” But it was hardly Vaniell’s first experience with that feeling. Every moment of every day he’d spent in the Garimoran court, he’d lived and breathed with the knowledge that the lives of those he loved were in the hands of a cruel stranger. That his own behavior might dictate whether they lived or died.

He’d been slowly suffocating, when, to the eyes of the world, he’d appeared carefree, rebellious, and extravagant.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. But he would never whine of injustice to one who had suffered far more than he, and at the same hand.

“My sense of smell is acute,” Kyrion said suddenly. “In either form. And fear has a stench unlike anything else. I know that you are afraid—of me, of flying, and of what I will do when we are high above the ground and you are at my mercy.”

Vaniell’s lips twisted wryly. So much for his pride in his ability to control his face. “It is not that I feel I am unable to take you at your word,” he admitted. “I know you said my debt to you is resolved, and I do not doubt your honor, however...” How could he make the other man understand his apprehension without somehow giving offense?

But it was the wyvern who spoke first. “I take no offense at your fear, Princeling. Perhaps there is no affection lost between us, but I can assure you that I do not despise you for the scars you bear.”

Vaniell raised his eyes to meet the bright silver gaze of the wyvern. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, once more seemingly robbed of the ability to speak.

“We are both shaped by our wounds, in unexpected ways,” Kyrion continued. “Though our prisons did not appear the same, the same man held our chains, and you were but a child when it began.”

Vaniell tried to choke back the emotions that rose at those words, but could not. Not entirely. “He was cruel and

vindictive,” he muttered, feeling a sickening swell of shame as he recalled those years. “I hated and feared him, but a part of me still wanted his approval because I thought maybe that would fix it. Maybe I could win. But he manipulated even that part of me, and I cannot bear to think of putting myself in another’s power again.”

Except Karreya’s. She had held his hand and led him through the darkness, and he had not been afraid.

“Your reluctance means only that he did not destroy you fully, not that you are a coward. In your case, you were controlled not by fear alone, but by love, and that leaves scars that even time struggles to remove.”

Vaniell swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. “Thank you,” he said hoarsely. It was the kind of acceptance he had never bothered to hope for, and from the last person he might have anticipated. The exchange left him both relieved and with an uncomfortable sensation of further debt. “But I will still apologize in advance for the stench. Even when I understand my reasons, I don’t know that I can manage to be completely unafraid of flying.”

The wyvern’s teeth were suddenly bared in a reptilian grin. “You will be very much afraid, Princeling. I will make sure of it.”

So swiftly that Vaniell never really saw him coming, Kyrion snatched him up by the back of his coat and flung him over his shoulder. “I won’t tell you not to fall,” he growled, “but do try to hold still.”

His wings beat once, twice as Vaniell scrambled for a grip. When the wyvern was a few feet off the ground, he grasped their packs in his claws and then rose slowly above the level of the trees.

A mist hung over the forest, and as they ascended through it, Vaniell’s stomach likewise ascended right into his throat. He was suspended in mid-air, far above the ground, where humans were never meant to go.

But then they burst through the fog into a clear sky, where the sun was beginning to peer over the edge of the world, illuminating everything in hues of orange and gold.

“Flying clearly has its upside,” Vaniell murmured, gazing out across the mist-shrouded forest. Perhaps this journey would not be as bad as he anticipated.

“Don’t get comfortable,” Kyrion threw back over his shoulder. “This is only the beginning.” Then he hurtled them up, into the deep blue of the morning sky, with powerful wing beats that left Vaniell clinging to his perch with desperate strength, praying with every breath that he would somehow survive until they touched down once again on solid ground.



It was perhaps midmorning when Kyrion finally banked, dove, hovered, and then landed on the bank of a narrow creek that rippled and bubbled on its way through the dense woodlands.

Vaniell, his hands and legs frozen from the effort of not falling off in midair, finally did exactly that, landing in a heap on the mossy ground with his eyes closed and his stomach lurching uncomfortably.

“I must rest,” the wyvern said, but by the time Vaniell looked up, the winged reptile was gone, and the gray-skinned night elf had taken his place, looking decidedly haggard with weariness.

“Seems fair,” Vaniell managed to say, keeping his groans firmly locked behind his lips. “I should be able to move in a moment, and then I will keep watch while you sleep.”

“I am not yet prepared to sleep comfortably in your presence, Princeling.” Kyrion sounded neither angry nor apologetic. “I will not be terribly far away, but I suggest you look well to your own protection and do not concern yourself with mine.”

A sobering reminder of where they stood. “As you wish.” Vaniell somehow lurched to his feet and picked up his pack

from where the wyvern had dropped it. He was not particularly fond of the woods, let alone sleeping in them, but his fugitive lifestyle had demanded that he learn at least the rudiments of woodcraft.

Which was to say, he could magic a fire, toast bread, and not panic every time he heard rustling in the dark.

Though that last part could be hit or miss.

“We will set off again at nightfall?” He was most definitely not asking because he did not want to be alone in the woods at night. It was more that he was in a hurry to reach their destination. Yes, definitely that.

But before the question had even left his lips, the surrounding woods were empty, without a single sound to mark the night elf’s departure.

Just as well he hadn’t hung around to chat, Vaniell reminded himself. The sooner they relayed their news to the Queen of Eddris—or whomever might be acting in that capacity at the moment—the sooner they could be on their way to Arandar.

Though now that he thought of it, Vaniell wasn’t sure exactly what sort of welcome he would find there, either. He had not seen his brother—now King Danric of Farhall—since the two of them had been enemies in more ways than not.

There had been some degree of contention between them for almost as long as he could remember. Danric had believed in their father to the point of obsession, and worshiped at the altar of duty and responsibility. He’d wanted nothing more than to be like Melger in every way—to make him proud by someday following in his footsteps. So, as Vaniell had recognized the man’s twisted ambitions and begun to distance himself through mockery and rebellion, his relationship with his brother had suffered as well. Danric had always been particularly irked when Vaniell made a point of shirking both duty and responsibility as a part of his dissolute facade.

And as if that were not enough, it had also been Vaniell who set in motion the events leading to Danric’s

disinheritance. Given the whole of their history, it was entirely possible his brother would not be able to forgive him. For the secrets, for the lies, for the years of believing them to be enemies... Even if Danric had finally discovered the truth of Vaniell's activities over the past few years, there would be no knowing how he would respond until they were face to face once more.

Striding back and forth along the bank of the stream, Vaniell swung his arms, rotated his neck, and tried to loosen the various knots that had taken up residence in his muscles during that harrowing flight. Kyrion might need him too much to drop him, but he had seemed to take great pleasure in flying erratically, dodging around treetops at the last moment, diving through low-hanging clouds, and generally finding as many reasons as possible not to travel in a straight line.

Once his muscles were warm and somewhat functional, Vaniell eyed his pack, but decided against eating. His stomach wasn't entirely settled yet, and the last thing he needed was to lose his lunch somewhere in the air over Eddris.

So instead, he reached into his pockets and set about renewing several of his more useful enchantments.

Enchanting, he'd discovered early on, was a nearly perfect blend of art and science. He had to understand what he wanted a spell to do, envision how it might be done, and then focus his magic with pure intention. Any visible etchings were a product of the magic itself, inscribing his will and creating pathways for activation.

But should he waver on even a single step or allow himself to be distracted at a crucial moment, the entire process was likely to go wrong.

Fortunately, the weather was calm, and the woods seemed quiet. The sound of the stream covered the usual creaking and rustling sounds of a forest, and created a—probably false—sense of security and peace that enabled Vaniell to slip into a state of deep focus.

The string was one of his trickier enchantments, as it carried multiple intentions—target, tangle, bind, in that order.

The soft fibers of the string could not hold etchings, so there was a filament of pure magic that wound along its length. Over time, that filament was prone to fray, creating unpredictable results if he did not repair and renew it regularly.

Once the string was finished, he turned his attention to his collection of marbles, perhaps his favorite discovery of his entire magical career.

The tiny orbs had such endless possibilities. They held etchings well, much like spell gems, but they were cheaper, and the etchings neither smudged nor frayed. On this occasion, he'd had an idea for a new enchantment that might prove useful when he was left to his own devices in the woods...

As was usual when he was enchanting, his eyes closed and his conscious mind slipped away to a place where there was only focus. Only the vision of what his magic would bring into being. Only pure intention and strength of will. The steel marble warmed between his hands, glowing brightly as the enchantment took shape on its surface in curls and whorls of power.

Vaniell was so intent that he barely noticed the first time something nudged his foot. Then something poked at his chest and jolted him back to the moment.

He returned to awareness under the dappled shadows of evening.

And under the scrutiny of round, startled brown eyes that stared intently into his from only a few inches away.

Vaniell yelped. Flaied. Tried to scramble away.

With a hiss, the creature on his chest leaped off and scurried back towards the water, giving sharp little barks of annoyance and alarm.

It vanished with a quiet splash, and Vaniell ran his hands through his hair with relief as he recognized his assailant.

An otter. He'd been terrified by an otter.

There was really nothing left to do but be thankful there had been no one else present to witness his embarrassment.

“Terrorizing small furry creatures now?”

The tall, broad-shouldered form of Kyrion strode out of the trees to look down on Vaniell with unmistakable amusement. “It seems I dare not leave you alone, even in the middle of the forest. You might well leave a trail of enemies from here to the frozen north.”

Of course, this would be the moment the night elf decided to wake from his nap.

“If you wanted me to be charming to the locals, you should have said so,” Vaniell returned, hoping his discomfiture remained well-hidden. “It isn’t my fault he was rude enough to interrupt my beauty sleep.”

“Your sleep?” Kyrion’s brow quirked. “Or your enchanting? If you choose to lie about your doings, it will not make me more inclined to trust you.”

“Whether I deserve your trust or not,” Vaniell replied coolly, “I cannot force you to grant it, no matter what I do. And I require solitude in order to focus. If you choose to question my every action and motive, I wonder that you are willing to let me out of your sight.”

“So do I, Princeling,” Kyrion responded dryly. “And yet here we are. Are you still prepared to depart at nightfall, or do you require further *solitude* for your work?”

“By all means.” Vaniell inclined his head politely. “I have no wish to delay. The sooner we can reach Arandar, the better, so let us continue on to Oakhaven with all possible speed.”

The two of them shared a swift and silent dinner, after which the night elf checked the bindings on his pack and shifted once more into his wyvern form. He did not speak, but ruffled his wings in a clear sign of reptilian annoyance, while snapping his teeth as if to say, “Hurry up!”

Vaniell suppressed a sigh as he pushed to his feet, reminding himself sternly that this was for Garimore. For all of Abreia. He could think of no other possible reason for spending the next few days facing up to this much unspeakable awkwardness.

CHAPTER 4



It had been some time since Karreya had last ridden a horse, so the first few minutes of their journey were occupied with recalling the posture least likely to end in pain or disaster. The saddle was bulkier than she was accustomed to, and did not allow her to feel the motion of the horse beneath her as much as she would have liked. But at least it required less work to remain seated—an adaptation that was no doubt useful for mounted warfare.

“Far enough,” Leisa called from ahead, pulling her mount to a trot, then to a walk. “We should be clear of the ambush. If we do not exercise caution, we’ll only wear out the horses, and we have a long road to travel.”

Though they did need to proceed as swiftly as possible. While it was imperative that Kyrion and Niell arrive in Arandar before their own arrival in Hanselm, this route would be far slower if they did not make haste.

“This is a mistake,” Senaya muttered in a low voice, but not so low that her companions could fail to hear her. “You cannot save anyone by placing your head in the viper’s mouth.”

An apt metaphor, given that the three of them were intended as bait.

But baiting was not always a poor strategy, any more than it was a certain victory. Wars had been both won and lost by confronting the enemy swiftly and hoping that he would strike before he was ready.

In this case, their enemy was Melger, King of Garimore. Or so he wished everyone to believe. But a very small group of people now knew that the present king was not actually Melger—he was not even Abreian. Rather, he was a Zulleri mirror mage wearing the face of a man he had very likely murdered.

“We cannot continue to run from this fight.” Leisa spoke through gritted teeth. Her eyes remained on the path ahead, but she gripped her reins in white-knuckled fingers, evidence of the unspoken tension between herself and Senaya—the mother she had not seen since she was five years old.

Their reunion had not been precisely amicable.

“As we explained, we will never be strong enough to confront him directly. He’s had too much time to prepare. The only hope we have is surprise and misdirection.”

And what a surprise it would be.

Karreya had not seen her father in eleven years. She had left behind her life as an imperial assassin and crossed the sea in search of him, not knowing what his fate had been, but hoping to find him and bring him home. She had certainly not expected to discover that he’d been wearing another man’s face, living another man’s life, planning to conquer all of Abreia through either trickery or force.

Perhaps at some point in the past, she would have been proud of his efforts. Applauded him for returning these lands to imperial rule, and for ruthlessly suppressing the traitors who had fled the absolute will of the Empress all those years ago.

But not now. She’d spent too much time among the people of this land. Learned to care for their well-being. Even learned to dream of a different future than she had always believed would be hers.

And yet, to achieve that future—both for herself and the Abreians she had come to care about—she and her companions must find some way to stop her father from pursuing his ruinous course. And their only hope of accomplishing that goal carried a great deal of risk.

The King of Garimore had spent years preparing for the moment when all was in readiness. When the other thrones were weak and vulnerable, ready to be conquered either by force or diplomacy. He had been building his armies and sowing the seeds of dissension from one end of Abreia to the other.

But not all of his plans had come to fruition. His plan to take Iria through diplomatic means was in shambles. The Irian Royal Council had ordered a halt to all pigeon messages, and the Garimoran envoy was fuming somewhere in an Irian prison, unable to carry any news of his utter failure. Queen Evaraine of Farhall and Queen Allera of Eddris had both survived assassination attempts, and were currently in hiding, gathering their forces and planning to protect their thrones.

But the King of Garimore knew none of these things—yet. In theory, he would be safe behind his walls, rejoicing in his successes. Salivating at the imminent taste of victory.

And so, Karreya must reach him before he discovered his error. She would tell him who she was and why she was here, and hope that the fear of being exposed as a liar and a fraud would provoke him to act too swiftly—to attack, secure in his belief that the other thrones were unstable and unprepared.

But he would be wrong. Kyrion and Niell were even now on their way to warn the other Thrones of what was coming. Her father would plunge the Five Thrones into war before he was ready, and be caught in a trap of his own making.

At least, that was their hope.

“It will not be enough to provoke him with misdirection,” Senaya was arguing. “Even if his plan is not yet fully prepared, if he has learned to harness the full power of his mirror magic, there will be little that can stop him outside of...”

She did not say “death,” but they all heard it, and Karreya responded swiftly to the unspoken threat.

“No. You must not kill him.” She doubted they would understand, let alone agree with her reasoning. The situation

was complex and filled with pitfalls, but she knew only that she would not allow him to be killed. Not until she had deciphered what his choices meant for the course of her own future. “I require him alive. He must be returned to the Empire if we are to prevent Her Eminence the Empress from taking revenge on Abreia in her wrath.”

That might not be her most important reason, but it was certainly true. Karreya’s grandmother, the Empress of Zulle, had lost three heirs to Abreia over the years. Should one of them die on Abreian shores, her rage would be sudden and it would be absolute. Even with the united strength of all Five Thrones, there would be no saving Abreia from the flames of imperial vengeance.

“Your brother may have grown more powerful than you remember,” Leisa burst out, “but he is not the only mirror mage in all of Abreia. Perhaps you have forgotten, but there are two more of us here. I am untrained, yes, but with our combined efforts, can we not hope to contain him?”

“Maybe if you had accepted my offer the first time.” Senaya’s tone was level, but Karreya heard the notes of an old pain. “I could have trained you. Taught you how to use this power. As it is, we have no time. Do you think mirror magic is like washing dishes or chopping wood? It is complex. Filled with dangers. I cannot possibly teach you everything you need to know before you will be forced to confront him.”

“And yet you gifted me a mirror in hopes that I would find my own way,” Leisa retorted incredulously. “You claim everything you have done was to protect me, but now you say that learning to use my magic is too dangerous?”

“I cannot force you to believe me,” Senaya said stiffly. “But I have truly wished nothing more than for you to live in peace. This path you are on... It might lead to many places, but none of them are peaceful.”

“You speak so much of peace,” Leisa shot back. “And I will not deny that I long for it. But how are we to find it if those around us wish only to steal, kill, and destroy? Someone must fight to achieve it. Someone must choose to sacrifice

their own peace in order to protect that peace for others, and if not me, then who?"

Were all families this complicated, Karreya wondered? Or only those born to power? Did all families argue, or only those who had been separated by time, distance, and regret?

Senaya was silent for a few moments, as if gathering her thoughts. The only sounds were the horses' hooves on the hard packed dirt of the road and a handful of forest birds, greeting the morning with bright, cheerful calls.

A strange counterpoint to these words of war.

"Your father would have said to allow the violent to fight among themselves." Senaya's voice was soft and regretful, echoing with painful memories. "That we are always free to choose peace. After the life I lived up until I met him, it seemed like a beautiful dream. The fae choose peace out of necessity, but what if I could choose it for its own sake?"

"But the violence came for you anyway." That was Leisa. Relentless. Implacable. Determined. But more than anything else, disappointed. Like Karreya, she had spent years searching for her parent, but the person she found was not what she expected.

"It did," Senaya agreed. "Always. It took my closest friend, my children, and my husband. It is why I chose to lay aside my power. Why I sought out a life of such simplicity that no one would expect to find me there. And it is why I question this path we are on. I fear that now I have found you, now that I have taken up my power and chosen to protect you, I will only lose you again."

"I did not ask for your protection," Leisa reminded her. "I asked for your help. And if you fear losing me, how is it better to stand back and watch it happen than to fight against it with every breath in your body?"

Because to fight was to hope, and hope could be a difficult burden to carry. Karreya had seen the collared mages in her father's house, had known when their hope was finally

extinguished, because they ceased to fight. The light went out of their eyes, and they simply existed.

If you had no hope, then your hope could not be crushed again and again and again, and Senaya seemed dangerously close to making this choice.

“You think we did not fight? That we simply stood back and watched all this happen?” Senaya’s voice had gone raw with pain. “We made none of our choices lightly. Especially not the choice to give you a life we could not be a part of! Do you think that decision did not tear my heart from my chest and leave me sobbing on the floor every night for months upon months? Do you think I did not question my choice to surrender you with every waking moment?”

Leisa was silent. And when she finally spoke, her voice was quiet. Thoughtful.

“I don’t know.” Her answer seemed to echo through the surrounding forest before she continued. “But I do know the questions I have spent my whole life asking. I know the answers I have spent my whole life believing—answers about why you must have done what you did. They are part of what has made me who I am, and they cannot be changed in a day simply because you say they are wrong.”

Karreja had not often experienced the sensation of awkwardness, but she felt it now, and she did not like it. A forest road seemed an odd setting for such a raw and painful conversation between mother and daughter, and an assassin for an audience did not make it in any way less odd.

“If you would wish to keep these words private,” she said, “you need only inform me and I will ride apart. Ahead or behind, it matters not.”

“We stay together,” Leisa replied flatly. “I see no reason to hide any of this from you. Not if we...”

She broke off, pulling her horse to a halt and holding up a hand for silence.

“A wagon is coming,” she said at length. “Horses. But I do not think they are soldiers.”

Startled, Karreya listened to the soft sounds of the forest, straining to hear hoofbeats or wheels among them. But there was nothing, and her hearing had always been quite acute.

“Are you certain?”

Leisa nodded. “I have... very good hearing,” she said, after a short pause.

“It is magic?” The thought did not dismay Karreya, but she was curious about the magic of others. In Zulle, no one discussed such things—at least not openly—and there was much she desired to know.

“Not exactly.” Leisa urged her horse into a walk again, her eyes scanning the road ahead. “My father was fae.” Her glance shot to Senaya, who fell in behind them as they continued down the path. “I was told I have likely inherited certain gifts from him.”

“What sort of gifts?”

Leisa’s lips twitched. “Not shy about personal questions, are you?” She sounded more amused than angry.

“Is it meant to be a secret?” Karreya inquired. “I intended no trespass. Was this not what you meant when you said there was no reason to hide your past?”

A reluctant smile pulled at the corner of her cousin’s lips. “Do you know how terrifying it is that you and Vaniell are friends? You both have a way of finding holes in a conversation and poking at them. None of us will have any secrets left by the time this is over.”

Was that a bad thing? Karreya had no idea.

“But no, it’s not really a secret. Or rather, given that we are allies, I see no reason not to tell you.” Her head turned, and her gaze seemed far away even as she nudged her horse towards the side of the road. “I have good hearing. Sharp eyesight. My hands are quicker than normal. And I suspect there are other things I simply have yet to discover. At least, so my father’s brother implied when I met him.”

She had met a fae. Karreya had heard of them, but only as legends. There were no fae in Zulle that anyone knew of.

“I thought,” Leisa went on, “that I would find him at the end of this road. That the dagger I sought was his, but it seems I was wrong. I suppose if I want to know the true nature of my fae magic, I must strive all the more fiercely for peace. Perhaps if we put an end to this war, he will decide to visit me again one day.”

“He will not.” Senaya sounded both weary and certain. “It was only under great duress that he agreed to search for you the first time. The human world has already scarred him, and now that he has seen you—now that he has done his duty by his brother’s kin—he is unlikely ever to return. It is why he gave the dagger to me for safekeeping.”

“Then perhaps,” Leisa said, “I will visit *him*.”

“They do not permit humans,” Senaya warned her. “Nor is it likely to be possible for you to cross the boundaries into their lands. Whatever magic guards them, it is only the fae who know of it.”

“And yet,” Leisa murmured softly, “he told me that he saw much of my father in me. That I am as much fae as I am human. It may not be likely, but...”

Around a bend in the road ahead, a wagon finally came into view. It was tall and brightly painted, drawn by a pair of plodding horses with large, heavy hooves.

“A merchant,” Senaya muttered. “Unlikely to be a threat.”

But Karreya still drew a dagger in her right hand, holding it out of sight along her thigh as they rode forward. The wagon was large enough to hold at least a dozen armed men, and the wagon’s cover could hide arrow slits from which crossbows might be fired. The driver could be a mage that hurled lightning, and even the horses...

No, likely not the horses. Here in Abreia, it seemed that horses were rarely trained for battle.

“Hallo there!” the man driving the wagon called out, smiling and waving as if hoping very much to die. Did he not

know how dangerous it could be to draw attention from unknown strangers? Or did he underestimate them because they were women? Some men did, even in the Enclave. At least until Madame Inci demonstrated why the Empress trusted her so implicitly.

“Good day, and a fair wind to you and yours,” Senaya said calmly.

“From Iria then, are you?” The merchant pulled his horses to a stop, eyes bright with interest. “Any news from Viali? I’m bound there with a wagonload of crafted goods, hoping for a fair profit.”

True, as far as it went.

Senaya bent her head. “I regret there is little of good I can share with you. If you have not yet heard, Their Majesties, King Trevelian and Queen Atalia, have been murdered, and His Highness Prince Torevan is soon to take the throne. A bad business, I fear, particularly for trade.”

The merchant’s face fell. “Murdered.” He shook his head and ran a shaking hand through his thick, brown beard. “’Tis an ugly word, that. I suppose they think ’twas a foreigner? Just as with Her Majesty of Garimore? I hope they won’t turn me away for aught that was none of my doing.”

“They seem to have few clues,” Senaya said carefully. “But I believe you will do well enough if you tread cautiously and have nothing to hide.” Her eyes darted to Karreya.

“Nothing to hide but my secret recipe for fish stew,” the man returned with a wink. “I suppose if there’s no market for pots and pans, there’s always someone who needs a hot, comforting meal. Especially in times such as these.”

There was no lie in his words, and Karreya allowed her shoulders to relax. This man was exactly as he seemed—a simple merchant out to make a living—so she gave Senaya a nod.

“True enough.” Karreya’s aunt turned her gaze back on the merchant and smiled with a rare warmth. “And where is it you hail from?”

“Oh, here and there.” The man waved a hand dismissively. “Was born in Garimore, but took to the road young and been traveling ever since.”

“Any news from the road behind you?” Senaya asked casually. “We are making our way to Hanselm to visit family, and would welcome any warnings of bandits or bad roads to avoid.”

The merchant winced visibly and scratched his chin. “Well now, these are odd times. The roads are safe enough, but... Seems they are busier than usual these days. Troops moving from place to place. Camped in the strangest places. Fields of corn turned to fields of tents. The city gates are closed where once they stood open, and the taverns are empty. Too many taken to swell the army’s ranks.”

“Conscriptions?” Leisa sounded almost shocked, and it was only the slight edge of untruth that told Karreya she was acting for the merchant’s benefit. “Has it come to that, then? The rumors of war must be true. But who does Garimore intend to fight? That business with Farhall seemed resolved and Garimore has always been on good terms with her neighbors.”

The man shrugged. “I’ve not heard anything official, but rumors say ’twas the Empire behind Her Majesty’s death. Perhaps ’tis an effort to prepare should those rumors turn out to be true.”

“Well, we thank you for the warning.” Senaya offered the man a friendly nod. “We should be on our way, but we wish you well, and perhaps one day, when we return, we will yet taste that fish stew of yours for ourselves.”

“Many thanks for the news, and may your skies be clear and your sails full,” the merchant returned, shifting his reins and clucking to his horses as he continued on down the road.

“If the gates are already closed, we may be too late,” Senaya said softly as the brightly painted wagon disappeared around the next bend.

“You will not dissuade me,” Leisa said fiercely. “War has not yet begun, therefore we still have a chance—a chance to buy time for Farhall, for Eddris, and for Iria. A chance to spare Katal entirely. Gates or no gates, I am seeing this through.”

“And if he is already prepared to strike? Hastening his move will only ensure the end of your friends’ hopes!”

“Then we will make a new plan,” Karreya interjected flatly, feeling rather perplexed by her aunt’s faintness of heart. “You are fond of reminding me of the Enclave’s teachings, and they certainly do not teach us to give up simply because a mission’s parameters have changed. We adapt.”

“And if you adapt your way right into a trap?” Senaya insisted. “I accompanied you here because I hoped to protect you, but I will not watch someone I love march tamely to their death. Not again!”

Leisa’s face went white as she turned her horse towards her mother, blue eyes meeting golden brown while an angry current sparked between them. Her mount blew anxiously through its nose and tossed its head, as if sensing the tension in the air.

“Again?” she asked in a dangerously quiet tone.

Senaya went stubbornly silent.

“Tell me,” Leisa demanded.

Senaya’s face turned to granite.

“*Tell me!*” Leisa shouted. “Tell me something that will help me make sense of this! Tell me why you left me with Soren. Tell me why you sent my uncle instead of coming yourself and...” Her teeth clenched for a moment before she forced the next words from her lips. “Tell me how my father died.”

CHAPTER 5



Oakhaven—the Eddrisian capital—was far closer by wyvern than by horse, but still farther than Vaniell would have preferred under the circumstances.

After flying through the night fighting a steady headwind, Kyrion did not pause outside the city as Vaniell had anticipated. Instead, he landed only a few paces from the front door of the royal palace and changed forms in the space of a breath. He was clearly weary from the journey, but his cold gray eyes still assessed their surroundings with an alertness that promised death to any who threatened them.

And Vaniell—who had done nothing but sit on the wyvern’s back over those many long miles—felt as if his knees might give out beneath him at any moment. His weakness was almost as embarrassing as his torn and rumped clothing, the scruff on his chin, and the filthy tangles of his hair. Indeed, it would be a miracle if anyone at the Eddrisian court recognized him.

Then again, perhaps anonymity was for the best. After all, he really had no idea how Allera would be feeling towards him in the wake of a Garimoran assassin making a nearly successful attempt on her life.

“Good day.” Vaniell glanced up at the half dozen guards who strode forward to greet them. Each wore a black sash over his or her green uniform and carried both sword and bow as they stood sentry on what Vaniell could only call a veranda.

That might sound odd when applied to a palace, but the residence of the Eddrisian royal family was not at all what anyone raised in a more formal Throne might have been led to expect.

It was a graceful structure of only two levels, constructed of wood and rough stone, without a single wall or tower or battlement to be seen. More like a large, rambling country home than a royal residence, it seemed built for comfort rather than intimidation, and its front doors opened onto one of the main streets of Oakhaven.

“What brings you here, Lord Kyrion?” Interestingly enough, none of the guards had drawn their weapons. Even their wolf companions seemed content to sit on their haunches and regard the newcomers with complacency, which suggested they were not at all perturbed by the sight of a night elf—or at least this particular night elf—on their front stoop.

“News that dare not be delayed,” Kyrion returned briefly. “I would ask to be granted an immediate audience, so that we might be on our way as quickly as possible.”

“We?” Most of the guards immediately glanced at Vaniell, though none of their eyes lit with recognition.

The question was, how much would Kyrion choose to reveal?

Only a very few people were aware of Vaniell’s part in the rebellion against Melger’s rule, and he had no way of knowing whether Allera was among them. Most still believed him a careless hedonist, with no thought in his head but for women, fashion, and parties. If Allera was yet one of their number, she might lock him up first and ask questions later, and Vaniell wasn’t certain Kyrion would be quick to speak up on his behalf. The night elf might be amused enough by the idea of the wastrel prince in a cell to simply leave him there until their errand was concluded.

Kyrion turned to Vaniell, one eyebrow arched, and gave him a long look from head to toe. “This one is something of a nuisance, but he is no threat to you. And for the moment, my business requires his presence.”

Vaniell's lips twitched. Absolute truth mixed with insult. He rather wanted to applaud, but given that Kyrion seemed to think anonymity was the safest course, he would likely do well to remain silent and unremarkable for as long as possible.

Not one of his best talents, but he could manage in a pinch.

One of the guards opened the wide front doors, and they were met by a servant in a neat gray tunic. The woman offered them a grim nod before beckoning them to follow her down a spacious hall with a polished wooden parquet floor and numerous skylights above.

“Her Highness has been anxious for news, so I’ve no doubt she’ll be pleased to see you, Lord Kyrion.”

“I regret that my information is unlikely to bring much pleasure, but I must relay it nonetheless.” Kyrion’s voice remained deep and quiet, but it held no threat, and Vaniell wondered whether that meant he felt safe in this place.

Their path led not to an audience hall or throne room, but to a comfortable sitting room in the family wing of the palace, on the second floor. Tall windows admitted the morning light, while a plethora of lamps brightened the corners and a warm fire crackled on the hearth. The cushions and couches and curtains were all in shades of gray, green and brown, the colors of the forest that made up nearly all Eddrisian lands.

A tall woman in her mid-twenties with long blonde hair and brown eyes stood before the fire, frowning into the flames. She was dressed in hunter’s leathers over a divided green skirt, and as she turned to face them, the frown smoothed out into a smile of welcome.

“Lord Kyrion. I’d say it’s a pleasure to see you, but truly, it’s a pleasure to see anyone who does not force me to pretend.”

“And how do your parents fare?”

“Well enough.” Princess Caro of Eddris shrugged a little as her lips drew downward into a scowl of worry. “Father’s recovery will be longer, of course, but he is awake enough to be cranky that he cannot be up and about. Mother, well...”

She glanced over her shoulder before continuing. “She grows stronger every day. It’ll soon be more than my life is worth to keep her out of action.”

The night elf actually smiled. “I well understand the difficulties your situation presents. My mother is yet a force to be reckoned with, and I would not care to be the one to tell her she must rest—for any reason.”

A door on the far side of the room flew open and bounced off the wall with a bang, revealing a small, dainty woman in a green dressing gown. She held her head high but leaned heavily on a cane as she entered the sitting room at a slow but steady pace.

Her graying hair needed no crown for Vaniell to know whom he faced—the sharp snap of her dark eyes as they locked on his was proof enough of her identity.

“Kyrion ven Athanel, who the devil have you brought into my sitting room?”

“Not quite the devil,” Vaniell murmured wryly. “Though rumor has it we are at least distant cousins.”

Allera raised an eyebrow, but Kyrion merely offered her a nod of greeting.

“I am pleased to see you looking so much improved, Allera.”

So these two were on a first name basis? Vaniell filed that information away for consideration.

“Why are you here?” Allera demanded abruptly. “It will be difficult to maintain the fiction that I am dead if visitors continue to waltz in at all hours of the day.”

“We are only here to consult with Princess Caro on a matter of security,” Kyrion assured her. “But I will take this opportunity to ask—when do you intend to make your survival more broadly known? Your guards wear black, and I know that your people mourn you with great sincerity. The longer this continues, the more of their trust you risk losing.”

“It is only because of their trust that I risk this at all,” Allera responded briskly, making her way towards a worn armchair in front of the fire. Vaniell would have expected her daughter to rush to her aid, but it was clear that Princess Caro knew better than to try. She even gave a little shrug as if to say, “What can I do?”

“Once my reasons are known,” Allera continued, “the people will accept it as an unfortunate necessity. But if it comforts you, know that in Eddris, neither man nor woman will ever be asked to go to war over a lie about my death.”

And with that, her gaze turned to land on Vaniell. “Unlike in some other places I might name.”

And just that quickly, the twin daggers of grief and regret found their way between his ribs to stab him in the heart once again.

Most of the time, Vaniell could pretend that he did not feel the ache of loss, or the sick emptiness of guilt over his mother’s death. He’d learned early to box his emotions and hide them away until it was safe, but then... It had never been safe. Feelings were far too dangerous to reveal in front of those who would use them to hurt and manipulate and control, and so he never allowed anyone to see them.

Which was how he knew that his agony remained invisible as he faced Queen Allera and bowed—slightly, politely, and without his customary smirk.

“Not quite the devil,” Allera echoed, “and yet alarmingly close if all that I hear is true. You’ve evaded searches by three kingdoms while traipsing merrily across the Five Thrones, doing who knows what for months on end. So why have you appeared now, and what does Eddris have to do with your schemes? Give me some reason not to lock you up and hand you over to whichever of your enemies will pay me the most.”

Vaniell did not flinch. He had embarked on this road knowing that the charming wastrel he had always affected was a thing of the past. If he meant to become the king Garimore needed, he would have to show himself capable of more than flirting and high fashion.

So he stood before Allera with his chin tilted and his gaze direct, hands in his pockets as a small smile tugged at his lips. “You are welcome to make the attempt, Your Majesty. But consider what you have been forced to do for the sake of your kingdom’s survival, and then ask yourself—what sort of person might a bastard second son mage prince have to become in order to survive the Garimoran court?”

Caro’s eyes widened at his bluntness, and even Allera seemed taken aback for a moment. Her fingers tapped the arm of her chair as she regarded him keenly, eyes raking from his hair to his boots as she considered his question.

“Dangerous words,” she replied at length. “And while I take your meaning, that does not mean I am willing to trust your motives. I will ask yet again, what are you doing in my kingdom?”

Allera would not be swayed by flowery speeches, so he might as well give her the plain, unvarnished truth. Again, not one of his best talents, but he was more than capable when the occasion called for it.

“Attempting to save it.”

“Why? Is it not enough that you are now your father’s heir? Or do you require the accolades of a savior in addition to your title?”

Vaniell grimaced. “Perhaps I am the only heir at hand, but we both know the King of Garimore is not my father. Even if you were committed to the initial pretense for the sake of my mother’s dignity, please do us both the honor of abandoning it now.”

Allera watched him for a few more moments before nodding stiffly. “Yes, I do know the truth. Both that Melger was not your father, and that the man wearing Garimore’s crown is no longer Melger. But despite all this, you are still the only heir Garimore has left, so why would you attempt to save us from his dreams of empire? And perhaps more to the point, how? You have no experience with governance or war.”

Vaniell shared a glance with Kyrion, wondering which of them was the best bearer of such news. When Kyrion merely shrugged as if to disavow responsibility, Vaniell sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Then he immediately thought better of it. The grease... the dirt... the tangles... He shuddered. Hopefully, the sooner he relayed his news, the sooner he could have a bath.

“As to the why...” He cleared his throat before plunging ahead. “You already know the present King of Garimore is a mirror mage, but we have only just learned who he truly is—a prince of the Zulleri Empire.”

Caro made a strangled sound, and Allera’s eyes widened as her hands clenched on the arms of her chair.

“A preposterous claim,” she snapped. “Unless you have proof.”

“What proof would make you willing to accept my word?” Vaniell raised one eyebrow in challenge. “I cannot force you to believe me, but we also know that his goal is to unite the Five Thrones of Abreia and present them as a gift to his mother, The Empress of Zulle, in hopes that she will consider him a fitting heir to her name and her throne.”

Allera blinked at him owlishly. Yes, it seemed he had finally managed to shock her fully.

“And... how have you obtained this information?”

Somehow, he kept his voice level. “I had to do something while I was *traipsing*, didn’t I?”

For the first time, Allera’s dark eyes held something akin to respect. “There’s more,” she said. “Isn’t there?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” he admitted. “We have learned that no fewer than three imperial heirs now reside on Abreian lands. If the empress learns of their whereabouts—and it seems likely that she will—she may decide to come after them. Should she do so,” he added softly, “I doubt very much that she will care what is damaged in the course of their retrieval.”

“Then”—Caro’s face had gone bone white—“Melger was not wrong. The Empire *is* coming.”

Allera slumped where she sat, looking old and pale as chalk. It was suddenly quite evident that she was not nearly so well-recovered as she pretended.

The princess immediately dropped to one knee beside her mother, pressing her hand and gazing anxiously into her face. “Mother, let me take you back to bed.”

“No.” Allera forced the word between her lips, glaring up at Vaniell fiercely. “Is it true, then?”

“Very likely, yes,” Vaniell agreed soberly. “That is why we are here.”

“To warn us about the Empire?”

“Yes, and also no.” Vaniell glanced at Kyrion once more, but the night elf merely gave him a nod, as if confirming that he ought to continue. “We had just one small window of time in which to act, and we have done so.”

Caro jerked to her feet, fury in her eyes as her mother drew herself up in her chair.

“*What*”—Allera ground out fiercely—“*have you done?*”

Vaniell refused to cringe or back down. They had made the best choice they could with the information at hand, and he would not allow anyone to make light of Karreya and Leisa’s sacrifices.

“We sent a small group of our allies directly to Hanselm. The imposter does not yet seem to know that he has failed here, in Farhall, and in Iria. Evaraine lives, and Prince Torevan will soon take the throne. While the King of Garimore is still gathering his troops and basking in his success, he will be confronted by someone who knows the truth of who he is. Someone who can expose him as an imperial mage. We are hoping that the shock of it will force him to act quickly, before he is ready.”

The expression on Allera’s face was rather terrible. “You are hoping to *encourage* him to attack us?”

“We believe he will act first to take Farhall,” Vaniell pointed out. “He is convinced that Iria will fall into his hands without a fight, and that my brother is a weak king, disliked by his people. If he can conquer Farhall swiftly, while the people are at odds over who will rule, he can then crush Eddris between them like cracking a nut.”

Allera stared blindly into the crackling fire for a moment, while Vaniell resisted the urge to shift his feet impatiently.

“You place a great deal of confidence in Farhall’s ability to withstand an invasion,” the queen said at last. “And in me. We have been observing the swelling numbers of Garimoran troops, and they will crush us if they descend in force.”

“Which is why it was imperative we not give Garimore the opportunity to move the main body of their troops too far north,” Vaniell responded firmly. “If they must act swiftly, their forces will not be at full strength, and their supply chains will be unstable at best. A slim chance is better than none, and if we can reach Farhall in time, they too can prepare to meet the threat.”

Allera’s keen eyes fixed on his and her expression changed to one of calculation. “Prince Vaniell, I am willing to believe you only because Kyrion clearly does, and if there is one man who owes you no allegiance or respect, it is he.”

Just as he’d once told Karreya, trust could be a double-edged blade. Even if Allera trusted Kyrion’s suspicion far more than Vaniell’s sincerity, in this case, it would be enough.

“But I must demand that you take no further actions of this magnitude without consulting the other Thrones. The Vaniell we have all experienced up until this point would have no idea that an army *needed* a supply chain, let alone how to destabilize one, and I will not countenance my people being sent to war at your whim when we know so little of your true character.”

“Sent to war?” Vaniell echoed softly. “Whether you send anyone or not, war is coming, and my aim is to ensure that Abreia survives. But if you wish to know more of me, know these three things—first, that I intend to fight for Garimore’s

freedom from tyranny, whether you choose to support me or not. Second, that I believe in the necessity of five fully independent Thrones. There will be no empires on Abreian soil so long as I draw breath. And third, that I am indeed a mage, so if it is your ambition to persecute mages, you may consider us enemies.”

“That,” Caro said, a grim expression tugging at her lips, “makes two of us.” She drew a dagger from her belt, and as she held it up, a brilliant white flame flared to life around the blade. “And for that alone, you would have my support.”

“Which is why *you*,” Allera said dryly, “are not yet actually in charge. However”—she turned her gaze back towards Vaniell—“I will agree to take your point if you also accept mine. If we are to have five independent Thrones, those Thrones must find a way to trust one another, or our very independence will lead to our doom. And now,” she shifted her attention to Kyrion, “must you be on your way, or is there time for tea?”

“I intend to rest before we depart,” Kyrion replied, “so tea would be most welcome. And perhaps, for the princeling here... some clean clothing? I fear he is the worse for having disintegrated a sea monster two nights ago and the stench begins to wear on me.”

“You did *what*?” Caro’s expression of disbelief might have been insulting had Vaniell not wholeheartedly concurred with the sentiment.

“I didn’t say I was a very *good* mage,” he returned agreeably. “And you have no idea how many trade concessions I would be willing to grant you in exchange for a bath.”

CHAPTER 6



*K*arreja had once considered herself to be intimately acquainted with pain. The Enclave was a harsh school, and one did not emerge without enduring both physical and mental anguish.

But the expression Senaya wore as she faced her daughter held an intensity of grief that Karreja had never dared to imagine.

“Did you envision some brutal and violent end? Some sudden tragedy that could not have been prevented?” Senaya shook her head. “Your father’s passing was so much worse. It was slow and silent. An invisible decline that we knew was inevitable, and yet... I could not convince him to save himself.”

Leisa’s face had gone white and still, but the story had only just begun.

“You know that the fae cannot endure violence—not even in proximity. The pain it causes them is the reason they have left this world behind, as it threatens their very survival.

“I told your father of my past. I warned him that I could not promise him a future. But he loved me—and you and your sister—so fiercely, that he endured the pain of living among humans in order to be with us.”

There were no tears on her cheeks, and yet, agony was etched on every line of her face. As if these wounds were still so fresh that her heart bled with every word.

“When he began to fade, I begged him to leave me. Better to know that he was alive and whole, even if we could not be together. But he would not go. Would not accept a future apart. He said that...” Her voice broke. Her jaw clenched, and her eyes closed. “He said that I was worrying for nothing, but even if the worst happened, he would rather have one day with me than a year with nothing but memories.” Her eyes, when they opened, were stark and deep in her grief-ravaged face. “And so I watched as he slipped away from me. Watched, powerless, as he grew weaker and weaker from the day-to-day struggle of survival. From each time my mother’s people caught up to us and tried to take me by force.”

Her next words were soft and heavy with remembered pain. “When they die, the fae do not leave behind a body as we do. Their physical form turns to mist and air, and I spent months lying beside him each night, wondering whether he would be there when I woke. Wondering whether he would slip away while I was sleeping, while I was shopping, while I was talking to a neighbor, or harvesting herbs.

“And then, one morning, he was gone.”

Karreya had once asked Senaya whether she would make the same choices again. Whether she would risk the pain of loss for the sake of the happy moments with the ones she loved.

Senaya had not been able to answer, and now Karreya thought perhaps she understood. All of those happy moments were overshadowed by this fear—the fear of an emotional torment she could do nothing to prevent.

“Your sister’s illness was sudden and unexpected.” Somehow, Senaya was determined to continue, despite what it cost her. “It was a devastating loss. A child should never die before her parents, and that grief will never leave me, no matter how long I live. But to watch one you love die by degrees, knowing that their love for you is preventing them from saving themselves... That is a horror unmatched by anything my mother has ever inflicted, and I cannot imagine repeating the experience.”

Leisa's eyes were as red as her mother's by the time the story was finished, but her determination had not wavered.

"I am sorry for your loss, and for your grief," she said. "I am sorry for the pain you have suffered. Sorry that I was never able to truly know my father. That I have so few memories of those times when all of us were together. But this... This is not the same. My death is not inevitable. I am not giving up for the sake of love—I am choosing to fight. Choosing to wage war against the very thing that stole my father's life. And I am asking you to help me."

Senaya gathered her reins, her features now set in an immovable mask. "Then I will help you," she said. "But only insofar as I can teach you to use your magic. I will not enter Hanselm, and I will not watch as you throw your life away. You have me until the gates of the city, but not beyond."

And then she turned her horse and rode away, never once looking back to see whether her daughter would follow.

Leisa's mouth opened, as if to call after her, but she did not speak the words. Her shoulders slumped and her chin fell as she rested her hands on the pommel of her saddle and took several deep breaths.

"She speaks truth," Karreya said softly.

Leisa did not look up. "And yet, it is what she did *not* say that haunts me."

"She did not say that she loves you."

Startled, Leisa inadvertently jerked on her horse's reins as her head swiveled to stare at Karreya.

"How did you..."

"The Prince of Garimore did not say that he loves me either."

Leisa blinked rapidly, appearing somewhat stunned by those words. "You were hoping he would?"

"That is not important." Karreya found that she was not quite prepared to discuss her attraction to a certain gray-eyed prince. At least, not with someone like Leisa, who seemed

inclined to think ill of him. “Before we parted, however, I wished to understand how he felt, not deal in practicalities and protestations of nobility. But he seems to find feelings more difficult to speak of. He is afraid, I think, of how others will use those feelings. Perhaps Senaya is the same.”

Leisa nudged her horse with her heels and turned to follow in Senaya’s wake. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that at the Enclave, we are trained to believe that feelings are a weakness. That they undermine our purpose and betray our strength. That we must always control our emotions or they will control us. And in my grandmother’s world, feelings are weapons. They can be used to hurt, to manipulate, and to destroy.”

“But Senaya fell in love here,” Leisa protested over her shoulder. “Surely she cannot still believe that feelings are weakness.”

“She can if they have brought her too much pain.” Karreya nudged her mount into a trot until she drew even with Leisa on the narrow road. “Her story might be seen as proof that our trainers were not wrong. That she should have listened when we were taught to deny ourselves.”

“Then she regrets it.” Leisa’s tone echoed with disappointment. “She regrets coming here. Falling in love. Having children... All of it.”

“Perhaps,” Karreya allowed. “But I do not think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because she is *here*,” Karreya said thoughtfully. “She is facing her fear. Each day she rises and confronts her pain once again, but she is the stronger, and the pain has not defeated her. Her presence here is proof that she has not yet bowed under its weight.”

“She is already fighting a war,” Leisa murmured, “whether she knows it or not.”

“Perhaps all humans are,” Karreya replied with a lopsided shrug. “But you should not give up on her. Not while she still fights.”

Her cousin's sigh was deep and long. "You are very wise," she said at last. "And more patient than I am."

Laughter bubbled up before Karreya could stop it. "The Mistress of Discipline would be quite surprised to hear you say so. I am not known for my patience. Or my wisdom."

"And I am not known for holding grudges, and yet here we are."

They shared a quick smile, and something small and warm took root in that part of Karreya that was left cold and empty by Niell's absence.

Had she made another friend? Or was this something different? Was this... family?

Time alone would reveal what she and Leisa could be to one another, but for now, that smile was enough. It meant they were more than mere allies, and Karreya found it surprisingly comforting to realize that she was still not entirely alone in this strange new world.



They traveled on at a relentless pace for the next few days, making their way through the forests and hills of southern Garimore as swiftly as their mounts' endurance would allow. Little was said, even when they camped for the night, but the silence did not bother Karreya.

It gave her time to think. To remember. To wonder what she might say to her father when she saw him again. Should it be her goal to shock him into making a mistake? Or to convince him to return home with her so they could face her grandmother together?

The sad truth was, she did not know him well enough to predict what he might say, or what he might do. He was, essentially, a stranger, and so she must approach him as she would any other target.

With caution. With wary respect. And with a flexible mind, prepared to shift her methods at any moment.

On the afternoon of their third day of traveling, they rounded a bend to see a group of travelers standing in the road ahead... No, there were two groups.

One appeared to be a family—three adults and four children of varying ages—dressed after the fashions of Iria. One of the two men lay on the ground beside their cart, with blood on his face and the front of his coat. Two of the children were crying, while the woman argued loudly with members of the second group.

These were clearly soldiers. Eight of them, unshaven and unwashed, wearing rumpled uniforms and carrying haphazard weaponry.

“Garimorans,” Leisa muttered under her breath, as her brows drew low and her mouth pinched with anger.

“We *are* within their borders,” Senaya noted quietly. “Perhaps if we simply ride on by, they will ignore us.”

Leisa shot her a disbelieving glance. “Ride on by, while eight armed men harass children?” Tapping her horse with her heels, she trotted forward, and Karreya followed, curiosity piqued by the scene.

“...we tried asking nicely,” she heard one of the soldiers say in a hard, angry voice. “And now we’re going to search your cart, whether you like it or not. You’re in Garimore now, which means you’ll do as you’re told.”

“Please...” The uninjured man held up his hands, palms forward, his posture one of peace. Pleading. “The cart is nothing but our personal belongings. Our food for the journey. We have nothing to hide.”

“Food!” Two of the other soldiers strode towards the cart, their faces equal parts anger and eagerness. They ripped off the covering and began throwing bags and baskets to the ground.

“No, please...” The woman started forward, but as she did so, one of the soldiers grabbed a child by the arm, yanked her towards him, and set a dagger to her throat.

“Get back, woman! Know your place, if you want your child to live. If you’re lucky, we will only take your food and you’ll be left with your miserable lives.”

His words were such a tangled mix of truth and lies, Karreya could not quite sort them out. But even in Abreia, it seemed, the strong oppressed the weak, just as they did in the Empire.

Karreya eyed the group, identifying the leader and assessing their strengths and weaknesses. Not everyone approved of their thieving—she could see it in the folded arms and eyes that lingered on the ground. But these were also not fully trained infantrymen. Two of them wore their sword belts wrong, while another carried only a hatchet. A fourth had a bow, but it was strung too loosely, and he had only three arrows in his quiver. And all of them had gaunt, sunken cheeks. Burning eyes that spoke loudly of hunger and desperation.

They would die quickly and without difficulty—even the one holding the child. He clearly did not want to hurt her. His knife was gripped in a hand that trembled, and his grip on her tunic was loose. Karreya could easily catch him by surprise and free the child with no danger.

Loosening a dagger in its sheath, she plotted her course and the order of her kills. It was possible one of the party of travelers would attempt to interfere, but she doubted they would react swiftly enough. Civilians rarely understood how quickly a battle could be over...

“Are Garimoran soldiers now such cowards that they must take hostages in order to steal from women and children?”

Leisa.

While Karreya was determining her strategy, Leisa had simply acted, riding into the midst of the tension and leaping from her horse to confront the leader of the group.

Her short sword was in her hand and her eyes crackled with anger, but she was a full foot shorter than the Garimoran captain and he was already on edge.

Karreya heard a strangled sound from Senaya, but she did not turn her head. The situation was too volatile, tempers too uncertain. The unbloodied male traveler was pressed to the side of the cart, eyes wide with fear, while the woman remained frozen, eyes on her child. The hostage sobbed silently as the knife hovered inches from her throat, while the other three children huddled together and the injured man moaned in pain.

The Garimorans had all drawn weapons—all but the one who now fumbled with his bow. And Leisa stood there in front of all of them, chin up, sword raised, without the slightest hint of fear.

Whether she was simply that skilled or completely unable to discern the danger, Karreya did not know her cousin well enough to tell. Or perhaps, like Karreya, she had determined that the majority of these men were not willing participants.

“We are doing our duty and guarding the roads of Garimore against smuggling and thievery,” the captain growled. “And you, little girl, are playing with fire. Put down the sword before you cut yourself and get out of my way.”

Leisa grinned. “Make me,” she said, and then everything fell apart.

The captain lunged forward, sword in hand, but Leisa wasn't there anymore. She had darted to the side, using the tip of her sword to knock the dagger away from the child's throat. “Drop,” she ordered, and miraculously, the child obeyed, allowing the full weight of her body to pull her tunic from her captor's grasp. Falling to the hard-packed dirt of the road, she covered her head with her arms as Leisa threw her weight into the hostage taker and forced him to the ground.

That was all the time she had before the other seven reacted, but Leisa was already up and charging into the fray.

She had acted foolishly and without a plan, but Karreya was marginally impressed with her cousin's speed and inventiveness. Leisa was clearly accustomed to fighting in close quarters with multiple opponents and had little trouble using the men's inexperience against them.

All except the captain. That one was better trained, and Karreya had begun to consider trespassing on her cousin's rights when the two of them clashed, sword to sword, in the middle of the road.

Blade met blade with a clang, and Leisa flew backwards as the Garimoran's superior height and muscle overwhelmed her.

But she did not allow it to stop her. Rolling away, she drew a dagger with her other hand as she got to her feet. The other seven scrambled for the weapons they'd lost during the confrontation and it began to look as though the battle might not go well for Leisa.

"Let this teach you not to play savior," the captain snarled as he charged forward.

Leisa lifted her blade to meet him and their weapons came together...

Her sword met his with a strange snapping sound, leaving the Garimoran gaping in shock as he stared at what he held in his hand.

A stick. Where he had once gripped the hilt of a solid steel sword, he now held a two-foot-long piece of wood, about one inch in diameter, with a splintered end where the impact of Leisa's sword had broken it off.

One by one, the other Garimorans lifted their blades, only to realize that not a single weapon remained. One held a spoon. Another a ladle, and a third gripped the handle of a broom.

Karreya threw a glance to the side, where Senaya was folding up a small silver box and slipping it back into the pocket of her divided skirt.

She had used her magic to intervene in the fight?

Karreya's disapproval must have shown on her face, because Senaya responded to her unspoken question.

"This is not the Enclave, child." Her voice was quiet, but cool. "No one here is playing by your rules. There is no honor in single combat, no courtesy in allowing others to fight alone.

There is only survival, and your allies will be expecting your aid.”

“*Mage*,” one of the soldiers spat furiously, turning to stare at Senaya and Karreya with a mixture of rage and revulsion. “Your kind is under sentence of death if you trespass on Garimoran soil.”

It was not the mild-mannered seller of herbs who answered, but the woman born as heir to the whole of the Zulleri Empire.

“My kind?” Senaya returned coldly, her voice gone harsh with command as she rode towards them. “Do not speak of my *kind* as if I were an animal. I have the power to crush every one of you if I choose. It is only by my mercy that you live, and that I did not turn your sword into a snake instead of a stick. So do not challenge me as if you somehow have power over whether I live or die. Take your lives as my gift and walk away from this place with gratitude.”

There was a lie in there somewhere, but Karreya could not quite determine which part was untrue.

Leisa was staring at the implements in her opponents’ hands, her shoulders tense and her eyes wide. And the family of travelers seemed to have frozen on the spot, unsure of who was most to be feared.

When no one moved, Karreya scanned the faces of the Garimoran soldiers, and noted that, alongside their fear, they carried a strong sense of righteous anger. These men might not simply walk away. They would consider it their duty to return—silently in the night if necessary—and see justice done. Possibly even with the help of friends.

“Perhaps it would be better to kill them,” she noted thoughtfully, and loudly enough for all of them to hear. “It need not be murder. Give them each a dagger and send them into the forest. It may require an hour of my time, but no one will find the bodies afterwards.”

Her cousin threw up her hands. “No! We are trying not to kill anyone unless they force us to. Just...” She turned to the

family huddled together near the cart. “I think it might be for the best if you were on your way. We cannot promise there aren’t more like these men lurking out here, so the sooner you cross the border, the better.”

“Thank you.” The woman darted forward, grasped Leisa’s hand and pressed it firmly. “We are in your debt, truly.”

“And you,” Leisa said, turning back towards the soldiers. “You’re hungry. I understand. You’ve been sent here with no training, no food, and no one to tell you when you’ll be recalled. But sooner or later, you’re going to shake down travelers who won’t hesitate to slice your throats. You’ll take a hostage who fights back. Or, you’ll become no better than thieves who take what they want and the laws be hanged. Threatening the lives of children is not far from that kind of depravity. Not far from the kind of actions that, in any other time and place, you would be ashamed to admit to.”

“Hungry or not”—the captain’s face was twisted with anger—“we do not answer to you. And you’d best hope we do not encounter one another when your pet mage isn’t here to save you.”

“It was *you* that she saved,” Karreya put in flatly. “She ended the fight so there was no need to kill you.”

One of the men spat on the road. “And how would you have managed that?” he sneered. “Two little girls against eight of us?”

Karreya’s fingers flicked, and the man let out a howl that reverberated off the trees and made her ears ring with pain.

“A soldier is only as useful as his feet,” she noted coolly. “And now you only have one.”

It had not been a very good throw. She’d meant to cut off his smallest toe, but her dagger had been slightly off the mark and had probably pierced between the bones of his foot.

It seemed, however, that they had finally gotten the message—these were no easy marks, and it was time to cut their losses.

“We’re leaving,” the captain ordered suddenly, his wide, frightened eyes fixed on Karreya. “This time. But if we find you again, we won’t make the same mistakes twice.”

Truth.

“I am relieved to hear it,” Leisa replied sternly. “So long as you include robbing innocent travelers in your list of mistakes. If you harass them again, we will know, and we will find you.”

“Believe me when I say that we want nothing to do with mages,” the man responded, his lips curled with distaste. “There are others who are better equipped to deal with you—permanently—and we will not hesitate to send word.”

They backed away, eyes darting from Leisa to Senaya to Karreya before they turned and ran west, leaving the road and disappearing between the trees before they reached the next bend.

“Well.” Leisa’s shoulders slumped as she stared after them. “That could theoretically have gone worse.”

“It certainly could have.” Senaya urged her horse forward, eyes snapping with anger. “And if I had not stepped in, it undoubtedly *would* have.”

“You?” Leisa scoffed. “You used magic in front of Garimoran soldiers! When we were *trying* to go unnoticed.”

“By attempting to rescue every helpless traveler from here to Hanselm?” Senaya sounded far more sarcastic than sorry.

Karreya was beginning to feel rather annoyed with both of them. She understood that she had made mistakes. All of them had, but was there really any need for her companions to talk those mistakes to death?

“I’m not going to stand by and watch while innocent and unarmed people are hurt by this war. I can’t.” That was Leisa. Determined to change the world around her, whether or not it wanted to be changed.

“Innocent people will always be hurt. But you cannot save them for good if you die while involving yourself in every

petty squabble you encounter.” And that was Senaya. Thinking like the empress she’d been trained to be.

Leisa’s hands flexed impatiently, and a frustrated sigh escaped her as she regarded her mother. “Really? Is *that* why you chose to broadcast what you are so that rumors will already be flying by the time we reach Hanselm? You know what Garimore does to mirror mages. Why did you reveal yourself?”

“I already told you.” Senaya sounded quietly furious. “I will *not* watch you die.”

“I was in no danger!” Leisa snapped. “Could you not see that those men were not in serious earnest? They were hungry. Trying to intimidate. But they were barely armed. Most of their weapons were left in camp somewhere, and the one holding the girl was terrified that he might accidentally hurt her.”

“She is correct.” Karreya decided she ought to at least attempt to end the argument. They were being loud when they ought to be avoiding attention. “I did not note the strangeness at first, but their threats were only partially true. And they did not tear the wagon apart until someone mentioned food.”

“True or not, there were eight of them! Even an accident could have ended your life.”

Leisa pulled herself into the saddle and turned to stare at her mother incredulously. “An accident? Did you perhaps miss that I have spent most of my life practicing with weapons? I began training as a bodyguard to a princess when I was *eight*. Became her protector at thirteen. I have spent years preparing to deal with exactly this sort of situation, which means I am more likely to have an *accident* while trying to cook dinner.”

“Humans are far more dangerous when they are hungry and desperate,” Senaya insisted. “They become unpredictable.”

“Yes.” Leisa’s gaze dropped to her hands where they gripped her horse’s reins. “I know exactly how unpredictable they become, because when I was five, I started a fight with

two of King Soren's guards. I was hungry and frightened and they were standing between me and food."

Senaya's jaw clenched and her own grip on her reins tightened, causing her horse to toss its head uncomfortably. "You still do not understand. I regret that things occurred as they did, but we made the best choice we could. We were trying to save you."

"You're right," Leisa said simply. "I do not understand. I don't know if I ever will."

Then she turned her horse and kicked it into a swift trot down the road, leaving the others to follow.

CHAPTER 7



Vaniell and Kyrion departed Oakhaven under the cover of darkness, after resting and ensuring that Allera both understood the plan and stood ready to receive messages from Arandar when the time came. She clearly still harbored some doubts about Vaniell—and his plan—but said that if Evaraine and Danric agreed, she would commit her troops as well.

Vaniell had also left one of his remaining hoard of spell gems with Caro, begging her to relay it to his contacts in Oakhaven. He'd been unable to send money for far too long, and their expenses would only continue to grow if war became a reality. She'd eyed him askance, but agreed, with a warning that he would suffer the full weight of her wrath if any harm came to her messenger at his people's hands.

It was the best he could have hoped for under the circumstances, so as Kyrion lifted off with powerful wing beats that carried them both northward, Vaniell huddled into a borrowed cloak and began to consider the next of his many problems—namely, what he was going to say to his brother.

What would it be like, seeing him again? Years of cruel words lay between them, borne out of a relationship twisted by lies and manipulation. And they had not seen one another since Danric learned that his father and brother were mages—the very people Melger had taught him to hate. Could there be any hope for them moving forward? Would Danric even agree to an alliance, or would he convince Evaraine not to trust anything to do with his younger sibling?

“You are thinking very loudly,” Kyrion said, his voice muffled somewhat by the speed of the wind. “Could it be that you are feeling uncertain about our next destination?”

“Can’t imagine why I would be feeling anything of the sort.” Vaniell couldn’t always prevent his sarcasm from escaping. “It’s going to be such a jolly family reunion. Hugs and backslapping all around. Nothing awkward or uncomfortable whatsoever.”

“So the fact that you were once engaged to your brother’s wife will not be a problem for you? Or the reality that you disappeared during your kingdom’s greatest crisis, and have yet to publicly acknowledge your mother’s death?”

For one deeply heartfelt moment, Vaniell silently consigned Kyrion to the depths of whatever hellish torment the night elves might believe in.

“It is more that those details pale in comparison to everything else that lies between myself and Danric,” he answered instead. “My brother is, to my dismay, an utterly and completely good man. Misguided in places, but almost depressingly good. Even if he decides it would be better for the world if he were to hang me by the neck from the nearest battlements, he won’t. Not until he is certain that I am irredeemable and unnecessary. And perhaps not even then.”

“And are you?” Kyrion asked mildly.

“Am I what?”

“Irredeemable and unnecessary.”

Vaniell let out a silent huff of laughter. “Probably. Or at least, I will be once we have resolved this crisis. For now, however, I know the present King of Garimore better than anyone else living, except perhaps Senaya. They will need me until he is dealt with.”

“Have you wavered, then, in your determination to take the throne?” Kyrion did not sound accusing so much as curious.

“No.” But how could he explain? “I am determined only to be of service to Garimore in whatever capacity I am needed. Should my kingdom be saved by some other sacrifice on my

part, I would gladly offer it. It is only others who seem to believe that my most noble sacrifice would be accepting the throne. And if that is where my path leads, then... so be it.”

“Would you still hesitate, if not for Karreya?”

Drat the wyvern anyway.

“I don’t know,” Vaniell returned frankly. “It’s a blasted nuisance, really. I’ve nothing to offer her unless it’s a crown, but that’s the one thing she could never accept.”

They flew on in silence for several minutes, drifting over the dark forest beneath, and in the moonlight, Vaniell could see the beginnings of the mountains taking shape between the wispy clouds.

“Leisa and I faced a similar dilemma,” Kyrion said at last, almost gruffly. “Your situation may not be impossible.”

Genuinely startled by what could only be named kindness, it took Vaniell several moments to find his voice.

“I don’t even know how she feels,” he admitted. “Never found the nerve to ask, so...”

“*Hold on!*” Kyrion snarled a vicious oath and banked hard to the right, diving steeply towards the trees.

“What...” But Vaniell had no need to finish the question.

A scream shattered the stillness of the night—a harsh, rasping cry that was soon echoed by another. And when Vaniell turned his head, he had only a moment of wide-eyed shock before a dark, winged shape struck him, knocking him off Kyrion’s back and sending him tumbling through the air.

Falling.

Wet clouds. Flickering moonlight. A cliff side, rushing to meet him.

There was nothing in his pockets that would save him this time.

A memory of Karreya’s scowling face flashed through his mind just before...

Something snatched at his cloak. Claws fastened around his leg, then his waist, jerking him one way, then another, stopping his descent just before impact.

“Kyrion?” he gasped, but there was no answer. Only the slow flap of dark wings and a hiss that shot tremors of fear through his chest, followed by a second dark shape arrowing out of the night.

It crashed into the wyvern holding him with a scream of territorial vengeance. The claws opened, and Vaniell fell once again.

He didn't even have time to cry out before he hit the mountainside. Pain tore through his shoulder, but he couldn't even scream because his breath was utterly gone, driven out by the impact.

Yet somehow, he was still alive. And from the sounds of the battle overhead, Kyrion was still in danger. Did he dare try to help, or would his efforts only make it worse?

The night suddenly flared with light. Twin jets of flame shot through the darkness, illuminating the struggle between not two, but *three* winged shapes as they ripped and tore at one another.

Two against one, Vaniell saw with horror. He could not tell who was winning, and his sense of helplessness grew until it rose up to choke him.

If Kyrion lost, would this be yet another tragedy credited to his account?

With a scream, one of the wyverns fell from the sky, crashing to the ground somewhere downslope. The remaining creatures circled one another, their flight faltering, but neither willing to yield. Until, at length, the larger one struck, fastening its teeth on the smaller wyvern's throat.

It went limp. Surrendering. But it was heavy, and the two were inextricably tangled.

They fell, struck the mountain with a crash, and then all was silent. The clouds covered the moon, and Vaniell found

himself alone in the darkness, fighting through pain, and wondering what in all the hells he could possibly do now.



In the end, he waited. The night seemed to last for an eternity as he shook with cold, gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulder and listening for the sound of claws on the rocks, unable to see even his hands in front of his face.

He did not dare move up or down the mountainside, but could only inch towards the nearest tree and huddle against its trunk, hoping to live long enough to see the morning.

And indeed, morning did come. Just when it seemed the night would never lift, a soft gray light bled into the edges of the sky, illuminating enough of the surroundings for Vaniell's heart to quail.

The mountain was not as steep as he'd feared, but it was rocky and treacherous, with unsteady footing and small trees clinging to life in the cracks. Not far below where he'd fallen, the ground was less steep, and the trees grew thicker as the slope descended.

And it was somewhere in that dense vegetation that Kyrion had landed. Along with two wild wyverns, who seemed to believe their territory had been violated.

Of all Vaniell's many fears, this might possibly be the one that terrified him the most. Lost. Alone. *Outside*. Surrounded by nature. Where he had no idea what to do or how to control his own fate.

But it wasn't as if sitting still would affect whether he was eventually eaten by some unspeakable horror, and he couldn't stay on the mountainside forever. As frightening as it was to be lost in a trackless wilderness, the only way out of this nightmare was to move. Find Kyrion. Trust that they could find the path back to civilization together.

And along the way, try to appreciate the irony of hoping desperately to find the one man he had always been terrified of

seeing again.

Alternating between stepping and falling and sliding on his backside, Vaniell inched down the steepest part of the slope until he was on firmer, more level ground. It was still an incline, but not so treacherous. He thought about calling out for Kyrion, but caution held him silent. If the wild wyverns had survived, he would be practically inviting them to treat him as a snack.

And so he searched as the sky brightened, not even quite sure whether he was looking in the right place, but growing steadily hungrier and thirstier. One of his steel marbles was clenched in a sweaty fist—probably useless against a wyvern, but it made him feel better to have some form of defense ready.

Broken branches were his first clue that he was approaching the crash site. Beneath the damaged trees, he found gouges in the shallow dirt. Dark stains that could only be blood.

And try as he might, Vaniell could not prevent his heart from pounding with dread. He did not want to find Kyrion dead. Did not want to feel the weight of guilt for one more death. Did not want to be responsible for carrying this news to all of those people who loved and respected the enigmatic king of the night elves.

“How unexpected,” a deep voice rumbled from behind his left shoulder. “The wastrel prince actually looks worried. Did you think to find me dead?”

Vaniell’s eyes squeezed shut. Out of sheer relief, of course, and *not* to hide his wayward emotions.

“I thought I would at least check your corpse for money before I moved on,” he replied with forced casualness before turning around.

Kyrion stood behind him, wearing a slight smirk along with copious amounts of blood and several visible bruises. His right arm hung limp, and he seemed to be hunched over in pain.

“What were you going to do if you found I’d lost the fight?” the night elf asked, as if genuinely curious.

Vaniell scratched his head and looked thoughtfully at the marble in his palm. “Die, probably. But that sounds less terrifying than telling all of your relatives that I let you be eaten by wyverns.”

“*Let me?*” One of those silver brows rose in addition to the smirk. “No one thinks of you as a warrior, Vaniell of Garimore. Even your worst enemy would hesitate before blaming you for losing to a pair of wyverns.”

His worst enemy...

He’d once thought that role would be filled by the night elf standing in front of him.

“Thank you,” he said earnestly. “I would be dead if you hadn’t intervened.”

“You might still be dead,” Kyrion admitted, his expression flattening as he looked around at the dawn-lit forest. “These mountains are inhospitable at best, and I must heal before I can shift or fly again. My magic should be fully recovered by tonight, but until then...”

Not to mention, their packs were gone, and Vaniell was no hunter. But even as he confronted the truth that they were still lost, still hungry, and in considerable danger, he felt decidedly more cheerful than he had only a few moments before.

And not only because he need not feel responsible for Kyrion’s death.

“Then I suppose we’ll have to muddle through with a bit of enchanting and a great deal of unfounded optimism.” Vaniell allowed a crooked grin to steal across his face. “And I’m not terrible at improvisation. Provided you can find us a safer place to camp, I can magic up some protection until you’re ready to travel again.”

“And can you hunt?” Kyrion rumbled, expression unreadable.

Vaniell grimaced at the thought. “I hunted once, when I was around ten, and I believe I threw up twice. But I suppose if I’m hungry enough...” He shrugged, and then winced when his shoulder reminded him of his crash landing. “I suspect we’d be better off hoping that you recover *very* quickly.”



There was not much to making camp when they had no baggage. With Vaniell’s help, Kyrion was able to make his way downslope until he judged that the taller, thicker vegetation would discourage the wyverns from making another attempt.

Tucked into a hollow between a copse of firs and a rocky overhang, Vaniell demonstrated his one useful skill and built a fire that would need very little wood to keep it going. Enchanting wood was not a simple feat, but he could do that much at least.

“If I had my hearthstone, this would be much easier,” he noted regretfully. “I can enchant a smaller stone for light, but heat requires more weight, and the wretched thing is too large to carry around in my pockets. Someday I hope to find a way to make it smaller.”

Kyrion lowered himself to the ground with a barely audible groan before reaching into his own pocket and producing a smooth, round stone that fit neatly into his palm. “Do you mean like this?”

His lips tilted into a smirk as he closed his eyes and clenched his fingers around the stone. When his fingers opened, it was glowing brightly, emitting a pleasant warmth along with its cheerful yellow light.

Vaniell did his best to hide his shock—and his curiosity—as he stared at what was essentially a pebble. If only...

“Exactly like that,” he admitted with a self-deprecating laugh. “But it was kind of you to pretend that I was being helpful.”

Kyrion shook his head. “I only hope you have more useful skills hidden in those pockets of yours, because that is all the magic I can spare at the moment. Flying takes a great deal of energy, particularly with a passenger, and my wound will recover more slowly if I burn myself out.”

“Oh, that was pretty much it.” Vaniell shrugged and tried not to display his discomfort with that admission. “I was born at court and raised in salons and ballrooms. I can manage decently well in a garden as long as you keep the bees away, but in the wilderness? I’m pretty much hopeless. Whatever happens from here on out will be purely experimental in nature.”

“You mentioned protection?” Kyrion reminded him. “Hopefully, you had more in mind than fire and a sharp stick. Or unpredictable explosions.”

“You wound me.” Vaniell allowed his eyes to widen reproachfully. “I happen to have a fair amount of practice at setting traps and alarms. We will at least have a warning before anything larger than a rabbit attempts to attack.”

One of Kyrion’s eyebrows shot up. “And have you experienced many rabbit attacks?”

“One, in fact,” Vaniell retorted, holding up his left thumb and forcing back the surge of painful memories that always accompanied this particular story. “And the little furball left a scar, so that just goes to show you should never underestimate anyone just because they appear harmless.”

Kyrion’s voice went flat and quiet. “I have never once thought you harmless, Prince of Garimore. And I’ll wager neither did the rabbit.”

Vaniell was not expecting the jab, so it hurt far more than such comments usually did. “Whatever you may think of me,” he said coolly, “I’ve never tortured the helpless. Never inflicted pain for fun, or enjoyed the ugly things I was forced to do.”

Silence reigned for a few moments as Vaniell stared grimly into the fire he’d built, wondering whether he would ever

outlive the consequences of his decade-long pretense.

But after a few more tense breaths, Kyrion sighed deeply. “My words were harsh and unfair,” he said. “I believed my resentment to be resolved, but perhaps I was overly optimistic.”

When Vaniell did not reply, he added, “And I do trust your word that you never deliberately caused pain. What came of my captivity was not truly your doing.”

For some reason, Vaniell decided to tell him the whole story. “The rabbit was caught in a reflecting pool in the garden,” he said abruptly. “When I found it, it was struggling to get out, unable to find purchase on the wet rock. I was sopping wet before I managed to pull it out, but I carried it inside, determined to dry it off and keep it as a pet.”

It had not gone well.

“I took it to my father, and when I held it up to show him, it bit me. Hard. I was bleeding and crying and by the time I recovered sufficiently to look for it, the rabbit was gone. I asked, and my father said that... That he’d had it killed. As an important lesson.”

Melger had rarely taken the time to interact with his younger son, but when he had, it was always in the nature of a lesson. Usually a brutal one.

“He said that in order for a kingdom to thrive, we must be forever vigilant and rid ourselves of anything that can hurt us, no matter how small. And then he said that if the rabbit was fool enough to be caught, it deserved to be dinner.”

Kyrion’s head tilted thoughtfully. “And what did you actually learn?”

That moment was still clear in his mind, so many years later. “To hide my pain,” he said quietly. “That if I wanted to protect what I cared about, I must never let anyone see how I feel.”

That lesson had become his entire identity, and even now, he did not truly know how to change it. With Karreya and

Emmerick and Jarek he'd made a start... And with Kyrion, he'd laid bare far more of his heart than he planned.

But he'd been unable to tell Karreya the truth. Unable in the end to do more than hide behind sarcasm, flippancy, and insincere smiles.

"Such lessons do not fade with time," Kyrion said finally. "Only with experience. Patience. Sincerity. You will have to want a different way in order to find it."

But of course he wanted things to be different. Wanted to be able to speak freely with his brother. Tell Karreya that he loved her. To weep for his mother and laugh with a friend without pretense.

"If wanting were enough, the world would be a far different place," he said flatly. "Neither of us would be here now, and there would be no need for war. So forgive me if I don't place much confidence in the idea that wanting to change will gain me anything but false hope."

"Desiring a thing can lead you to finding the right road," Kyrion corrected. "But you are not wrong. Desire alone can change nothing."

Then how did it happen? How could one undo the scars of a decade? And how in the name of all the gods that ever were had Vaniell ended up here, having this conversation with Kyrion, of all people?

Though if anyone would know the answer to this question...

"We should rest," he said instead of asking, choosing for the moment to take the coward's way out. "I will create an enchantment that should warn us if anything approaches—human, animal, or night elf. But I've no way to feed us, so the sooner we can be on the move, the better."

Kyrion's knowing gaze warned that this conversation was likely not over, but he nodded and moved to a place tucked well beneath the dense copse of firs, where little light could reach. "I've no choice but to trust you in this," he said. "And as it happens, I do not believe my trust has been misplaced."

But if you do plan to betray me, know that my wife will not hesitate to ensure that you regret it for however many short and painful days may remain to you.”

“Noted,” Vaniell murmured wryly. “I will be sure to shiver with fear as I do my best to protect us both. But if my trembling hands make my enchantments fail and a rabbit tries to eat you later, I accept no responsibility.”

He heard a rumble that almost sounded like laughter, but Kyrion had already lowered his hood to cover his face and hidden himself completely in the darkness beneath the trees.

Probably already asleep, drat him. Vaniell had always envied those who could fall asleep in an instant, no matter where they were. His own mind had always been far too full, with no way to clear it of the concerns and complications of his everyday life. He’d had no one in his life to talk to, no one to help him work through the worries and questions that plagued him. In truth, he’d been more open and honest with Kyrion than with almost anyone he’d ever known. A terrifying thought, really.

Thankfully, despite his warnings to Kyrion, his hands remained steady as he made a quick semicircle around their camp, choosing various objects to act as a temporary focus for his enchantment. The craftings did not need to last for long, so he set one on the trunk of a sapling, one on a piece of shale, and another on a rock that protruded only a few inches from the ground. It was a basic weaving of magical threads that interconnected with each other, so that if any thread was plucked, the entire construct would reverberate with energy. Enough to snap back and hit his mind, alerting him to the presence of an intruder. Even sufficient to wake him, should he be fortunate enough to sleep. But he doubted sleep would come in the middle of the day. Not on the hard ground, while lost in the forest, with the nervous energy of the attack and the conversation that followed still burning through his veins.

And indeed, as the sun rose higher, and the air warmed enough to be almost comfortable, Vaniell remained stubbornly awake.

Awake enough to note when the sounds of boots and the clank of weapons began to filter through the trees from downslope.

It had been far too dark to make out their surroundings when he and Kyrion had fallen from the sky, so it was not out of the question that they'd found themselves close by some seldom-used mountain road. Kyrion would no doubt be able to tell, were he awake, but Vaniell had no intention of disturbing him in the midst of a much-needed healing sleep.

Besides, he was bored, and the idea of doing something useful that did not require running or stabbing anything sounded rather appealing.

With as much care and caution as he possessed, Vaniell made his way down the slope, keeping a wary eye on his surroundings and trying to stay well hidden within the trees. As the sounds of footsteps grew louder, he could occasionally even make out the murmur of voices.

It would have been far more useful to go up and look down on these travelers from above, but he'd realized it too late, and anyway, climbing wasn't really something he made a habit of if he could help it.

"... they expect us to stay."

"Until we receive word that we're needed. At least we aren't digging latrines or going on parade every day."

"No, but we ain't exactly eating much, either. Don't matter what you do to venison, it still tastes the same."

"We'll be lucky if our boots don't wear out before we're recalled. I swear we've tramped enough miles on this same blasted useless trail to travel to Katal and back."

"Have to keep on the move, you know that. If we camp in the same place, we might be noticed."

Soldiers. Camped out in the wilderness somewhere between Oakhaven and Arandar. Watching and waiting, much like the soldiers they'd encountered near the border of Iria...

The imposter had eyes, even here. Forces held in reserve for the moment he decided to spring his trap.

Vaniell cursed silently and began to inch backward, hoping to make his way back up the hill before his presence was noted.

But his breath froze in his lungs when he heard a shout from behind him.

“Oi, someone’s been here!”

An instant later, the threads of his enchantment snapped, and he turned and ran, racing towards the place where Kyrion lay sleeping. Trusting Vaniell to watch his back.

He’d failed, and he’d meant no betrayal, but Kyrion might not hesitate to believe the worst. If he even survived, which was by no means certain.

“Blast it all!” As he ran, Vaniell snatched up a branch from the ground. He needed a weapon, and the ones in his pockets were too uncertain, so he broke the narrow branch into pieces, each one splintered and uneven. As he laid a hasty enchantment on them, he prayed that he would arrive in time, and that the one who’d shouted would hesitate to stab Kyrion in the back... That the soldiers downslope would be lazy and delay their response to their comrade’s cry.

But they likely had not missed the scrabbling of Vaniell’s boots on the rocky ground, which meant he would have mere seconds in which to act.

He burst into camp at a dead run and took in the scene as everything seemed to slow. Kyrion sitting up and pulling back his hood, eyes aglow with fury. A man in a dark tunic with a drawn blade preparing to strike.

Even a night elf could not move fast enough to stop that blow, so Vaniell did not pause to think. He lifted his palm with the splintered pieces of wood, blew on them once, then flicked one with his finger as his magic swirled into the rough etchings and flared with light.

Like an arrow from a bow, it flew towards its target faster than the eye could follow and hit the sword-wielder’s

shoulder. Driven and strengthened by magic, it sank deep, drawing a scream from the man's throat as he dropped his blade.

Another flick, another fiery dart that hit the target's thigh. The man crashed to the ground, bleeding from both wounds and snarling threats that both Kyrion and Vaniell ignored.

"Can you walk?" Vaniell barked, dashing to Kyrion's side and offering his hand to help the night elf to his feet.

Glowing silver eyes met Vaniell's gaze, their depths swirling with anger, doubt, and indecision.

"I swear I did not betray you," Vaniell told him fiercely. "But if you still want to hurt me, at least wait until we're elsewhere. This one has friends, and they're probably right behind me."

Kyrion's gaze cleared as he reached up, grasped Vaniell's hand, and rose to his feet, teeth clenched tightly together. "I can run," he said grimly, "but not much more as of yet."

"Then we run." And he would improvise again if the occasion demanded it. He had no desire to kill, but if driven to do so, he had no doubt he could find a thousand ugly ways for their enemies to die.

With Kyrion in the lead, they raced across the side of the slope, hearing the sound of running footsteps and shouts behind them.

"Any idea where we can go to hide?" Vaniell panted, but Kyrion did not answer. He'd turned towards the mountainside and was scrambling up, using his uninjured hand as an anchor. Vaniell was forced to follow suit, his heart in his throat as his boots slipped and his fingers tore and the slope grew ever steeper.

A cracking sound sent Vaniell jerking to the side as an arrow splintered against the rock only an arm's length from his face.

They were clearly too visible to their enemies downslope.

“We need to go down,” he gritted out as he tried to climb faster. “We’re too exposed here.”

“No,” Kyrion growled back. “Trust me. I know where we are now.”

Trust him. While arrows flew at his head and a steady ache grew between his shoulder blades. Trust him, when he might well believe Vaniell had already betrayed him once.

But he had no choice, so he climbed, and could barely believe his eyes when his boots suddenly reached firm footing on a narrow, all but invisible track along the mountainside.

“This way.” Kyrion led them onward, not down, but up, on a trail that appeared to have been made by mountain goats.

Only once did Vaniell make the mistake of looking down, and instantly felt so ill that he nearly collapsed on the spot. But the memory of arrows kept him upright and moving, grimly focused on the back of Kyrion’s head.

So focused that he ended up crashing into the night elf’s back when he came to a sudden stop, his hands raised to the side, his posture unthreatening.

“I swear I mean no harm to any in your community,” he said, as if to the empty air. “I wish to speak with Yvane.”

“You again.” The man who appeared seemingly from the middle of a rock face did not look particularly pleased or displeased to see Kyrion. His eyes were sharp and his expression unreadable as he glanced towards Vaniell and then back to the night elf. “And your companion?”

“I stand responsible for him,” Kyrion replied without hesitation. “But our errand is truly urgent, and we are being pursued by soldiers of Garimore. Will you allow us entrance, or should we make other plans?”

The man grimaced, but shrugged as if he cared little one way or another. “Seems you always bring some trouble or other to our door, but Yvane has granted you her trust. I suppose you’d best follow me in and she can decide.”

He turned and disappeared, and Kyrion looked back over his shoulder with a nod. “We’ll be safe enough here,” he said, and then he, too, simply stepped into the rock and vanished.

“Wait, where are we...”

A hand reached back out, gripped the front of Vaniell’s coat, and yanked him right into the side of the mountain.

CHAPTER 8



That night after they'd camped and eaten, Senaya took an audible breath and seated herself across the fire from Leisa.

"Very well. Tell me what you want to know about your magic and I will do my best to aid you."

Leisa was silent for so long, Karreya began to fear she did not intend to answer. But eventually, she set aside her cup and folded her hands before speaking.

"Tell me what you would have said if... If you'd stayed. If you'd trained me as a child first coming into my power."

Senaya shook her head. "That I fear I cannot do. The sort of training you ask for would be of little use to you now. For good or ill, there is much you have learned that you will not be able to unlearn. You have found your own way, and your methods have set their own pathways, like riverbeds carved in rock. I can teach you new things, and possibly explain why some of your efforts may succeed or fail, but you cannot unlearn your magic."

Leisa's chin fell. "Then at least answer me this. What is so terrifying about our power? Why does... Why does your brother fear other mirror mages most of all? I know a little, but there has to be more. On my own, I am simply not that powerful."

"It is true that you cannot bring down an entire fortress or defeat an army with a wave of your hand," Senaya agreed. "At least, not all at once, and not in the usual way. But given time

and secrecy, a mirror mage can do both of those things with terrifying ease, as you should know from seeing what my brother has done. We are also unique in that we have access to a much greater well of power than other types of mages.”

A thoughtful expression crossed Leisa’s face. “I have heard speculation that we can draw power from multiple sources.”

“Yes,” Senaya confirmed. “Like life force mages, we draw a part of our power from ourselves. If we never learn to tap other sources, we mirror mages can burn ourselves out very quickly, and our abilities are quite limited. But when we tap into our full strength, we also function as boundary mages, in a way that no scholars are yet able to fully understand. As best we can tell, our mirrors act as a boundary between our own world and the reflected world within the glass. We are able to reach across that boundary and use the power in what we see—both that of our reflected self and the world around our reflection. We draw it across the boundary and it is amplified by the transition, which grants us vast amounts of energy with which to work our will.”

Leisa had grown rather pale. “That is terrifying,” she allowed.

“But there are limitations,” Senaya continued. “We can only act upon reflections. Those actions are mirrored in the physical world, but we can never act on the physical world without the mediation of the mirror boundary.”

After staring thoughtfully into the fire for a few moments, Leisa spoke again. “I believe perhaps I have been limiting myself to the use of my own life force. It has grown easier since I began to practice with the mirror you gifted me, but I am still tired after any significant effort. And there have been times I have tried to act on a thing I can see in my mirror and felt as if there is some barrier I cannot reach past.”

“I do not know if I can train you to use the mirror as I do,” Senaya warned. “I am willing to make the attempt, but you must accept that you may be limited to the methods you have already learned. Your mind may not be able to adapt to new

sources of power. Also..." She paused, and her hands folded tightly together before she spoke again. "I must ask whether you have ever tried to change something living."

"I have." The corners of Leisa's mouth twisted. "A strange, wraith-like creature. I encountered that barrier I spoke of and ended up only exhausting myself for my efforts."

Senaya's shoulders suddenly slumped as if in relief. "That is good. You should not be able to do such a thing. I may have threatened those men with turning their daggers into snakes, but it was an empty threat."

Aha. So that had been the lie Karreya sensed.

"We cannot change other living beings. Not without losing our humanity." Senaya's expression held echoes of some painful memory. "A mirror mage entirely devoid of love and compassion can do this, at great cost, but it is a dark magic that will leave scars on your very soul."

"How do you know?" Leisa asked bluntly.

Senaya looked up and met her daughter's eyes. Her face was drawn and haggard, but she did not flinch. "You are asking whether I have done this thing."

Leisa nodded silently.

"I have not," she said softly. "But my mother has used that power many times. Had I stayed—had I not run from my future and abandoned her plans for me—I would have done so long before now."

Her daughter regarded her—doubt written clearly across her features—and at length Karreya could remain silent no longer.

"She speaks truth."

Leisa turned to look at her skeptically. "You cannot know that."

"And you do not know my grandmother," Karreya said flatly. "Much like you, when I came to this land, I trusted in my training and my instincts. I thought I knew how to make my way among you. But I was wrong."

Niell's face appeared suddenly in her memory, as he'd looked that day at the market. His finger on her lips, begging for silence. His hair in artful disarray. His eyes, bright and thoughtful as they'd stared at one another.

She did not like that he was so far away. She'd grown used to having him close, and it felt almost as if one of her daggers or her limbs was suddenly missing.

"It was your Prince Vaniell who showed me how much I had yet to learn. How I could make costly mistakes out of ignorance. And you, too, risk deadly error if you do not understand what you face, and cannot accept that our knowledge of some things is greater than yours."

Leisa hesitated for a moment before nodding hesitantly. "Point taken, I think."

Perhaps Leisa did not quite understand, but Karreya did. She suspected that what her cousin truly needed was a glimpse, not of what she'd lost, but of what her mother had saved her from.

"Then I hope you will also consider taking a different view of what occurred when you were a child. Attempt to see your own life through another's eyes," Karreya suggested. "It will not be without pain, but some pain is necessary."

"More pain than I have already felt?" Leisa retorted harshly. "More pain than wondering for most of my life whether my parents left me because they hated and feared my power? Whether they walked away when they could not bear to look any longer on this face that I stole?"

"A different pain," Karreya replied patiently. "Not better, not worse. And what do you mean you have stolen a face?"

Her cousin could no longer hold her gaze. "When I was five, my sister died of a fever. I wanted to see her again, so I changed my reflection to look like her. It was the first time I'd used my magic, and I did not know how to change back. By the time I learned..." Her lips trembled, as if she were fighting tears. "I was alone, and I did not remember the shape of my own face."

Because before she had come fully into her power, her parents had left her. As difficult as it might be for Leisa to hear the truth, Karreya could well understand their terror. If their daughter had manifested mirror magic, it was only a matter of time before someone discovered it—someone such as the hunters sent to track Senaya and return her to the Empire.

“If it aids you,” Karreya said, “I can tell you that your faces are actually quite similar.”

Both Leisa and Senaya suddenly stared at her in utter shock and confusion.

“What are you saying?” Leisa whispered.

“It is my truth sense,” Karreya explained. “When you change your appearance with mirror magic, both of your faces are visible to me—the truth and the lie. And yours are very much alike.”

Her aunt appeared dumbfounded. “That is how you knew me in Iria. You saw both faces.”

Karreya nodded. “And it is how I will know my father. He will not be able to hide from me.”

Across the fire, Senaya’s face had gone ashen gray. “Your grandmother does not know.” She stated it as fact, not conjecture.

“No. I have hidden it very carefully.”

“Why?” Leisa was swiping at her cheeks with her sleeve. “Why have you hidden your magic? Would it not make her value you more?”

“Yes,” Karreya responded flatly. “She would value me so much that she would lock me up, hide me away, and use me as a weapon until my soul was crushed and my spirit a withered husk. I would never see the sun or taste freedom again so long as she lived.”

Her cousin was now as pale as her aunt.

“You may not understand why my aunt chose to leave you,” Karreya continued, “and I will not think less of you for it. But I *do* understand it. I have stood before the throne in

Myrn Draguri. Trembled with the fear of knowing what my grandmother is willing to do in order to maintain her power—in order to exercise complete control of everyone and everything in her empire. There is no one she will not crush. Nothing she cannot use. No darkness she will not embrace. Had she discovered your existence, she would have moved the heavens and the seas in order to possess you. Abreia itself would have ceased to exist and everyone you knew would have died, unless she kept them alive to use them against you. And then you would be her creature, subject to her will and living at her pleasure—the perfect weapon against her enemies until she molded you in her own image.”

The fire continued to crackle into the silence left in the wake of Karreya’s words. Leisa’s hands were clenched together, and Senaya sat as if frozen in place.

“Is this true?” Leisa spoke quietly.

“I do not lie,” Karreya replied.

But Leisa shook her head. “I was talking to you... Mother.”

Senaya remained motionless, staring at her daughter. “It changes nothing. I cannot go back and alter the past, no matter how much I might wish it.”

“I did not ask you to change anything. I asked whether Karreya is telling the truth.”

A handful of tense moments passed before Senaya’s chin dropped to her chest and her eyes closed.

“Yes,” she said simply. “When I chose to love your father, when I chose to have children, it was the most selfish thing I have ever done. I knew what sort of world they might someday inherit, and I did it anyway. Because...” She seemed to crumple in on herself where she sat. “Because I received a taste of what it was like to be loved. What it was like to be a part of a family. And I wanted more. I was greedy and selfish and all of you paid the price for my sins.”

This, Karreya reflected, was why her aunt had insisted that she must give Niell up. That there was no place in her life for

one slightly broken prince of Garimore. Not because she feared he would not understand her, or that their love would die... But because Karreya held the power to destroy him. Because their family was a curse that would destroy everything it touched until someone gathered enough power to change it.

“It is no sin to want to be loved.” Leisa had not moved, but there was a tremor in her voice that had not been there before. “Or to fight for a different world than the one we live in.”

To want to be loved...

For those like Senaya, Karreya, Vaniell, and even... even her father. Did they have the right to be loved? To seek out their own happiness? Or was there some greater calling, some other rule by which they ought to live by virtue of their birth?

“I once thought I would have to sacrifice love in order to protect the ones I cared about,” Leisa admitted. “I have walked away from Kyrion twice now, because we both had something we needed to do. Both of us had a duty that we felt we could not lay aside. But it is love that holds us firm. Love that reminds us why we make these sacrifices in the first place. Without the capacity for love, we become empty and bitter, driven by whatever has taken its place—whether it is envy, lust, greed, or some other emotion.”

Perhaps the true calling was not to seek out love, but simply to love. To love one’s people enough to sacrifice one’s life in their defense. To love one’s family enough to stand between them and danger. To love another person so deeply that you would destroy your own happiness rather than see them be hurt.

“You have sacrificed much,” Karreya said thoughtfully. “Walked away from the one you love in order to pursue duty. And yet, you are not unhappy.”

“No.” Leisa’s joy was visible in her answering smile. “Because no matter where I am, Kyrion goes with me. Because no matter what happens, I know he will never give up on me. After we have both done everything we can to fight for our people, we will find one another again. It is a light that I

carry with me, wherever I go—this hope, and this confidence that he is my home, as I am his.”

Hope... Such a strange emotion. Karreya had rarely considered it except as a weakness, but now that she heard her cousin speak of it, she was willing to consider that it might not always be a liability.

And yet, how could one carry such hope in the face of overwhelming odds? How did one maintain their confidence from day to day?

“How do you know?” she asked curiously. “How do you continue to believe that he will not give up on you? That he will not someday decide that he is finished and has no desire to see you again?”

“I ask myself that from time to time,” Leisa confessed. “And it is not an easy answer. But I have chosen to trust him. To have faith in the strength of his heart and his determination. And I have chosen to fight for him—for his health, for his home, and for his happiness—no matter what the world may throw against us. I believe it will be enough, so long as we are both willing to fight for each other.”

Her tone was fierce. Confident. Unwavering. And at the end of her speech, Senaya rose to her feet.

“I have already agreed to teach you,” she said. “And I will keep that promise. Before we reach Hanselm, I will teach you everything I can, but then I must go. Perhaps you do not believe me, but the longer we are together, the less chance you have of ever returning to the man you love.”

“If that is still your choice,” Leisa returned quietly, “then I have nothing more to say.”

Senaya nodded and walked away from the fire, into the darkness, alone.

CHAPTER 9



He'd been pulled through an illusion, Vaniell realized, though not before he let out a rather undignified yelp of dismay. The "rock" was no more than a well-crafted magical curtain disguising a path that led over the ridge and down the slope into a narrow valley beyond.

And as he followed Kyrion and their guide into that valley, Vaniell was startled to find an entire community nestled at its heart—tiny houses, with smoke rising gently from their chimneys, small garden plots, cows staked out to graze, and chickens wandering about pecking at the dirt. A handful of people were out and about, hauling water or wood along the well-worn paths.

Whatever this place was, it was decidedly within the borders of Farhall, and yet, it had clearly been hidden with great care and deliberation. But Kyrion had known where to find it and was quite familiar with its inhabitants, which meant...

"I suggest utilizing your most polite and least sarcastic behavior for as long as we are here," the night elf suggested, glancing back over his shoulder as they made their way down the slope. "I believe I can prevent them from murdering you, but I guarantee nothing if you choose to forego diplomacy."

"I'm wounded," Vaniell murmured, gazing around thoughtfully at the extent of the tiny community. "When have I ever been less than diplomatic?" At Kyrion's raised eyebrow, he shrugged and grinned a little ruefully. "When I am not at home, that is."

Their guide threw a curious look his way, but continued to lead them down towards the center of the valley, where they were met by a man and a woman. The man's arms were crossed and his expression was forbidding, but the woman's smile held genuine welcome.

“Kyrion ven Athanel. Welcome back. Though I admit I was hoping to see that Leisa was with you. I was looking forward to a long, cozy chat on your next visit.”

And Kyrion, for a change, actually appeared to relax as a small smile crossed his lips. “Yvane, it is good to see you as well. I wish that I had arrived under better circumstances.”

The woman named Yvane scanned him with a clinical gaze as if checking for injuries. She was a small woman, with dark eyes, dusky brown skin, and curling dark hair, and appeared somewhere around middle age, though that could have been anywhere from thirty to forty-five. Despite her size, her air of command was unmistakable, and she seemed utterly unintimidated by her visitors.

“Don't tell me,” she said dryly. “You ran afoul of those dratted Garimoran scouts and you're hoping for sanctuary again?”

“How long have they been troubling you?” Kyrion's tone was sharp, and he turned his gaze to the cliffs surrounding them as if searching for any signs of imminent danger.

“Oh, never fear,” Yvane said cheerfully. “They have not yet detected our presence. But it's growing harder by the day to evade them. They've been lurking about for several months now, ever since the snows receded enough for them to make the journey this deep into the mountains.”

Then her dark eyes shifted to Vaniell and grew deeper, sharper, and far more piercing. “And what sort of human have you brought me this time?”

“The future King of Garimore.” Kyrion's blunt words startled both Yvane *and* Vaniell into a moment or two of speechlessness.

“A bit premature, wouldn’t you say?” Vaniell muttered out of the corner of his mouth before bowing his head politely.

“My lady Yvane, it is a distinct pleasure to meet you. We are indeed seeking sanctuary after an unfortunate encounter with a pair of wyverns, followed by my countrymen’s regrettable enthusiasm for apprehending us. I would extend my apologies for their behavior, but I fear at this moment I have little power to change it.”

He finished his speech and glanced up, only to be met by startled gazes filled with either speculation or hostility.

“So you’re Vaniell.” Yvane’s voice was flat and unreadable, and the man beside her appeared to be considering the best way to eviscerate their Garimoran guest.

“I am,” Vaniell returned without rancor. “Though I find it curious that you did not assume the future king would be my brother. Have you met Danric?”

“And his wife.” Yvane did not seem inclined to elaborate, but she’d shared a great deal in those three simple words. Most important, perhaps, that she knew significantly more about recent happenings in the world than someone living in this secluded valley ought to know. Unless she had somehow played a vital part in those events.

But if she’d met Danric and Evaraine, it was probably wise to be wary of whatever they might have told her about Vaniell himself. Did he figure in their stories as a shadowy nemesis, an unfortunate necessity, or a distant ally with unknown motivations?

“What I find myself most curious about”—Yvane had turned those piercing eyes on Kyrion—“is how such an unusual pair came to arrive on my doorstep in company with one another.”

“That,” Kyrion replied, “is a story I would prefer to relay in private, if we may. There is much to tell. Even had the wyverns not attacked, I had planned to break our journey here to warn you of what the future may hold.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound at all disquieting.” Yvane sighed and cast a glance up at the tall, grim-looking man beside her. “Breven, tell the scouts I’ll hear their reports tonight, and then join us back at the house.”

He glowered for a moment before nodding and striding away, limping heavily on the wooden peg that had replaced his left leg below the knee.

“Poor Breven won’t like me being alone in the house with a villain such as yourself, Prince Vaniell, so I suggest you remain on your best behavior.” Yvane’s eyes seemed to go soft as she gazed after the man. “Five gods know I can take care of myself, but he’s determined to stand between me and danger.”

Five gods...

Yvane suddenly seemed to shake herself and turned back—all softness vanished from her expression. But the damage was already done, and from the look on her face when she met Vaniell’s eyes, she knew it.

“I’ll ask you to say nothing aloud until we reach my home,” she warned him sternly. “For reasons I’m sure even you can understand.”

“Even me?” he echoed quietly. “The wastrel prince of Garimore? The second most hated man in all of Abreia? Are you begging me not to judge you or assuming I would not hesitate to harm you, because either way, I fear the warning does neither of us any credit.”

Yvane’s sudden smile was cool and assessing. “How interesting to discover that you are more than just a sharp wit in a fancy suit of clothes.”

“I suppose we are both learning a great deal today, aren’t we?” Vaniell kept his tone even and polite, while resolutely ignoring Kyrion. He could feel the night elf’s glare boring into the side of his head, suggesting that this was not at all what he’d meant by Vaniell’s “best behavior.”

Fortunately, there was no chance for him to elaborate on the topic. Yvane turned and led them at a brisk walk through the heart of the tiny village, greeting her neighbors with

cheerful words until they reached their destination—a small but cozy house that exuded a welcoming warmth the moment they stepped through the door.

She seated them at the small table before turning to build up the fire and fill up the kettle.

“We’ve only just had a scout return from Waterdeep, so I’ve a bit of tea to share, along with some fresh milk.” Yvane set three heavy mugs on the table, then a plate with a chunk of coarse brown bread, which she sliced before taking her own seat. Afterwards, she seemed to take an unusually long time adjusting her shawl before folding her arms and gazing at Vaniell with a crease between her brows.

“How much do you know?” she asked abruptly.

“Only what you told me,” he answered, careful to keep his tone level as he accepted a slice of bread. “That you are not Abreian.”

One of her eyebrows raised slightly.

“You are Zulleri.”

“And is this likely to prove problematic?” She seemed almost nervous, and shifted her posture as if that question were aimed as much at Kyrion as at Vaniell.

He did not yet feel certain enough of Yvane’s loyalties to tell her the truth of what he knew, but a part of him insisted that he test her. If only to see whether her stern facade would crumble, or whether she might reveal something more than her place of origin.

“Only if you remain loyal to the throne of Myrn Draguri,” he said coolly, and watched as the blood drained from her face.

“I am not,” she said tightly. “And I will do everything in my power to prevent the Empress from ever finding me or using me again. But I think that you had best start your story from the beginning, Prince Vaniell, and explain how you know a name that few Abreians have ever heard spoken.”

Vaniell matched her posture, folding his own arms across his chest as he regarded the diminutive woman across the

table. “As for my story, you have not yet earned that privilege. But I have recently met someone who hails from the Zulleri Empire, and who has served the Empress in the past as a part of a secretive group called the Enclave.”

She’d appeared nervous before, but at that final word, Yvane froze.

“The Enclave?” she whispered. “The Enclave is here?” Then her eyes darted to Vaniell’s, their depths turbulent with pain and memory and confusion. “How did you discover this? The Enclave does not make free with its secrets, and its members do not announce themselves—they simply kill and then disappear.”

And Karreya could easily have done so, if death had been her ambition. But fortunately for him...

Vaniell’s lips curved a little wistfully as he recalled their first meeting, and all the verbal sparring that came afterwards. It seemed he could not even think of Karreya without a pang of longing. Without wondering whether she was well.

But of course she was well. He should be wondering whether she’d stabbed anyone yet or whether they’d found trouble on the road. Though trouble had best hope they didn’t. Karreya was likely to come out the victor in any such encounter.

Perhaps he paused for too long, or perhaps the slight smile on his lips betrayed him, because when he opened his mouth to speak, he found Yvane staring at him in shock.

“There was no killing,” he said hastily. “We are... friends.”

“The Enclave does not permit friendship,” she countered.

“I can be quite charming,” Vaniell murmured, remembering Karreya saying almost exactly the same thing. “Perhaps life at the Enclave never prepared her for meeting someone like me.”

“Her?”

But Vaniell was finished revealing his own secrets until Yvane acknowledged some of her own. Judging from the hints

she'd dropped and the things she seemed to know...

"You say you served the empress, and you know a great deal about the Enclave, Yvane. You were one of her mage assassins, weren't you?"

Vaniell was suddenly plucked out of his seat by a powerful hand. The chair flew across the floor as a muscular arm wrapped around his neck and began to squeeze, reducing his air to a pittance and bringing dark spots to his vision. He scrabbled at the arm with his fingers, but it was like trying to bend iron—he was simply not strong enough.

His coat... He could still reach the pockets and might be able to save himself with an enchantment. Not, however, without causing potentially irreparable harm, and this man did not deserve such a fate. Not for protecting someone he loved.

"Breven, stop!" Yvane jerked to her feet, eyes wide, hands outstretched. "You cannot kill him. Not for guessing the truth."

The pressure did not immediately ease.

Kyrion had risen slowly and smoothly to his feet and was now watching Breven, eyes glowing slightly but his hands empty of weapons. Vaniell wondered with a distant sort of curiosity whether the night elf would intervene if Breven did not release him. Perhaps there was no love lost between them, but Kyrion seemed to think Abreia needed his former nemesis. Would he change his mind, given the opportunity to do away with Vaniell this easily, far from civilization where no one would ever find his body?

"Breven, *please*," Yvane begged, appearing weary and defeated but not hostile, in contrast to the man who finally released his hold, dropping Vaniell to the floor with a painful jolt.

Vaniell took a quick, gasping breath and rubbed at his neck, trying to resist the urge to put more distance between himself and Breven. But it was Breven who stepped away, all the while responding to Yvane with swift, angry gestures.

"Yes, I know, love," she answered aloud, "but it does not matter. Not anymore. They cannot hurt me now. It only

remains to be decided what I am willing to do.”

Vaniell took in a few more deep breaths, keeping a wary eye on Breven and coughing a few times while waiting for the blood to fully return to his head. He was about to attempt rising to his feet when a hand suddenly appeared in front of him. Grey-skinned, scarred, and utterly steady—an offer of aid from the last person Vaniell would have expected.

Glancing up, he took a moment to search those still slightly glowing eyes. He found no hostility or condescension. Only acceptance. Perhaps a hint of curiosity. As if something over the past few days had brought about a shift in Kyrion’s perspective.

Vaniell could have stood without help—could have continued along this road alone. But his heart told him that this was one of those moments where the path of his life divided. In one direction lay the same solitary, joyless pursuit of justice he’d been living for the past decade. In the other? The future he’d caught a glimpse of in Iria.

That future was filled with friends. Allies. People he could depend on to have his back.

All it required... was trust.

Trust in a man who once would have plunged a dagger into Vaniell’s heart without hesitation... and been utterly justified in his actions.

One of Kyrion’s eyebrows quirked. “Do you require another moment to brood on the wrongs of your ancestors?”

A laugh escaped before Vaniell could think better of it. “I fear there is not enough time in this life for such an endeavor.”

“Nor is there time enough to live in your past sins, Princeling. Choose, or the present will move on without you.”

It was the one form of risk Vaniell had refused to take, ever since he was a small boy. To trust without certainty and open himself to hurt. To walk that razor edge between falling and flying with his heart in his hands. In all other areas of life, it was the elements of risk and uncertainty that made him feel

most truly alive. So why not in friendship? Why not take the leap, when the only true risk was to remain as he was now?

Vaniell grasped Kyrion's hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet.

Their eyes held, and Vaniell gave a single nod of recognition. Of thanks.

It was such a small thing, and yet, it felt as if the world had shifted beneath him.

"Are you well?" Yvane was regarding him warily, while Breven stood beside her, arms folded mutinously across his chest.

"Never better." And somehow, Vaniell found himself smiling, because as bizarre as it seemed under the circumstances, even Karreya would find no fault with his honesty.

"I must ask," Yvane said carefully, "how you became friends with a Zulleri assassin, and..."

"Whether I know where she is now?" Vaniell finished the question for her.

Yvane nodded.

"I don't even know where *I* am now," he told her honestly. "But as for the rest..."

It was difficult to know for certain when their friendship had begun. He'd tried to save her life, and she'd ended up saving his. They become reluctant allies, and somewhere in the process, they'd seen one another. Stared into the darkness and never flinched.

"Our friendship was not calculated. We collided in a dockside bar, and then..." He'd discovered she was so much more than he'd first realized. She was beautiful, yes. But also deadly. Honest. Wise. Confident yet humble. He'd given her his trust, and she'd granted hers in return. She'd fought for him, and he would do the same for her, for as long as he drew breath.

“So it’s like that, is it?” Yvane offered him a wry smile. “Well, I suppose you’ve already realized that she is not the first of her order to come here and fall in love.” She glanced up at Breven and tucked her hand into his arm before returning her attention to Vaniell. “Does she return your feelings? Does she even know who you are?”

“She knows who I am,” Vaniell admitted. “But I do not know how she feels, or if she would even want what I have to offer. There is so much that stands between us...”

As Vaniell paused to consider just *how* much, Kyrion abruptly entered the conversation. “And a great deal more that you should know, Yvane, including the reasons that I intended to stop here in the first place.”

“Just tell me.” Yvane’s expression turned steely and grim. “I’d rather hear the worst of it now, so we can be prepared.”

“It regards the current King of Garimore. You are aware that he is an imposter and a mirror mage. But we have only recently discovered that he is also Zulleri. This will mean more to you than it did to us, but apparently he was once known by the title of Second Blade.”

Yvane’s knees faltered, and she would have fallen had Breven not caught her and lowered her gently into a chair. “Two Blades, here...” Her face lost color and her hands clenched around the edges of her shawl. “And he in particular.”

“What do you know of him?”

“Modrevin Draguris,” she said heavily. “A man I never thought to see again, and never wished to.”

Without warning, Vaniell found himself utterly bereft of speech. His thoughts stumbled to a halt and his heart churned with a strange mixture of shock and exultation.

For the first time in his life, he had a name.

The person who had made his life a misery and destroyed everything he loved now had a name. Vaniell no longer need think of him as “not-Melger.” As “Imposter King.” Or worst of all, as “Father.”

He was Modrevin, and somehow that made him less of a shadowy unknown, less of a terrifying threat. He was only a man, and a man could be defeated.

But even as he marveled at the feeling of *finally* having a name for his enemy, something else Yvane said sank in.

“Two Blades,” he mused thoughtfully. “Yvane, who is the other Blade that you know of?” She could not know of Karreya. Which meant...

Reaching up to where Breven’s hand rested on her shoulder, Yvane grasped it tightly for a moment before looking Vaniell dead in the eye.

“Her name is Senaya. She was once First Blade, but she escaped the Empress’s plans for her and came here. I was one of the Empress’s loyal subjects—a powerful mage and an assassin, trained by the Enclave to be the perfect weapon. When I was just barely out of my eighteenth year, the Enclave chose me to be the one to find Senaya and return her to Zulle.”

Kyrion and Vaniell exchanged startled glances.

“It was... what, twenty years ago now? Perhaps a bit more? I came here filled with purpose. Knowing nothing but the mission. Committed to my duty to serve the Empress with my very life. I had been molded in my profession since a very young age, and had been taught to use my power in... unspeakable ways.” Yvane looked down at her hands. “I am a mind mage, you see. Perhaps the most powerful one the Enclave had ever seen. So they trained me to see myself as little better than a dog, to be ordered to fetch or kill on command, then tasked me with returning the First Blade to Zulle by whatever means necessary.”

Kyrion’s face was suddenly unreadable, and Breven was watching Yvane as if her pain was his own.

“But they did not understand what Abreia is like. In Zulle, all magic is tightly controlled, leashed and used only to serve the Empress. Here, it is free, and one of my gifts is to sense others’ magic.” Yvane’s eyes closed, and her hands folded in

her lap, clenched around one another until her knuckles turned white.

“For example, I knew when I first met Leisa that she is a mirror mage. I can sense that you, Prince Vaniell, are an enchanter. And while I cannot read Kyrion’s magic so clearly, I know that it is immense enough for him to crush me with little effort.” Her eyes opened. “I can do other things as well. Terrible things. Some that I will not speak of here. But when I came to this land, I was already near the end of my control, and after a year of chasing Senaya, the strain broke me.”

She turned to look up at Breven then, and his hands gripped her shoulders as if they could somehow take her pain away.

“When a mind mage of my powers breaks, the consequences can be devastating. My mind lashed out, and everyone around me felt it—other mages worst of all. So many could have died, but for Breven. He found me. Stopped me. Picked up all my broken pieces and put me back together. And then... he brought me here. Far from anyone else, where I could heal in peace and learn to shield my mind.”

Yvane shifted her gaze to Kyrion. “It was only later, after we left this valley for the first time, that we learned of the persecution being practiced against mages. I thought perhaps this could be my penance—providing a home and protection for those who need it. But I think... I think I have always known that one day I would have to leave this place again. Re-enter the world and repay the debt that I owe.”

Breven dropped to a crouch in front of her, hands flying, desperation in every line of his body.

“No, love, not like that.” Yvane reached out to rest a hand on the side of his face, her eyes sad but filled with tenderness. “I have promised, and it is a promise I will not break. Never again will I break the mind of another. But that does not mean there is nothing I can do.”

Breven placed his hand over hers where it rested against his cheek, and for a moment, they shared some form of communication too deep for words. Yvane’s eyes filled with

tears and she nodded. Breven lifted her free hand, kissed her palm, and then rose to stand beside her once more, grim and resolute.

“I know little of Modrevin,” Yvane said, “But I will tell you what I can. And then...” She shook her head. “I do not know exactly what I must do, but my heart insists that this peaceful life I have built here will soon come to an end.”

It was sobering, Vaniell reflected, to regard one’s own tragedies in the light of another’s, and realize that such pain was not, in fact, unique. Perhaps there were more people in the world who had suffered great betrayals than those who had not.

But rather than casting him into despair, the thought gave him hope. For so long, he’d imagined himself alone, cast out by the depths of his guilt and the shame of his own actions. Watching others lead ordinary lives, wondering if that simple joy would be denied him forever.

But now that he had come to know others like Jarek, Karreya, Leisa, Kyrion, and Yvane, he wondered if perhaps isolation had been his greatest mistake of all. What if he’d allowed himself to know others long before necessity had forced his hand? What if he’d listened to their stories, shared his own, and discovered sooner that he need not fight alone?

It was Kyrion who broke the silence between the four of them, and his tone was as heavy as Yvane’s. “I do not pretend to understand what strange twists of fate have brought us to this moment,” he said. “Nor do I counsel that you continue in your quest for absolution. What you have done in the service of those who used you as a thing rather than a person is not your guilt to bear. But I do feel that it is right to tell you this. Not because I harbor ill-will, but because I believe you would wish to know. Leisa, whose life you saved alongside mine, is also entangled in this story of yours.

“Twenty years ago, her mother left her behind in Arandar, fleeing in the night because she had learned of a threat that endangered the lives of everyone she knew.”

Yvane turned ashen.

“Yes,” Kyrion said softly. “Leisa is Senaya’s daughter.”

CHAPTER 10



The closer they came to the walled city that awaited them, the greater the numbers of travelers on the roads, and the more difficult it became to pass unnoticed.

Each night, they were forced to travel far from the well-used road to find a place where they could camp unseen, so that Leisa could continue to discover more about her magic. With Senaya's reluctant guidance, she'd begun learning to change the shape and contour of her mirror, and to sense the power that lay behind its mysterious surface.

Karreya had no part in those moments—indeed, she felt more than a little like an intruder as mother and daughter attempted to bridge the awkward distance between them. So instead, she slipped away from camp and explored the lands through which they traveled, noting the moods and character of its people, the colors and rhythms of this land that had lured her father far from home with the promise of... what? Power and riches?

The Throne of Garimore was indeed beautiful in its own way. Covered in farms and forests, with no barren, sandy deserts or towering sandstone cliffs. There was no urgency to its beauty, no threat in its rolling green hills—only the gentle passage of days and seasons and years. Its people were farmers and craftsmen, whose lives seemed rooted in complacency. They grew trees and flowers for their own sake, tended grass for no other reason than appearance, and even the common folk frequented shops filled with unnecessary goods.

But with each village they passed through, the nearer they came to the capital city of Hanselm, there was less of good humor and complacency. Less of peace or prosperity or whimsy. Eyes shifted. Jaws clenched. Hands clutched at weapons. Children hid behind their parents, and merchants barred their doors.

Farm fields lay barren and orchards went untended, even in the middle of what ought to have been the growing season. And soon, new forests seemed to spring up in the midst of those untended fields—forests of tents, filled with the sounds of horses and armorers and the clang of blade against blade. Heavy boots trampling the fertile ground.

Garimore was preparing for battle.

It was late one morning as they rode through a small farming village that they encountered a group of armed and armored soldiers pulling men forcibly into the street. From late teens to the middle-aged, they simply took them from their homes, from their work, or from their families. One man still wore the floured apron of a baker, and another had a sobbing child clutching tightly to his leg.

Conscriptions, meant to swell the ranks of their army. But with every farmer, every blacksmith, every baker they forced to take up the sword in the name of conquest, the people went unfed. Horses went unshod. All to add a few extra swords in the hands of those who had neither the ability nor the desire to kill. Even the Empire did not rely on conscripts, except in newly conquered territories. There was no need. It was an honor to serve the Empress, and the families of her soldiers were well compensated.

And as Karreya rode past them, with the anguished cries of parents, children, wives, and friends ringing in her ears, she wondered how she ought to feel knowing that this had all been brought about by the man she'd once called Father.

She'd recognized her desire to seek justice for those he had destroyed in his quest for power. Decided that she could not stand by and allow these people to pay the price for his

misplaced ambition. She had even discovered how deeply she wished for other mages to live without fear of prejudice.

But what did she feel for *herself*?

It was a strange question. One she might never have contemplated had she never come here and met Niell. But now it demanded her attention, as it followed on the heels of her discovery that not all emotions were a liability. If she had feelings about the well-being and circumstances of others, why not her own?

When they were just past the outskirts of town and the sounds of misery had finally died away, Leisa reined in her horse and dropped back to ride beside Karreya.

“Are you well?” she asked in a low voice.

“I am feeling... thoughtful,” Karreya responded. “I am thinking about what my father has done. About everything he has broken and destroyed. And I am wondering what those things should mean to me. Whether I should be feeling shame that he shares my blood, or anger at his abandonment. Perhaps hope that he will listen to me... I do not know, and it perplexes me.”

“There are no easy answers when it comes to feelings.” Leisa dropped her stirrups, rested her reins on her horse’s neck, and stretched her arms over her head with a grimace. “I’ve gotten so used to traveling with Kyrion, I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to ride for this long,” she groaned. “But truly, there is no ‘should’ or ‘should not’ when it comes to what we feel. It’s more about naming those feelings and choosing what to do with them, so that they do not have the chance to rule our actions.”

Naming her feelings...

“I do not think I know the right words,” Karreya admitted. “There is something heavy *here*”—she tapped her chest—“and something urgent *here*.” She tapped one finger against her temple. “I have the desire to move faster, to arrive sooner, and to speak the words in my head. To know what my father will say to me. But I cannot tell what words I wish to hear from

him. I first thought this would be like confronting any other enemy. I know well how to formulate a strategy, and how to provoke a response, and I believe I can force him to act rashly. But what then? I cannot tell whether it is right to hope for a certain outcome, or to simply make my plans and act on them.”

To make a plan and act on it... That was at the heart of her training. She knew how to assess and how to move that assessment towards action. She knew how to improvise as more information became available. How to achieve her ends through whatever means necessary.

“I have always known that I must be willing either to kill or to die,” she murmured. “That in order to act swiftly and decisively, I must understand what I am truly fighting for. Whether I fight to protect others or myself. Whether I fight for a cause or a person, or whether I place greater value in my convictions or my life.”

“But it’s different this time, isn’t it?” Leisa’s voice held a note that Karreya’s instincts insisted was compassion. “Before, it’s always been strangers. It’s always been about your duty to the Empire. Now, it’s at least partially about you.”

“Yes,” Karreya acknowledged. “And if I hesitate, I know I will fail. The necessary decisions may be difficult and brutal, so I must know myself and my desires completely before I face them. But how can I do so? The man I seek is a mystery to me, and therefore...” It finally struck her. “Therefore, a part of *me* is a mystery as well.”

And she did not like it. She had barely known her father, and even his face was little more than a memory, so why should this matter so much to her?

Leisa reached over to place a hand on her arm, and Karreya blinked as she stared at the hand. It was a touch of comfort—generous and instinctual. Did all Abreians touch one another so easily?

“I know this may come as little consolation,” Leisa said, “but I believe this is a very human reaction. You were old enough when he left to have learned to desire his approval.

And to take the hurt of his abandonment and make it a part of yourself, even without knowing.”

Karreya considered that for a moment. Absorbed the flinch that echoed through her mind when she heard the words. Was it true?

“How do you know these things?” she demanded. “Is this a knowledge that all Abreians are taught when they are children?”

Leisa’s lips curved in amusement. “Not at all,” she said. “But they are a part of my own story. And just because those wretches at the Enclave told you it was wrong to have feelings doesn’t mean you won’t have them. You will. All they did was ensure that those feelings will catch you by surprise and make you weaker instead of stronger.”

What an odd thought. “Can such feelings make us stronger?” Karreya asked doubtfully. “I believe that love, hope, friendship... those are good. But what of anger, shame, and doubt? How can such things make us better?”

“By looking at them squarely, naming them, and bringing them into the light,” Leisa told her. “They are there whether we choose them or not. But if we can learn not to flinch from them... We take away the power of others to make us feel small and broken. And what greater strength can there be than to take away another’s ability to control us?”

Truth. Even Madame Inci would admit that such power would be a potent weapon indeed. So why did the Enclave not teach such things?

She eyed her cousin curiously. “How did you become so wise?”

Leisa let out a gurgle of laughter. “I am flattered,” she said with a smile. “But I do not feel wise in any sense of the term. I am weak, and I am wounded, but somehow, I am still standing. More than that, I am loved, and I know that my heart is safe with the ones who love me. Perhaps that is the only secret wisdom I possess—knowing that I can face the darkness

within me without fear, because those who stand beside me will never flinch, no matter what I find.”

Face the darkness within her without fear...

Karreya had thought that of Niell once, and now knew it to be true. He had not turned away from her when he learned her true identity. And perhaps it was only Niell who could truly understand this turmoil now raging within her as she prepared to face her father once more.

An uncomfortable surge of longing shot through her—a wish that Niell could be here with her, instead of many miles away. Something about his blinding smile and ridiculous flirting made her feel as though she were not an ocean away from her home, but somewhere familiar and safe.

“How long have you been in love with Vaniell?”

Leisa’s question startled her into glancing over, wide-eyed, wondering if she had somehow made the unthinkable mistake of speaking her thoughts aloud.

Leisa’s laughter rang out when she saw Karreya’s expression. “No, you didn’t say anything, but there was no need. You were thinking of someone who mattered to you. And even if you choose to deny it, I know you were hoping for more from him before he left.”

That much was true. But she could not truly be angry with him. Not when she had also failed to speak what was in her heart, because she had not understood it. Perhaps he had felt the same. Perhaps his own heart was filled with just as much turmoil and frustration.

“I do not know the answer to your question,” she confessed. “Because I am not certain that I know what it is to love. I know that I wish to be near him. That I am less anxious when I know he is unhurt, and that I would kill without hesitation to protect him. He has said that I am the only one allowed to stab him, and that he wishes to have me at his side. That I should not run away, because he will find me when this is over.” She sighed deeply, tilting her face skyward as her

horse ambled along so slowly he might have been asleep. “But I do not know what any of it means.”

She glanced at Leisa. “If I am not mistaken, the two of you have a difficult history.”

“Difficult is one word,” Leisa admitted with a lopsided smile. “But Vaniell has been playing a deep game for many years. I’m not certain I truly know him. But I am cautiously ready to believe that he is, in fact, a decent man who was abused and manipulated by the man he believed to be his father. Who has been trying his best to make up for his mistakes. Beyond that... only his actions will tell.”

Karreya had seen enough of Niell’s actions to know that he was a man of deep courage, principle, and determination. But that did not mean he loved her. He had said only that he did not see her as a plaything. That he wanted her at his side, and not as a guard or an assassin. But what?

From up ahead, she heard a brief exclamation from Senaya, which jerked her eyes up to the road.

Soldiers—a full company of them—were arrayed across the path, standing behind what appeared to be a sturdily constructed barricade.

“Stop, and state your business,” one of them called out. “You are approaching the royal city of Hanselm, and all travelers must submit to questioning.”

“Well, that’s new,” Leisa muttered under her breath. “He used to let anyone and everyone just march in through the open gates.”

“Hello,” she called back, her voice friendly and her expression open. “We are here to meet family. Our father has joined the army, and we were unable to keep the farm running, so we have come to seek a position with a distant cousin.”

Karreya had a great deal of practice, but it was still difficult to hear so many lies rolling off Leisa’s tongue.

“And just who do you claim as your *cousin*?” the man demanded. “Hanselm already has its fill of beggars, and no need for more.”

“Lord Kellan,” she answered promptly. “His mother was the second wife of the Duke of Pergisham, and our mother is the present Duchess’s second cousin by marriage. The two of them stayed together briefly during a house party at the Duchess’s aunt’s summer residence near Corview on the southern coast.”

Karreya watched as the poor man attempted to work out their actual relationship, which was, of course, none at all. Kellan was one of Niell’s friends and allies, a younger son of the nobility who used his apparent uselessness to disguise his rebellious activities. Though many of the other details were actually correct. Niell had provided them with an impressively thorough cover story.

“Four days.” The man wearing a captain’s insignia seemed to come to a decision, though his scowl made it clear that he had not necessarily bought their story. “You’ll have a pass that will allow you entry to the city for four days, and then you’d best be employed or be out on your ear.”

He glanced at the three of them. “And how many will the pass be for?”

“Only two of us,” Leisa said coolly. “Sen will be returning to look after the farm, just as soon as she delivers us safely to Hanselm.”

“Very well.” The man murmured orders to one of his fellow soldiers, who reached into the pouch at his belt for a piece of official-looking paper. “But your woman will only be allowed to accompany you as far as the gates. She may not go beyond it without a pass of her own.”

“Understood.” Leisa dipped her chin in a polite nod.

The captain made a few quick marks on the paper before handing it to Leisa—simple lines beneath words “Gate Pass” that indicated it permitted entry for two people.

Karreya saw Leisa’s finger tighten on the paper and wondered if she was perhaps feeling conflicted about the coming separation.

They would be going on their way, embarking on the most dangerous part of their mission, and Senaya would not come with them. Was it strange, or perhaps even painful, for Leisa to know that her mother had chosen to leave her once more?

“The insignia on your pass indicates how many days you will be allowed to remain, and it will be stamped upon your entry into the city. Should you extend your stay unlawfully without attaining a position in the duke’s household, you will be detained and fined. Is this clear?”

Leisa nodded once more. “Thank you, Captain. We understand. And I’m certain my cousin will wish to aid us.”

The captain grumbled under his breath—something about “country wenches” and “freeloaders”—but stood aside as the barrier was moved back to allow them to ride through.

“How far to the gates?” Leisa asked over her shoulder.

“A day’s journey,” one of the guards called back. “But if you camp along the way, beware of thieves.”

“Oh, lovely,” Leisa muttered. “They waylay us on the road, but can’t be bothered to stop thieves from harassing travelers?”

“The strong must survive of their own will and abilities,” Senaya said flatly. “That is the first tenet of our family’s house.”

“But it is not how this kingdom was run up until recently,” Leisa argued. “I was here, not quite a year ago, and none of this would have been allowed. It was prosperous and peaceful.”

“On the surface, perhaps. But I assure you, the foundations for this have been in place for far longer than anyone realizes.”

“This seems to be a change from what you have told me of my father,” Karreya mused aloud. “The man you described did not seem like one who would take a long-term view, or understand that victory requires preparation.”

“He has clearly learned the value of patience,” Senaya returned with a shrug. “Or we would not be here now.”

He had been waiting for over a decade, and had finally seen his opportunity to strike. But why now? What had he seen that induced him to act? From the outside, it would seem that his world was falling apart. Both of his sons, lost. A marital alliance, unraveled. Did he see his patient plans crumbling beneath his feet and decide to make his move before it was too late?

Perhaps this was a sign of his need for haste. His impatience to win. And if so, it might indeed be possible for Karreya to use his already hasty actions against him.

What would he feel when he saw her face? Anything at all? And should it trouble her that all their plans hinged on him feeling panic when he realized who she was?

Niell would know the answer. Or at least help her feel less like a fish learning how to walk.

But he was not here, and despite the ache in her chest, Karreya was thankful for it. This city held far more pain for Niell than for her, and unlike her, he might find himself unable to walk out again once he entered it.

So if she was to protect him, she must learn. Adapt. Steel her heart against whatever confrontation was coming, because this moment was unlike any other she had experienced.

Her training was simple. Find the target, eliminate it, escape undetected. But this time, she intended to be noticed. And she could not kill her target—in fact, she very much needed to keep him alive.

Even if Niell was right. Even if her own father learned of her identity and attempted to kill her to protect his secrets.

The only way out of this now was through, and Karreya did not intend to let anything stop her. Not her aunt, not her friends, not an entire city full of enemies. The reckoning was coming, and only time would tell who would remain standing at the end of it.

CHAPTER 11



The flight from the hidden valley was a silent one, but for once, it was not an awkward silence, only thoughtful.

They'd left Yvane still reeling from the news, but unwilling to share any details of her own plans. She'd said it was better if they did not know the details, but that she intended to join the fight against Modrevin.

With every new ally, Vaniell's burden ought to have grown lighter, but too much had changed over the last few days—not the least of which was Vaniell himself. And now, he was about to confront a moment he had long been convinced would never come.

He was about to meet his brother and his ex-fiance, in a kingdom he had once nearly helped to destroy. And he had no idea what either of them truly believed—about him, about the past, or about his present ambitions.

There was no denying the weight of apprehension resting on his shoulders. But oddly, after the events of the past few days, that apprehension was brightened by the faintest light of hope. Hope that they had not given up on him. Hope that eventually they would forgive him.

When they landed at last, it was not at the palace gates, as Kyrion had done in Eddris. Instead, he landed outside the city, shifted to his night elf form, and turned to Vaniell with a raised brow.

“I thought it best if we walk in from here. The guards at Arandar are considerably more alert than those in Eddris, and having been shot out of the sky here once before, I have no desire to experience it again.”

“A reasonable precaution,” Vaniell agreed. “And if you prefer to travel separately, I understand.”

“Because you do not wish to be seen with a night elf?” Kyrion said the words without rancor.

“Because they might like you better if you aren’t seen in company with a rogue Garimoran prince,” Vaniell retorted. “In these lands, I suspect I’m a far more unwelcome visitor than you.”

“Possibly true.” Kyrion’s lips actually seemed to turn up at the corners and twitch slightly. “But if I abandon you now, I would not be on hand to enjoy your discomfiture. I hope you would not deny me that long-awaited pleasure.” His eyes glittered, but Vaniell would have sworn it was not with malice.

“On the contrary, Your Majesty.” Vaniell bowed low, with a sweeping flourish. “I live only to provide for your amusement. Would you also like me to recite poetry? Perhaps sing an epic ballad or two?”

“Can you?” Kyrion regarded him with unwavering stoicism, eyes still glimmering faintly.

“Can? Yes to both. But can and should are very different things.”

“And here I was under the impression that Prince Vaniell of Garimore was accomplished in all the courtly arts.”

“Only the useless ones, remember? Want someone to play the part of a wealthy reprobate? I’m your man. Require a dancer who can smile for days and never step on your toes? Look no farther. But for the love of all Abreia, don’t ask me to do something useful. I might faint.”

“Then I suppose we’d best travel together, after all,” Kyrion murmured, one brow curving upwards. “If you faint and break that face of yours, it’ll be left to me to explain our

purpose here, which would require far more words than I prefer to employ in the middle of the day.”

Vaniell felt a grin threatening to break free. “Then I suppose I’ll have to save you from such a wretched fate.”

“Indeed.” Kyrion locked eyes with him, his gaze suddenly serious. “And in that case, I suppose I would be forced to thank you.”

The air left Vaniell’s lungs, and all temptation to smile vanished. They were no longer talking nonsense. This was about something else.

“What exactly are we talking about now?”

Kyrion’s head tilted slightly. “The gem you gave to Princess Caro.”

A fist seemed to clench in Vaniell’s chest. The spell gem. He’d been using them to pay for his travels and fund his network’s activities, but once, they’d had a far more sinister purpose. One Kyrion was all too familiar with.

It was a gem very similar to that one—enchanted with a spell of control—that had permitted Modrevin to manipulate the enspelled armor that had enslaved Kyrion for so long. The armor had turned him into the Raven—feared assassin and terrifying bodyguard, unable to resist his king’s commands, and forced to commit unspeakable atrocities at the king’s whims.

And Vaniell had been the one to enchant it.

“Yes,” he said through frozen lips. “What of it?”

“You once gave one very like it to Leisa, in front of the king... In front of Modrevin.”

Vaniell blinked at him, utterly taken aback. *That* was what Kyrion had chosen to remember in this moment?

“You knew what it would do,” Kyrion continued. “Knew that he would not be able to tell whether it was enchanted and would therefore suspect you. Which means that you risked everything to build that link between us—not only to set me free, but to warn Leisa of what he was.”

Vaniell was utterly blindsided by the sting of emotion that forced him to bite his lip and drop his gaze to the ground.

He had indeed known what it would look like when he gave the gem to Leisa. He'd had no choice but to play that moment off with all the panache and flippancy he was capable of. But on the inside, he'd been racked with terror. Afraid that the imposter king would understand exactly what he'd done and why, and would take out his anger on Mother and Pip. Even more afraid that by potentially freeing the Raven, he would unleash a destructive power that might well end in the death of everyone and everything he'd cared about.

"I wish I'd done it sooner," was all he could say. "I'm so sorry..."

A warm weight settled on his shoulder. A firm grip, and a gentle squeeze.

"This is not an indictment, but my thanks," Kyrion said. "Without that act of courage, I would not be here, and I would never have come to realize how utterly extraordinary Leisa is. I would have missed the greatest joy and privilege of my life—to know her and love her and have her beside me as my queen. I hope, Prince Vaniell of Garimore, that you can learn to look back on your past and see it much as anyone else's—filled with mistakes, yes, but also with moments of courage that have changed those around you for the better."

Vaniell could not even speak. He could only nod, wordlessly, and hope he could somehow manage not to humiliate himself completely by breaking down into the sort of tears he'd only ever cried for his mother.

Kyrion continued to grip his shoulder, and after a few more deep, shuddering breaths, Vaniell was finally able to look up and meet that piercing silver gaze.

"Shall we go?" Kyrion asked with the tiniest hint of a smile.

"Best get this next part over with," Vaniell agreed, offering a wry grin of his own.

Strangely, he was no longer dreading the day before him, but rather wondering whether he would even be the same person at the end of it.



Vaniell expected them to have at least some difficulty entering the city, but even though the gates were guarded and carefully watched, the two of them received no more than a quick glance and a salute as they passed into the streets of Arandar.

Perhaps Kyrion was better known here than he'd anticipated, or perhaps the guards knew perfectly well that no night elf would be serving as a clandestine agent for the enemy. Whatever the case, they were allowed to enter without incident, and Vaniell found himself studying his surroundings with a swell of curiosity.

Not only because it was his first time in Arandar, but because this place was now Danric's future. His brother was king here, and Vaniell had always known he would perform admirably in the role. Indeed, he had always expected Danric to be the one to take on leadership of Garimore when the time came.

The older prince had spent most of his life preparing for that position, and now that it was no longer a possibility, Vaniell could not stop wondering whether his brother resented him for it. Could not seem to ignore the uncomfortable certainty that he would never be able to live up to the standard Danric had set for dedicated, conscientious leadership.

A standard that was evident even here. The city of Arandar was built in a valley and had spread up both sides over the years. As a result, it was crowded, and the streets seemed to turn and twist in odd places, but they remained clean and orderly. There was evidence of recent repairs, and while the city did not appear as prosperous as Hanselm, there was a clear sense of pride and purpose in Arandar's inhabitants.

For a few moments, Vaniell paused on the corner of a city square to take it all in, to watch and listen to the people, and to

remind himself that this would be Danric's legacy. Farhall, not Garimore, was his brother's home, and these were his people.

And if he knew anything at all about Danric, the man would do whatever was necessary to protect this place. It only remained to be seen whether he would be more inclined to murder Vaniell for endangering it, or hail him as a hero for trying to save it.

Perhaps he lingered a bit too long, because an armed and armored guard eventually approached, looking stern and severe as he made his way towards them across the street. Probably to tell them to move along and stop cluttering up the square.

But instead, he bowed, hand on the hilt of his sword.

"If you would be good enough to accompany me," he said stiffly, "the palace has been informed of your arrival and requests an audience at your earliest convenience."

Meaning now.

It wasn't as if putting off the moment would make it any easier, so Vaniell let out a barely audible sigh and followed as the guard led them through the streets and up the hill, to where the royal palace perched on a promontory overlooking the valley. It was far smaller than the palace at Hanselm, but still somehow graceful and proud—a protector rather than a leech.

The gates to the palace courtyard swung open at their approach, and within the yard itself, Vaniell could see... far too many people. Oddly, none of them were milling about—rather, they stood in ranks and groups, all of them focused on the open gate.

"I had hoped to arrive with a great deal less fanfare," he muttered under his breath to Kyrion.

"Since when did Vaniell of Garimore object to fanfare?" Kyrion's eyebrow twitched in his direction. "And has it occurred to you that their presence might actually have nothing to do with you?"

"Of course not," Vaniell returned, with entirely feigned complacency. "I have a reputation to uphold, after all. Isn't

everything always about me?”

“Perhaps when your company does not outrank you.” Kyrion smirked slightly as his chin lifted and somehow in the space of an instant he was no longer just Kyrion, but Kyrion ven Athanel, Wyvern King of Dunmaren, sovereign of his people and a welcome guest in this foreign court.

And for once, Vaniell was glad of it, as his companion’s title and reputation allowed *him* to fade into the background.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty.” A man in a neatly pressed guard uniform and polished boots bowed low before Kyrion and received a graceful tilt of the head in return. “We are honored to have you here, as always, and I believe you will find that we have several other guests who are eager to greet you.”

“Eager is *one* word for it.” The stern female voice belonged to a tall, lithe, night elf in a dark, formal cloak, who stalked forward out of the crowd with a younger woman at her heels. “I feel that irritated is perhaps a better one.”

“Greetings to you as well, Mother.”

Vaniell’s gaze fastened on the night elf woman with something approaching horror. This was not one of the confrontations he’d imagined having. And even if he had, the woman before him did not appear to be the forgiving sort. Her dark eyes were deep and stern, and the lines around her mouth made her look grimly disapproving. And if her graceful movements and collection of weaponry were any indication, she was likely to prove every bit as dangerous as Kyrion himself.

The night elf behind her suddenly chuckled, a sound of unrestrained amusement. “Oh, but this is delightful. Do tell him exactly how annoyed you are, Mother. I promise to enjoy every minute of finally getting to see Kyrion in even more trouble than I am.”

The younger woman’s skin was a darker gray than Kyrion’s, and her hair was nearly white, but otherwise the two

resembled one another strongly. Other than her wickedly teasing grin, perhaps.

“Wyn and I have been awaiting your arrival,” the older woman said. The lines in her face softened marginally as she looked at her son, scanning him as if to reassure herself that he was unhurt. “I anticipated your return rather sooner than this, and there was some concern that your errand may have resulted in a mishap.”

Kyrion’s expression eased into something that was almost a smile.

“I am well, as you can see. What brings the two of you to Arandar?”

“Discussing the terms of our treaty,” she said briskly. “After Garimore’s invasion, it seemed prudent to determine the details of our mutual defense clause.”

“I came because I was bored,” the young woman announced. “But where is Leisa, and who is *this*?”

She turned lavender eyes on Vaniell and scanned him up and down in an appreciative style that, in another time and place, might have moved him to at least attempt a flirtation.

“This?” Kyrion regarded Vaniell with a raised brow, as if trying to decide how best to proceed. “You were afraid I had encountered a mishap... I suppose you could say this is it.”

“Only a mishap?” Desperate to put off the necessary explanations, Vaniell turned wounded eyes on the night elf. “I thought I would rate at the very least a catastrophe.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I would be hard pressed to label you as even a mild inconvenience.”

Wyn’s jaw dropped. “Kyrion? What is happening?”

But rather than answering, Kyrion looked around at the crowd of overly attentive listeners. “I suggest we move our conversation indoors. We have a great deal of information to relay, and little time in which to do so.”

“We?”

“Yes.” But then Kyrion would say no more until their small group made their way into the palace, following the guide of a uniformed servant.

In comparison to the palace at Hanselm, the interior of Farhall’s royal residence might have been dismissed as positively shabby. But to Vaniell’s eyes, it was something far better—a home. There was no particular degree of wealth or ostentation on display, merely a functional residence filled with well-designed and well-kept furnishings.

And when their group finally paused in front of a perfectly ordinary door, the servant stepped back and permitted Kyrion to knock, just as if they were visiting friends.

“Enter.”

At the sound of that familiar voice, Vaniell actually winced. But it was too late to back out. Too late to make his excuses. The door was already opening, to reveal not a formal receiving room, but a comfortable study, with a fire burning in the hearth and a pair of desks occupying one side of the chamber.

And behind one of those desks...

“Kyrion!” A familiar dark-haired man rose hastily from his chair and moved towards them with a smile. “What a relief. We were concerned when you did not return sooner. But where is...”

In the midst of his question, Danric finally looked past Kyrion and saw Vaniell.

He stopped in his tracks, lips parted, hands fallen limply to his sides. For the space of a few breaths, the only sound was the crackling of the fire.

There was no naming the emotions that crossed his brother’s face. There were too many, and they were too entangled with one another to identify them. Fear, loss, anguish, hope, relief, frustration... Vaniell could not even tell for certain whether the bad outweighed the good.

“I’d almost begun to wonder whether you might be dead,” Danric said at last into the silence, a slight tremor in his voice.

“Whether you’d finally irritated someone enough that they decided to silence you for good.”

“I’d be lying if I claimed no one has tried.” For once, Vaniell was having no luck at all reading his brother’s mood.

“I’d be lying if I claimed I’d never thought about it.” Danric’s dark eyes bored into his, piercing and serious.

“If you’ve decided this world would be better off without me, I suppose there’s not much I can say. And little I could do about it,” Vaniell said lightly, hoping to the heavens that he’d managed to conceal how much this pained him. How much he wished their history had been different.

But unless Danric had found his study, read his journals, and chosen to believe his words... The only version of Vaniell he could possibly know was the wastrel he’d spent years loathing. The brother who defied every order, disappeared when he was needed, and refused to do his duty to his kingdom. Everything Danric abhorred.

“Little you could do?” Danric looked incredulous. “That is perhaps the greatest absurdity you have ever uttered, and I have been listening to you be absurd since we were children.”

“I...” Vaniell truly had no idea what to say to that.

Danric stepped forward, and everyone else in the room began to back away as he moved towards Vaniell with a slow, measured stride. “Over the past year, I’ve begun to put together numerous whispers and tidbits of information that only made sense once I understood what you were trying to do. Once I realized you’ve been lying to everyone since you were barely old enough to shave.”

Vaniell braced himself. This speech had been many years in the making, and he owed it to his brother to listen till the end.

“For over *ten years*, you carried the weight of this terrible truth.” Danric’s voice was shaking now. “You were utterly alone, but you mastered your fear again and again, took the brunt of everyone’s disappointment and disgust, and faced every day with that outrageous smile, because you thought no

one else would believe you. And because the fate of our people mattered to you.”

Vaniell could have been pushed over by a slight breeze. Fallen to his knees and wept. It was not what he had expected his brother to say—not even close. Where was the accusation? The judgment? Where was the hurt and frustration?

Danric finally came close enough to reach out and clasp Vaniell’s shoulders, a world of heartfelt emotion in his dark eyes. “I can only say that I am sorry. Sorry I was so blind. Sorry that I did not see what that man was doing to you and to Mother. Sorry that I failed you both and left you to bear this burden alone.” His eyes closed, and he shook his head. “So don’t ever say again that there is little you can do. You have done more to protect the Five Thrones than anyone else in this room, and if you’ll still have me... I am beyond proud to call you my brother.”

There were no words. For once in his life, Vaniell had nothing to say, no humor to offer, only a quick nod, with his lips pressed tightly together to keep them from trembling.

And then Danric’s arms went around his shoulders in an embrace—swift and fierce and filled with all the words they could not say.

“Thank the heavens.” A quiet soprano voice intruded on the moment, breaking the tension before the mood in the room grew truly maudlin. “I was worried that I might have to force the two of you together and glare until you admitted the truth, but it seems you did not require my assistance after all.”

Seemingly having emerged from thin air, a slender auburn-haired woman regarded them from across the room with a fond smile. Danric paused to clasp his brother’s shoulder one last time—his eyes suspiciously red—before striding towards her, bending down, and placing a tender kiss on the top of her head.

“I’m so sorry if we disturbed you, love.”

So this was Vaniell’s sister-in-law. The woman Vaniell had once been engaged to marry—Evaraine, Queen of Farhall.

She might be small and appear deceptively frail, but the strength of character in her green eyes would have given pause to even a bolder man than Vaniell.

Those eyes turned up to her husband in evident disapproval. “And you would have been in a great deal of trouble had you *not* disturbed me. You know perfectly well I wished to be notified the moment Kyrion returned. It is only a happy bonus that Vaniell is here as well.”

“Vaniell.” The voice came from behind him and raised the hairs on the back of his neck. “The enchanter Prince of Garimore?”

Vaniell whirled to see the young female night elf regarding him out of glowing eyes, her lip curled to reveal her teeth in a silent snarl.

“Brother... Isn’t this the one you promised I could eat?”

Suddenly Danric burst out laughing, a sound that Vaniell would have sworn he had never heard before. His brother’s eyes were bright with amusement as he surveyed the room, his arm wrapped protectively around his wife’s shoulders. Then he looked at Vaniell, grinned, and winked.

“Welcome to Farhall,” he said.

CHAPTER 12



It was only a brief ride to the city gate the following morning, and the three of them accomplished it in silence, moving along at the pace of the other travelers that now shared the road with them in increasing numbers. Whatever had passed between Leisa and her mother the night before, Karreya had not been privy to, but it had clearly not gone well. By the light of the early morning sun, they seemed determined to act like strangers.

The road split as it approached the walls of Hanselm, and at the junction, they paused, forcing riders and pedestrians to flow around them as both Leisa and Senaya regarded one another while wearing frozen expressions of utter indifference.

Which were, of course, a lie. It hurt Karreya to look at them, so she stared instead at the walled city and wondered what it might be like. Similar to Viali? Or utterly different?

“Where will you go?” Leisa did not sound as if she cared one way or the other.

“South, I believe. I have spent enough winter seasons in the north, and have no desire to repeat the experience.”

“And... if I have more questions? About what we spoke of along the road?”

“My door will always be open to you.” There was no lie in Senaya’s statement, only weary resignation. She did not believe Leisa would ever come looking for her again.

“Be safe,” Leisa said stiffly. “And if you choose to look for me...”

She did not finish the sentence.

“Should the Five Thrones survive what is coming, perhaps we will meet again.”

Karreya turned just in time to see Senaya turn her horse down the road to the left and move south at a trot, not once looking back over her shoulder. Not once giving any visible sign that she was leaving behind anything that she valued or regretted.

It was still a lie, but that was not Karreya’s place to reveal.

Leisa took a few deep breaths as she watched, fingers clenched tightly on her reins. “I never truly expected anything from her,” she said softly, “so I don’t understand why it should hurt now that I know this is all I’m going to get.”

Because hope was tenacious and unpredictable, and it crept up on silent feet until it surprised you with the strength of its will to live. Because sometimes it refused to die even when you knew it was necessary.

But Karreya did not say that.

“Perhaps when we have finished our mission and eliminated the threat, Senaya will be able to lay her fears to rest,” she suggested instead.

“But if she is only willing to fight for me when there is no risk, how can I trust her?” Leisa stated the facts with raw honesty. “How can I believe she won’t run away again the moment something is difficult or painful? I can’t, and I would rather we end things like this than allow her to break my heart over and over again.”

“Did you gain the knowledge you needed?”

Leisa shrugged. “I understand better now what I ought to be capable of, but in theory only. There was much that does not seem to work for me, and I cannot tell whether it is a matter of practice or the fact that my father was... what he was.” Fae seemed to be a word not to be spoken in front of others. “It will take time to explore—time we do not have at this present moment.”

“Your power matters less than your confidence.” Karreya had found that this truth applied both in magic and in life. “Perhaps you must simply move ahead and trust in your instincts to guide you.”

“Are you ready to do the same?” Leisa threw her a sharp glance. “This next part of the plan relies more on you than on me.”

Karreya nodded. “I do not embark on a mission unless I am prepared to complete it, as there can be no hesitation once that mission has begun. Whether I know what I must face or not, I will not falter.”

“Then I guess it’s time.”

Leisa turned her horse to the right and nudged it with her heels, trotting ahead until they fell in at the back of a larger group of riders, all heading for the main gates of Hanselm.

But the closer they came, the deeper the crease between Leisa’s brows as she looked around her. “This has all changed so much since I was here last,” she noted. “There were farms as far as the eye could see. Orchards and fields filled with crops. Now...”

The land grew nothing but tents and hastily thrown together barracks. Paddocks for cavalry horses. There was a stench in the air, of too many living creatures crowded into a small space. And along the road, fully half of the travelers wore the red uniform of the Garimoran army.

They were the sights and sounds—and smells—of war.

When Karreya and Leisa finally reached the gates, the indications of a kingdom in conflict continued. Every traveler was searched and questioned, their passes scrutinized and stamped, and several turned away. A farmer with a wagonload of crops cursed furiously as his cargo was rummaged through without care or concern, spilling and bruising the fragile fruits and vegetables.

Their own entry proceeded without incident, though the guard did reiterate the warning about leaving the city before their pass could expire, unless they were able to find gainful

employment. He rolled his eyes when he said it, as if he knew perfectly well there was no employment to be had.

“Thank you,” Leisa said with a gracious nod as he handed back their pass. “We will use the days wisely.”

And then they were off into the city, making their way down a wide road of fitted golden stone, much of which was obscured by the dirt left behind by thousands of travelers.

There was a smell here, too—but to Karreya’s nostrils it was the stench of fear, despite the appearance of a well-designed, prosperous city.

The buildings were all of that same golden stone, with graceful proportions, arched doorways, and a proliferation of windows. Most structures bore black wreaths of mourning for the late queen, and even the fountains that splashed cheerfully on every street corner were covered in dark shrouds. Yet, in general, it appeared to have once been a lively and pleasant city, where there was time and money to spare for luxuries such as the brass lanterns lining the margins of the main road. Most opulent of all to one from the harsh, dry lands of Zulle were the trees and flowers that sprung up from boxes and borders on every side.

And this was where Niell had grown up. Where he’d spent his life hiding, pretending, constantly in conflict.

For the most part, Karreya had been able to avoid the imperial court, and the deadly swamp of intrigue and politicking that went along with it. But she had seen enough to know, intimately, how it would change one compelled to swim in its waters. This golden city and the palace lurking at its heart were the forces that had shaped Niell from his earliest years, and she found herself deeply curious—almost hungry—to understand him through this place.

But that was a mission that would have to wait. Hanselm was a larger city than Karreya had expected, and there were far more watching eyes than she had sensed in Viali. Suspicion seemed more common than trust, and it would make their present errand far too difficult to risk dividing her attention.

“Where are we to meet your cousin?”

Leisa grimaced in response as she navigated the crowded road, attempting to avoid a heavy dray wagon that had paused in the middle of the street while its owner unloaded his goods.

“That depends on whether our message arrived or was intercepted in transit. If Lord Kellan received my request—and *if* he has decided he is willing to aid us—we will be met at an inn near the northern gate, sometime after dark.”

They paused for a moment as the traffic flowed past, and as they were waiting, a voice rang out.

“You there!”

Karreya turned to look and saw a small squad of soldiers making their way through the crowded street in her direction. There was no question that she was their target, nor that the men’s hard, determined expressions presaged a confrontation they could ill afford.

Leisa, too, noticed their approach and turned to greet them with a pleasant nod. “How can we help you?”

“By handing over your mounts,” the leader of the group responded in cool, clipped tones. “They are being officially requisitioned by His Majesty, King Melger of Garimore, and you are required to surrender them immediately.”

Leisa blinked at him uncertainly. “You mean, you’re stealing our horses?”

“As a loyal citizen of Garimore, you are being asked to surrender them into the care of the army, for the purpose of defending all Garimoran citizens against the threat of invasion,” the man replied, a dangerous light in his brown eyes. “Do you dare to refuse the command of your king in this matter?”

Leisa eyed him suspiciously, but appeared uncertain about her next course of action, so Karreya voiced her own question aloud.

“And what is your proof that you speak for your king and not for your own purposes?”

Were it common practice to requisition visitor's livestock, the guards at the gate would have stopped them on the way in, along with the larger group ahead of them. She'd also noticed these same soldiers walking past three men on horseback without a word. This entire confrontation seemed no more than a front for thievery—the strong taking from those they perceived as weak—and she had no patience for those who acted with so little honor.

“Proof?” the man sneered. “The only proof I need is the authority I’ve been given to throw you in prison if you deny my request. Now, are you going to get out of that saddle, or do I have to make you?”

His right hand grasped his sword hilt while his left moved towards her arm, and Karreya's instincts flared to life at the threat. Her left foot was out of the stirrup before he could so much as touch her, kicking him in the face with enough force to stagger him backward. While he was still off balance and swearing loudly, she swung over the other side of the saddle and under the horse's belly, using her grip on the stirrup and the momentum of her swing to kick his legs out from under him.

The horse threw up its head and snorted, beginning to dance nervously in place, but Karreya was no longer under its feet. She'd drawn her daggers and sliced her opponent's sword belt in two places before ducking under the outstretched arms of his companions and preparing to attack them from behind.

“Stop!”

It was Leisa's voice. Speaking to *her*... The intense focus of battle faded, and suddenly Karreya recalled that she was meant to be playing a part. She was not here as a weapon, but as a spy, and her actions had drawn entirely the wrong kind of attention. Worse, she had exposed Leisa to danger, and while Karreya was more than capable of avoiding the guards' attempts to capture her, Leisa had no such certainty.

She would need to remove her cousin from the vicinity, then find a way to draw off pursuit.

Evading the guardsmen's hastily drawn weapons, she darted towards Leisa. "Come," she ordered. "Leave the horses."

Thankfully, Leisa did not pause to question her, but leaped from her saddle and raced after Karreya into the crowded street.

"Stay low," Karreya told her, ducking between startled shoppers and tradesmen as she made her way steadily towards the opening of the closest alley. Once within its shadows, she jogged towards the low wall blocking the end, pulled herself to the top, and from there, leaped up and grabbed the edge of a narrow balcony that allowed her to access the roof. "This way."

The buildings in this part of town were no more than two levels—not high enough for fugitives to hide on the rooftops—but at least they were built close together. Karreya set a path that allowed them to leap across two more cramped alleyways before descending into a less busy street a short distance away. Crossing it towards the north, she used a conveniently placed pile of crates to access the long, open roof of a stable, where she paused to take in her surroundings. The rooftop was flat, but far too uncluttered to make a safe place for Leisa to hide. They would need to put more distance between themselves and the horse thieves, but first...

A strange sound caught her ear.

She whirled around. Leisa was just climbing up behind her, but her eyes were wide, and her lips appeared pinched with strain.

"Please," she murmured, holding out one hand in a wordless plea. "I need a moment."

Karreya nodded. "Very well. But I fear we must not stay for long. These rooftops are too orderly to shelter you for any length of time, and as it is day, our path will have been marked."

Leisa dropped to her knees, placed her palm flat on the rooftop, and closed her eyes. "Just a few seconds," she said,

drawing in a deep, steadying breath. "I'll be all right."

Karreya moved hastily to crouch down beside her, eyeing her cousin's face with concern. She was accustomed to traveling swiftly through and over city streets, and had not stopped to consider that her path might prove difficult to follow, even for one of Leisa's abilities.

"I... apologize," she said at length. "I believe I have endangered our mission through my actions. But if you are able to forgive my mistakes, I swear to you that I will continue to ensure your safety."

Leisa's eyes flew open and met Karreya's with an expression of surprise. "You thought I was angry?"

"I... Yes?" she asked warily. Perhaps she had not grown much better at reading others' emotions. "I fear I did not adequately consider the nature of our mission or your limitations. I acted without consulting you, and those actions, while appropriate to one of my training, might not be wise when I am traveling with a companion."

Leisa began to grin. "Maybe when you're running around with His Princely Highness. But I promise, this isn't that different from what I used to do when I was trained as a bodyguard for Princess Evaraine."

Then...

"The embarrassing truth is, I'm not terribly fond of heights," Leisa admitted wryly. "Or climbing. I do well enough when I have time to prepare myself, but this was just a little too sudden." She took a few more deep breaths and shrugged her shoulders a few times to loosen them up. "I'll be fine in a moment, I swear. And don't worry about the horses. I might have chosen a method with a bit less fanfare, but we needed to leave them behind anyway. Now we just have to hide from the guards until dark, which should be easy enough in a place as busy as this one."

"If you wish to remain hidden, I can lead the guards around the city until they lose interest," Karreya offered.

“And leave me out of all the fun?” Leisa raised one eyebrow and grinned. “Don’t even think about it. I admit that I’m probably not as accomplished at all of this as you are—and I’m a bit out of practice—but I actually enjoy a good chase. Reminds me of the days before everything was a matter of life or death or war or catastrophe.”

Karreya tilted her head curiously. “What is that like? I confess I cannot imagine a world where one’s everyday moments are not filled with such calculations.”

“And that,” Leisa reminded her grimly, “is exactly what we are fighting for—a world where not everything is a threat. I pray you will one day experience it for yourself, but for now, I think we had best move on.”

Karreya sensed the movement before she saw it, and dove sideways just before a projectile whistled past her ear. It hit the roof and bounced away, but not before she registered that it was not precisely a threat. It was small and round and lightweight, and...

A stray memory made her hesitate, and then the tiny missile exploded into a shower of harmless sparks. Just like Niell’s conkers on that strange day in Emmerick’s shop.

Leisa had drawn her short sword and was racing for the nearest cover, but Karreya stood up and faced the direction the shot had originated from.

“I have seen this magic before,” she said. “Come out and face me with honor, and perhaps we will discover that there is no need for hostility.”

“You think that was hostility?” A head of spiked black hair appeared at the edge of the roof. The young man wore a smirk and dangled a slingshot from one hand as he pulled himself up to stand a handful of paces away, regarding Karreya with bright-eyed curiosity. “That was just a warning shot to get you to hold still. If I were feeling hostile, you would be running away down the nearest alley, crying for help.”

Oh, would she? Karreya’s wrist flicked, far too fast for the eye to follow, and the slingshot was suddenly knocked from

the man's hand. It flew across the rooftop to lie useless on the ground while he clutched his wrist and muttered a few choice oaths through clenched teeth.

"Tell me again of your hostility," she said coolly, "and I will show you mine."

"Or, you could tell me where you've seen that little trick before," he said instead, still clutching his wrist but not noticeably dismayed by her threat.

Leisa must have found their exchange alarming, because she moved to intervene with a relaxed posture and a deliberately soothing tone.

"We are no threat to you or your city," she said calmly, sheathing her sword and approaching the newcomer with empty hands. "We merely had a misunderstanding with a few guards and were hoping to avoid being detained."

"Misunderstanding?" The man grinned, a cheeky expression that brightened his eyes and displayed a pair of dimples that made him look younger than he probably was. "Depending on your perspective, I suppose that's as good a name as any for horse theft."

So he'd followed them, had he?

But Leisa did not appear disturbed. Her head tilted curiously, and she scanned their attacker with narrowed eyes.

"Expensive clothing, non-lethal weaponry, and a lack of care for your own safety..." she mused aloud. "Are you perhaps a friend of Lord Kellen?"

The grin vanished. "My answer might depend on who's asking."

"We were sent here to meet him by a mutual acquaintance," Leisa informed him. "Potentially the same one who designed your... explosive little exhibition there."

"Does your mutual acquaintance have a name?"

"Not one that I'm willing to speak aloud in a place we may be overheard," Leisa returned.

“How terribly interesting.” The young man eyed them both, his gaze sharp and assessing. “Normally we require some form of recommendation, but kicking city guards in the face is a solid statement in your favor. I can attempt to arrange a meeting—that is, if you’re going to be in the city long enough.”

Leisa seemed to have decided the potential benefit was worth a bit of a risk. “We were supposed to meet with him already,” she said carefully, “but there was no way to know if he received the message. It would have come by pigeon, regarding... employment opportunities.”

The dark-haired man shifted his attention from Leisa to Karreya and back again. “I see. In that case, I think you’d best come with me. Lord Kellan will want to know what sort of special, er... skills, you may have. Besides annoying the city guards, of course, though that one is my personal favorite.”

“Thank you.” Leisa offered him a nod and a sly grin. “Though I should acknowledge that was mostly my cousin here. Her skills in that area are quite impressive.”

“And I will not hesitate to use them against you if you betray us in any way,” Karreya added, not quite ready to place much trust in a stranger who dressed more like a fop than a warrior to be feared. His fingers bore more rings than scars and his waistcoat was embellished with so much embroidery it might almost serve as a form of armor.

But then again, she’d underestimated Niell as well, so if this was one of his allies, she would do well to withhold judgment.



Fortunately, the dark-haired man seemed to know his way through the streets and alleys of Hanselm, and led them quickly to the back door of a nondescript warehouse on a less traveled street in a quieter area of the city.

His knock was a deliberate pattern of raps and pauses, resulting in the door being yanked open by a scowling giant

wearing a blacksmith's leather apron over his clothes. Oddly, he also held a quill in one hand and seemed to have ink on every finger.

“Make someone else your blasted doorman, or else quit coming round every single hour of the day,” he growled. “I’ll never get anything done if you keep interrupting like this.”

“Profoundest apologies, Brig.” Their guide offered an elaborate bow and a wide grin, then stepped inside and motioned for Karreya and Leisa to follow. “But I stumbled across a pair of Lord Kellen’s numerous cousins and thought I should arrange a meeting.”

“More cousins, eh?” Brig looked them up and down skeptically. “You’d think the gate guards would get suspicious.”

“They’re too busy scowling and stealing horses,” the dark-haired man responded, turning back to offer Karreya a rather insulting wink.

When she responded with only a flat stare, he shrugged unrepentantly. “Follow me then, and we’ll let Brig get back to forging.”

“Forging what, exactly?” Leisa asked as they trailed after their guide through the cluttered warehouse.

“Gate passes and certificates of employment, mostly. You’ve got to have them to stay in the city, unless you’re one of us.”

“And who, exactly, are you?”

“You’ll see.”

He led them through the maze of boxes and barrels to a corner, where the apparently abandoned warehouse became a hive of bustling activity. A board was propped up against the wall with rows of documents nailed to its scarred surface, while a pair of children stood nearby, accepting what appeared to be pouches and instructions from a young woman with dark hair. Behind a ramshackle desk, three men engaged in an argument, while an adolescent boy attempted a handstand in the corner.

Atop the desk, a cat was curled up on a pile of papers, right next to a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches.

“Kel, got visitors for you!”

One of the three men turned from the argument and cast a speculative glance at Karreya and Leisa out of startling blue eyes. His golden hair was pulled back in a neat tail, and he wore an elaborate velvet waistcoat over a white silk shirt. He appeared an aristocrat at first glance, but his gaze was sharp and canny, and further assessment revealed that his boots were dirty and his hands were strong and rough over the knuckles.

“How delightful. Thank you, Jase.” The blond man moved out from behind the desk to approach them. He carried no visible steel, but there was a suggestion of hesitation on his right side that indicated some form of weapon lurked there. Magical, most likely. His delight was, Karreya’s truth sense informed her, no more than a polite fiction. “And why have you brought them here?”

“More of your cousins.”

A look of weary amusement crossed the blond nobleman’s face. “Always a treat to discover relatives I didn’t know I had. Where are you seeking refuge from and what are your skills? I may be able to find you a place, but it’s grown more difficult of late, and I hate to promise anything I cannot deliver.”

“You are Lord Kellen?” Karreya asked abruptly.

“So my father informs me,” he replied, in a coolly polite tone.

Truth. They had indeed found Niell’s contact, so Karreya gave Leisa a brief nod of confirmation.

And Leisa wasted no time. “Vaniell sent us,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “He also sent a pigeon explaining what we needed, but apparently, it went astray. We don’t need work, but he said you can help gain us access to the palace.”

Kellan’s eyes widened, and he glanced at Jase as if for confirmation.

The dark-haired man merely shrugged. “They did attack the guards who tried to take their horses.”

“Why do you want a way in?” Kellan asked flatly. “What are your intentions and what are the risks if we aid you? My operation is vital in protecting the lives of many, so if you intend to endanger us, my answer must be no.”

This time, Karreya did not wait for Leisa to offer a response. “We intend to remove Melger from the throne and grant that place to its rightful holder.”

Everyone in the warehouse seemed to freeze. Staring. Terrified. Hopeful. Skeptical. Karreya did not blame them.

“And how,” Kellan asked in a dangerously quiet tone, “do you propose to do this?”

“Long story,” Leisa returned briskly. “And a dangerous one, so I will not share it here. Suffice it to say, I know my way around the palace, and we hold vital information that will alter the trajectory of the conflict between the Thrones. Given the increased security, a legitimate reason for entry seemed wise.”

Kellan’s head tilted, and his regard sharpened. “That much is true enough,” he admitted. “And as it happens, you have come at the right moment. His Majesty has called for a convocation—essentially summoned everyone in Garimore of any importance whatsoever—to be assembled tomorrow evening. We aren’t sure what he means to announce, but it will be significant, and I fear will bring only greater suffering to the people of Garimore. If you believe you can stop him...” His lips twisted wryly. “I don’t care if you’re the Queen of Farhall or Garimore’s worst enemy. Take him down, and then we’ll find a way to deal with you.”

Karreya and Leisa exchanged a glance that was almost amused. Lord Kellan had hit oddly near the mark.

“You can get us into this convocation?”

The blond man nodded decisively. “We can. We don’t have the funds presently to provide proper clothing, but if you can manage that, we can forge invitations.”

“Clothing is not an issue,” Leisa assured him.

“And if this works... You say you intend for Prince Vaniell to take the throne?”

She shrugged. “I’m not Garimoran, so I don’t suppose I have any authority over the matter. But given what I know, it seems like the best option.”

Kellan smiled suddenly, a razor-sharp expression that somehow appeared more fierce than friendly. “Then whoever you are, welcome to the family. I think we’re going to get along quite well.”



The wait for the following nightfall seemed interminable, and Karreya spent most of it perched on the roof of the warehouse, avoiding the eyes and the questions of those within. Watching the sun sink slowly towards the horizon as she awaited the moment Leisa would call her for their final preparations.

She would see her father soon. But would he know her? Would he hear her? And what would she do if he refused her request?

Karreya reached for one of her daggers out of habit, and scowled as she recalled that she now wore the new outfit Leisa had fashioned out of mirror magic and an old mourning gown.

It was long and black, and draped her form in graceful folds that allowed great freedom of movement. The skirt split to the middle of her thigh, and beneath it she wore dark, skin-tight trousers and boots. The bodice was embroidered with golden thread and fit closely around her neck and shoulders, with long sleeves that hugged her wrists and featured that same golden embroidery in fanciful swirls.

It was beautiful, Karreya was compelled to admit, but it felt odd to wear something other than she usually did. The only weapons it permitted her to conceal were six daggers and the stilettos in her boots, which meant she would likely have to

leave her belt pouches behind as well. Though, perhaps a few items could be slipped into her bodice...

Removing her belt from where she'd fastened it over the dress, Karreya laid aside her lock picks and other various tools of her trade, then selected the few items she thought she might need, slipping them into the slender, almost invisible pockets she'd asked Leisa to incorporate into her dress.

Last of all, she picked up the small pouch she'd received from Niell and weighed it thoughtfully as she recalled the moment he'd given it to her.

It felt like a tangible token of the trust they'd placed in one another and reminded her of all the times he'd offered help, for no reason other than kindness. A sharp ache took up residence in her chest as his brilliant smile flashed in her memory.

She missed him. Missed his smile and his teasing and his bright eyes that saw so much more than she intended to reveal. Missed his assertion that they were friends, no matter how many times she threatened to stab him. And she wished he were here. Because out of everyone she knew, either in Abreia or Zulle, Niell was the only one who would understand the turmoil in her heart as she stood on this rooftop, both fearing and longing for the confrontation to come.

Balancing the pouch in one hand, she opened it, expecting to find an assortment of coins and nothing more. There was money, yes, but Karreya caught her breath as she saw what else the pouch contained.

A large gem, brilliant and finely cut, lay atop the coins, sparking with fire in the rays of the setting sun. And tucked in beside it was a small piece of paper, worn and stained from traveling in the pouch.

Karreya's fingers shook oddly as she pulled out the paper, unfolded it, and read Niell's words.

*I don't know when you will find
this, or what you might end up*

needing, so I'll keep this short. The money is, of course, just money. Use it for your needs along the road, and try not to keep count of it as debt. I offer it gladly in hopes that it will help you make your way in safety.

The gem is one of mine, and it can also be sold for funds in a desperate situation. However, should you wish for help of a different kind, the gem is enspelled. As with most of my efforts, the enchantment is not yet tested, but I believe it will act as a beacon.

Theoretically, that beacon can only be detected by me, and is dependent on an act of will. Hold it close to you until the gem grows warm, and if you need me, I will know.

Whether you read this five minutes after leaving me in the forest, or months down the road when you barely remember my name, know that I miss you. That you are held in my memory as a friendship beyond price, and that I have not given up

on seeing you again. Whether I am King of Barimore, or a wanderer without a name or a home, I will one day find my way to your side and say the words I was too much of a coward to utter before we parted.

Be safe, my friend. And know that I trust you. With everything I have, and everything I am.

Niell

Those who survived the Enclave did not cry. Could not. But for the first time in her memory, Karreya wished she could remember how. Whether for sorrow or for joy. For the promise of tomorrow, or for the fear that it would never come...

No matter what happened, Niell would find her. He had said it twice now. And while she might once have heard it as a threat, now it was a promise. The kind of promise that reminded her she was not alone, and that not being alone was a form of strength.

Whatever occurred tonight, whether she succeeded or failed, that promise would not falter. She knew it with the kind of certainty only her magic provided, as if it had read his words and known them for the truth.

Perhaps it had.

He had not said that he loved her, and yet, it felt as if the final piece of her armor had finally fallen into place. When she confronted her father tonight, she would not do so alone.

Niell would stand beside her, and that was all the courage she needed.

CHAPTER 13



“*Y*ou did *what*?”

Danric appeared to be reconsidering his welcome.

“We sent Leisa and Karreya to Hanselm, hoping to provoke Modrevin into acting before he is ready,” Vaniell summed up helpfully. He actually thought he’d explained the situation rather well, given the complicated nature of the tale he’d been required to recount. All while Kyrion stood by nodding occasionally, but otherwise providing no assistance whatsoever.

Their audience appeared to be in varying stages of shock, whether from the revelation of Melger’s true identity, Karreya’s existence, or Yvane’s origins. Not to mention Senaya and Leisa’s imperial heritage. It was a lot to take in, and some seemed to be grasping the implications more quickly than others.

“A grave risk,” Evaraine said coolly. “But not without justification. I do not care to be forced into war, but it seems war is coming whether we wish it or not.”

“And you do not fight alone.” Kyrion finally decided to join the conversation. “Dunmaren will abide by the terms of our treaty. Garimore’s attempt to assassinate you is most certainly a threat to the sovereignty of Farhall, and will be answered by our people as well as your own.”

“They won’t be thrilled,” his mother, Lythienne, put in dryly, “but they can be made to see the necessity of it. This

Modrevin is a threat to all of Abreia, not just the human kingdoms, and it is past time to put a stop to his activities.”

Kyrion’s sister, Wyn, nodded in agreement, but not without a sideways glower at Vaniell and a quick slash of her finger across her throat. Apparently, she still intended to eat him.

Another of their surprising allies—a tall, dark-haired elf—rose to add his voice to the conversation. “I cannot promise much, but know that the elves of Sion Dairach will likewise support your cause in whatever ways we are able. We owe you a great debt for the depredations caused by the wraiths that escaped our borders, and would repay that debt by aiding you in your quest to depose this tyrant.”

“Thank you, Kyrion, Lythienne, and Dechlan.” Though she remained seated and was little more than half the size of most other people in the room, the Queen of Farhall was somehow the unquestioned leader of this strange group. “I accept your offer of aid, and hope that this cements the friendship between our kingdoms beyond the possibility of fracture. I am likewise encouraged by the news from Eddris and from Iria—it seems we are of one mind and stand ready to defend ourselves against Garimoran aggression. Katal, also, has indicated they are allied with us in principle, even if their troops cannot possibly reach us in time to be of any help. There’s just one problem...”

She looked around the room a little ruefully. “We must choose someone to lead us through this conflict, and it cannot be me.”

“Why not?” Vaniell would back the Queen of Farhall against pretty well anyone, Modrevin included. “Everyone here trusts you, and your kingdom lies at a natural nexus between the lands of your nearest allies.”

“I thank you for your vote of confidence.” Evaraine appeared slightly amused. “However, there are numerous reasons why I would be a poor choice. To begin, the most obvious is that I know nothing of war. I can feed and clothe the army in my barracks, but the moment they leave my kingdom, I am at a loss.”

Well, that made two of them. Vaniell wouldn't know what to do with an army, either.

“Second, I cannot lead from the front. When the army leaves, I will remain here. My physical limitations would be a hindrance in the field, and given the diversity of our forces, I believe we need someone visible to give them confidence.”

She glanced at Kyrion, but he shook his head. “I thank you for the honor, but it would not be wise for me to accept such a position. Not only would many humans hesitate to trust me, but I am bound by my duty to my own people and to Leisa first and foremost. It is Lythienne who leads our battle forces and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.”

“Caro would be another natural choice,” Evaraine noted, “but she lacks true leadership experience and is not a well-known face.” Here she paused before glancing at Vaniell. “You, on the other hand, are quite well-known, and have led a successful rebellion for years without anyone realizing the truth. You clearly have a gift for strategy and secrecy, and for convincing an impressively diverse collection of individuals to trust you.” A hint of a smile creased the corners of her lips. “Odd as that seems to say.”

“Very odd indeed.” Vaniell couldn't quite hold back an answering grin. He might not have wanted to marry her, but he quite liked the Queen of Farhall. “But it cannot be me either, you know. I'm good at misdirection and trickery—at hiding and manipulating from the shadows. But put a sword in my hand and I'd be useless, and our troops will know it. I've sworn to do whatever I can to retake Garimore, but my reputation still stands against me. If I'm to take some role in the future, it will be after I've proven I can be trusted.”

“*If?*” One of Danric's brows arched skeptically. “You know perfectly well that the only ‘if’ in this situation is *if* we succeed, brother. A free Garimore has only one true choice to be her king.”

Vaniell managed to wince only slightly. “I never wanted to take that from you,” he said quietly. “I hope you know that. I was always content to be second. And everything I've said in

the past... I didn't mean it. You would have been the perfect king for Garimore. You spent your whole life preparing for it, and now..."

"And now," Danric interrupted, "I've finally discovered the role that is truly right for me. Farhall needs my knowledge and my skills far more than Garimore ever did. And while it may sound strange to you, I love this kingdom, in ways that I was never able to love Garimore. Garimore was my duty, and I was more than content to devote myself to that duty, but Farhall is my home now. I love her people and more than anything else, I love her queen, and there is not the smallest drop of jealousy in my heart. You were born to be King of Garimore, and it will be a great day that sees you take the throne."

Vaniell's chin dropped as he choked back a swell of emotions that threatened to overwhelm his control. When his lips finally stopped trembling, he offered his brother a crooked grin. "I've always said you were a disgustingly good man, Danric. How delightful to discover that I was right."

Their eyes locked, and Vaniell felt a sudden surge of affection for the brother he'd once considered an enemy. Then he glanced around the room at their allies, with a challenging tilt to his head. "Would anyone care to dispute that the obvious leader for our alliance is standing right in front of us? Danric has the knowledge, the authority, and the ability to do what is needed, and I can't imagine anyone more trustworthy."

"It certainly took you long enough to see what has always been plain to those of us with eyes." Lythienne's tone was filled with a somehow parental exasperation. "And before you ask, yes, I would be pleased to work with and beside King Danric in the interests of our alliance. He has more than proven his competence and trustworthiness over these past months."

"Queen Allera has already indicated the same," Vaniell murmured, "and Iria has agreed to follow Allera's lead."

Everyone in the room was nodding in agreement, except, of course, for Danric himself, who appeared utterly

gobsmacked.

“I can’t...”

“Don’t make us vote,” Vaniell said with a smirk. “You’ll lose, big brother.”

Evaraine stood on her tiptoes and kissed her husband’s cheek with a smile that was equally proud and sad. “I do not have to like that you will leave me, but I am absolutely certain that you will lead us well, my heart.”

And he would—to the very gates of hell and beyond. If Vaniell was certain of only one thing, it was that Danric would never falter. And with the bonds of friendship that had formed between this strange and unforeseen fellowship, perhaps they had a chance.

Modrevin was strong, unprincipled, and far more prepared. But he fought for himself alone, and that, in the end, was going to prove his undoing.



The following few days passed all too slowly for Vaniell, as the council of war convened and everyone seemed neck deep in strategies and paperwork. Messages were sent—to Dunmaren, Sion Dairach, Eddris, and Iria—detailing their plans to march on Garimore and formally requesting aid. He spent hours in various meetings, providing as much insight as he could into the man he’d once called Father, and utilizing his own network of messengers and informants to aid in the formation of their strategies.

But all the while, his mind seemed to keep wandering, to Garimore and to Karreya. She should be close now—close to arriving in the city he’d called home for much of his life, close to the confrontation on which all of their plans hinged. Close to a moment that might threaten her life, or at the very least change it forever.

And as he walked the hallways of the castle, surrounded by former enemies who inexplicably did not hate him, he wished

she did not face this moment alone. True, she was accustomed to being alone and would deny needing anyone even if he'd offered to stand beside her. Indeed, if she'd opened the pouch, she'd received that offer and declined it. Or perhaps the enchantment had failed.

But either way, she would soon be confronting her father—not as a long-lost family member, but as a potential enemy, and that was not a moment he would wish on anyone. Let alone someone he cared about.

Someone he cared about...

What an insipid way to express how he felt about Karreya. The truth was, he missed her desperately. Could not stop thinking about her expressive golden eyes, her unflinching courage, her blunt conversations, and those moments he'd been fortunate enough to hold her hand in his. He wished she was beside him now, scowling and threatening to cut off his fingers.

The thought made him smile as he descended the stone steps towards the castle's courtyard, turning his face to meet the early summer sun and shivering a little in the cool breeze. After so many months in the warm, gentle climate of Iria, these northern temperatures seemed unnecessarily harsh for summer, and he was looking forward to...

Something caught him by the collar and yanked him backwards just as he reached the bottom of the stairs. He ducked and twisted, but his assailant's grip was made of iron, and all he could manage was to catch a glimpse of her identity.

Rethwyn. Kyrion's sister. She'd been stalking him since the day of his arrival, and had at last managed to catch him when no one else was looking. Her teeth were slightly bared in a feral smile as she looked down on him from her superior height, and her eyes glowed with what might have been annoyance, anticipation... or possibly murderous rage.

"Come with me, little prince," she growled low in her throat, and commenced dragging him after her up the steps and back inside, in the direction of the audience chamber.

He could either walk tamely beside her or fight her grip, which did not seem likely to result in success, so Vaniell found his feet and managed to give the impression he was sauntering casually along because he wanted to.

All while sliding his hands into his pockets and giving hasty consideration to which enchantment he might try if the furious night elf actually made an attempt on his life.

“So, where exactly are we going?” he asked politely, while trying to decide between a garrote that dissolved into thin air and a tricky little marble that could choke and blind its target in an instant. He’d been working on various non-lethal options of late, but had not yet found a willing subject to perform any tests.

“Do not speak, human.” Wyn bared her teeth at him yet again. “The sound of your voice annoys me.”

“How terribly disappointing,” he said blandly. “And after I’ve worked so hard to achieve a mellifluous tone. But I suppose you’re entitled to your opinion, just as I’m entitled to wonder whether your threats to consume my person are entirely genuine.”

Her teeth snapped together with a click only a few inches from his face, and her smile only grew. “Have you not heard, Princeling? We night elves are shapeshifters, and we love nothing so much as a hunt. My other form is not terribly picky about what she eats, so if I were to turn you loose in the forest and tell you to run...”

“Is that what you’re hoping for? A chase?” Vaniell let out a short bark of laughter. “Allow me to save you some time. I don’t really run *anywhere*—such an undignified behavior—so you might as well have a go at eating me somewhere closer. Just not inside the castle. I don’t imagine Queen Evaraine would appreciate having to clean my blood off her floor.”

Wyn paused, dragging him to a stop along with her. “Are you attempting to annoy me on purpose?”

“Of course.” He shrugged in her grip and grinned at her. “Annoyed people are far more predictable. They’re also far

more distracted by trying to figure out how to make the annoyance stop, so they're easier to surprise.”

And with that, his hand popped out of his pocket and flicked the marble in her direction.

She batted it away, but that simple contact was enough for the enchantment to flare to life.

With a sudden gasp, she reached for her throat, then abruptly vanished, only to reappear in the form of a silver-furred storm cat. The creature was the size of a small horse, with enormous paws, tufted ears, and glimmering fangs that snapped together only a hairsbreadth from Vaniell's arm. Apparently, shifting shape could break the choking part of the enchantment...

Vaniell leaped backwards and reached for a second marble, just as the storm cat lurched forward and crashed to the floor mid-leap, pawing at its face and snarling.

Vaniell took another step back, and the cat's head whipped towards him. The marble had worked—Rethwyn still could not see, but she could smell him, and the moment she regained her feet she began to stalk forward on velvet paws.

He didn't want to hurt her, but neither did he want to be eaten.

Time to make a liar out of himself.

Vaniell turned and raced down the corridor, with the blind storm cat careening along in pursuit. He needed some form of obstacle...

The audience chamber was close by, so muttering a quick prayer that something would work, Vaniell laid a hand on a lintel as he passed under it, leaving just a tiny thread of enchantment behind.

Then he ran on, and as the storm cat charged down the corridor in his wake, she ran face first into an invisible barrier and let out a yowl of pain and frustration.

Hah. Success!

The barrier would have been broken by the force of the collision, but it delayed Rethwyn by just enough that Vaniell was able to reach the audience chamber and slip in through a side door. He scanned the walls, cataloging the curtains and the chairs, then yanked down a length of the silken rope that held the curtains in place...

Only then did he notice the people—Danric, Evaraine, Lythienne, and Dechlan, who stood beside his diminutive blonde wife, both of them dressed for travel. All of them watching Vaniell with wide-eyed expressions of confusion and suspicion.

“I...” Vaniell grinned disarmingly and searched for an explanation, but he hesitated just an instant too long, and the storm cat hit him from behind, sending him sprawling across the stone floor with the rope in his hand.

Rope was not the easiest thing to enchant, but with the very real possibility of death lurking over his shoulder, his magic became a razor-sharp blade of focus and intent. A quick whisper of power and the pathways spread in a glowing flood, spiraling around the silken threads until they exploded into grasping, crawling tendrils. The moment the cat was close enough, Vaniell flung the rope in her direction, rolled away, and was instantly rewarded by a snarl of rage.

The rope’s individual strands were rapidly expanding into a cocoon, attempting to wrap around the cat’s body, but she was shredding them with her claws nearly as fast as they multiplied.

He was going to need something else.

“Rethwyn vir Lythienne!”

The voice cracked with command. The cat crouched in place, still growling, but at least no longer advancing with murderous intent.

Lythienne, former Queen Regent of Dunmaren and now an outraged mother, loomed over Vaniell where he lay on the floor. Her eyes glowed with fury, and Vaniell winced,

wondering whether he'd done irreparable damage to future relations between Garimore and Dunmaren.

But the night elf's glowing gaze was not directed at him. "Return from your hunting form and face me," Lythienne snarled at her daughter.

As quickly as it had appeared, the storm cat vanished, once more becoming a tall, lithe, night elf warrior, nearly speechless with frustration and chagrin. Also, apparently, with her sight restored by the shift.

"Do not ask me to step aside, Mother! I only intended to frighten him, but he attacked first."

"I am not asking," Lythienne snapped, "I am commanding. You will cease this at once, before you bring unspeakable shame to our family. Are you a child? To be toying with the human's fear as if it is a game?"

"This human deserved it," Rethwyn muttered. "It is *he* who treated Kyrion as a thing rather than a person. Why should I not take the opportunity to teach him a lesson?"

"And in the process," her mother retorted, "you underestimated him. Have you learned no wisdom? An enchanter is no one to be trifled with. Had you pressed him, he would have been forced to resort to far more deadly means, and I would not have been able to defend your actions."

Slowly and carefully, Vaniell pushed to his feet, straightened his clothing, and ran a slightly shaky hand through his hair.

Perhaps she'd genuinely only meant to scare him, but for a moment, he had been convinced she was in deadly earnest.

"I will *not* apologize," Wyn grated out through clenched teeth. "Not this time. Not to him. Even if Kyrion has forgiven him, I certainly never will."

Vaniell wished he could say that he understood, but she would not welcome his understanding. Nor was it his place to intervene.

“If you will not apologize,” Lythienne said sternly, “you will swear a debt of service.”

“No!” Wyn’s eyes blazed up again. “I would rather...”

But what she would rather do was lost in the sound of the doors crashing open and reverberating against the wall.

Kyrion loomed in the doorway, his face drawn and his eyes like twin stars beneath his brows.

His breath sawed in and out of his chest, and his hands clenched on the doorframe as a single word emerged.

“*Leisa.*”

A bolt of pure fear shot through Vaniell’s chest as he strode across the hall to grasp Kyrion’s arm.

“What is it? What do you know? Is she injured? Or...” He couldn’t say the word.

“Hurt. Taken. Confined. I feel pain and rage.” Kyrion’s expression was raw, stark, and... utterly afraid. Vaniell had never seen the night elf afraid before, and in the face of that terror, every thought vanished but for one.

Karreya. Was she safe? Or was she, too, hurt and alone, feeling pain and rage with no one to help her?

They were too far away. Distant and unreachable as the stars. What could he do—what could any of them do—when they remained mired in plans and logistics and the movements of armies?

He should never have agreed to this. Should never have left her side.

“I’m going.” Kyrion’s voice. Cold and implacable.

“Going where?” Danric moved towards them, concern written on his brow, Evaraine at his heels.

“To wherever Leisa is.” For Kyrion, the answer was simple. “You have what you need from me, and my mother is more than capable of leading our warriors. In the event of my death, my brother Cer will take my place.”

Danric eyed him for a few moments, arms crossed over his chest, and Vaniell saw the thoughts flickering across his face. Danric had been born with the mantle of responsibility weighing heavily on his shoulders, and he had never once shrugged it off for merely personal concerns. In a moment like this, he would weigh duty against love, and duty would always win...

“I wish you well, my friend,” Danric said earnestly. “Go swiftly. Ask for whatever you need from the quartermaster, and know that we will be following as quickly as we are able.”

Vaniell’s mouth opened and then snapped hastily shut as Evaraine reached out and took her husband’s arm. Love, it seemed, had changed the former prince of Garimore. Perhaps, in the end, love changed everyone brave enough to receive it.

“Would that I could come with you,” Evaraine said wistfully to Kyrion. “I owe Leisa everything, as does every citizen of Farhall, and perhaps all of Abreia. She has saved me so many times... Please find her, if you can, and we will see to everything else.”

Kyrion’s grip on his control seemed to grow ever more tenuous as he nodded, teeth clenched so tightly that his jaw trembled. The glow of his eyes intensified, as fear and anger radiated from every line of his body.

Enchanter he might be, but Vaniell could not fail to sense the vast well of magic lurking behind those eyes. Whoever had dared to hurt Leisa... There would be no escape if ever he came within reach of Kyrion’s vengeance.

The night elf suddenly looked up, straight at Vaniell, that bright silver gaze searing into his, piercing to his soul and forcing him back a step as he confronted the power that roiled in its depths. He expected anger. Bitterness. Perhaps even a desire for retribution. But he found only a single question.

“Are you coming?”

It shocked Vaniell to his core.

“I will be nothing more than a liability,” he warned quietly. “I was born to thrive in ballrooms, not on battlefields. Whether

I wish to go or not, my presence might put your mission at risk.”

“That is not what I asked, Princeling.”

Vaniell paused, mind racing. Perhaps he was no longer needed here. But could he face returning to Hanselm at Kyrion’s side?

It was Lythienne who spoke up first, addressing him coolly from her position beside the now pale and miserable Rethwyn. “Why do you hesitate, Prince of Garimore?”

For so many reasons. He wanted to believe Kyrion asked him out of friendship, but he was afraid to find out. He wanted to believe Karreya would be pleased to see him, but he was afraid to know the answer. He wanted to think that he could be a help, not a hindrance, but he could not bear learning he was wrong through failure to save a friend.

Doubt.

It had never been able to rule him until he discovered he still had the capacity to care.

He had never been careful with his life, so why must he be so careful with his heart?

The bartender, Jarek, had once insisted that Garimore needed the Vaniell who took risks and infuriated others. The one who made everyone wonder if they were insane to trust him. Who reveled in the unexpected and never did as he was told.

His people needed the Vaniell who was entirely himself.

But so did Kyrion. So did Karreya. They needed the man who was willing to be outrageous and dance on the razor edge of disaster because it was where he felt most alive. And that meant taking risks not only with his life and his magic, but also with his heart.

Perhaps he would wind up wounded and bleeding in the end, but at least he would have *lived*.

“I’m coming,” he said simply. He reached out and clasped Kyrion’s forearm in a firm grip, meeting those glowing eyes

without flinching. “I may not be a fighter, but I’m also too stupid to know when I’m beaten. If you’ll have me, we might as well go and do this impossible thing together.”

An onlooker could have heard a feather falling to the stone floor in the silence that followed.

Until Kyrion gripped Vaniell’s arm in return. “Perhaps no one thinks of you as a warrior,” he said, “but they would be *wrong*. I am pleased to have you with me.”

A surge of exultation caught Vaniell by surprise, along with a fierce desire to break down and weep.

Against all rational expectation, he had found another friend.

“Ready when you are,” he said.

CHAPTER 14



*K*arreja had not experienced nerves since the day her much younger self had first defeated her mentor in the Enclave arena, but as they ascended the many steps towards the entrance of the palace, she could feel her hands beginning to grow clammy. Her heart beat too quickly, and her chest felt strange.

The confrontation she'd been hoping for since her arrival in Abreia was finally at hand, and she could not predict how it would play out. Could not even imagine a likely course for the conversation.

As they reached the top of the steps and handed their invitations to a steward in a red tunic, Leisa nudged her with an elbow. "I can't believe I forgot about the flounces," she muttered, with a grimace of utter dismay.

And as they crossed the threshold into the entry hall and Karreja took her first glance at the inside of the Garimoran royal palace, she couldn't quite believe it either.

The hall was broad and brightly lit, with high ceilings and glass panes in the roof. The walls were carved marble, and the columns had been ostentatiously embellished with gold leaf, yet somehow even the garish decor was overshadowed by the people moving in and around the room.

She and Leisa stood in a multi-colored sea of spangled and beribboned skirts composed of tier upon tier of ruffles. The men were far more conservatively adorned, but many of them wore shirts with ruffles at the collar and cuff. Gems dripped

from fingers and wrists and throats, as if someone had opened a jewel chest and strewn it about the room. Taken together, the effect was bewildering and made it difficult to focus. Karreya's attention begged to dart from one explosion of color to the next, and the black sashes worn over each ensemble did little to provide relief.

In comparison to the rigid formality and protocol of the imperial court, it was positively shocking, and Karreya began to wonder whether her father could truly be presiding over such appalling excess.

But a far more important question was whether she and Leisa would be able to blend in with the crowd in their relatively simple gowns. There were a few others who had eschewed the bright colors and garish designs worn by the majority of the attendees in favor of more sober ensembles, but those few seemed to belong to the less fortunate members of the court. The poor, or the barely invited. Which, perhaps, was just as well. One of the more effective forms of disguise was to make oneself into a person others considered beneath their notice.

Though Karreya felt uncomfortably as if she had not quite succeeded in this case.

"They are looking at me," she whispered to Leisa out of the corner of her mouth.

"Who is?"

"People." Too many people. Men and women alike, casting her strange glances, then looking away before she could meet their eyes. "Some of them look hungry, and some of them look angry, and I do not know why."

Leisa snickered under her breath. "That, my friend, is because I might have misjudged your dress and accidentally allowed everyone to see how utterly stunning you are."

"You think that I am..."

"Beautiful," Leisa finished for her. "Yes. And so does a certain prince, if I'm any judge of the situation. Did he never tell you so?"

“He did.” And it had not been a lie. He had been the first person to ever see her that way. The first person to make her believe she could be more than just a weapon. She carried the gem he had given her as a reminder, and it suddenly seemed to grow heavier in its hidden pocket. Tempting her to touch it. To allow it to warm against her skin so that he would know that she wished he were here.

But Vaniell had his own task, and she would not be the cause of its failure.

As if sensing Karreya’s discomfort, Leisa took her arm and pulled her forward into the crowd. “As entertaining as it would be to watch these poor courtiers flirt with you all evening, I suspect we’d best move on and find the heart of these festivities.”

Karreya glanced ahead at Lord Kellen and his father, the Duke of Pergisham, who wore a frustrated scowl as he stalked through the milling crowds of people. They’d come in together, but now that they’d gained entry, Karreya and Leisa were free to do whatever was required. So long as they avoided being caught, of course.

“I will assess the crowd while we await the king’s announcement,” Karreya murmured. “What are your own intentions?”

Leisa’s smile was sharp and predatory. “I have some listening to do. Possibly some clandestine searching. Both above and below stairs. I’m not sure I know exactly what I’m hoping for, but I’ll settle for anything that will help us predict what might be coming next.”

So she intended to play spy... “It will be dangerous,” Karreya said. “And it is not what was agreed upon when we embarked on this mission.” For whatever reason, she found she was feeling anxious about her cousin’s safety.

“I agreed to guide you here and get you into the palace,” Leisa reminded her quietly, “and I have done so. Now that we are here, I have decided to take advantage of the opportunity to learn what I can.”

“And when it is time to leave?”

“The warehouse.” Leisa sounded utterly calm and unconcerned, as if it were not halfway across Hanselm. “We can meet there before making our way out of the city.”

Karreya did not like it, but it was not as if she were in a position to argue. She had her own task, and it would require all of her focus if she were to be successful. “Do not die, cousin,” she said sternly. “I have no desire to battle your husband again should he decide I am complicit in your death.”

Leisa smiled reassuringly. “I’ve done this before, remember? Don’t worry about me. Just be wary, and keep in mind that you will not be invisible this time. We need him to see you, but that means others will see you as well, and you are not allowed to stab them for flirting.”

A timely admonition. If any of these bejeweled fops batted their eyes at her, she was likely to stab first and consider the consequences later. And she could not exactly confront her father if she were too busy breaking out of his dungeon.

Once Leisa disappeared into the crowd, Karreya drifted, following the currents of brightly dressed courtiers out of the entry hall and down a corridor lined with dark curtains. A tribute, she supposed, to the late queen—Vaniell’s mother. Someone he had genuinely loved. Someone her father may have had killed in order to further his plans.

It was a sobering reminder of the many obstacles that stood between her and Vaniell, even if both of them should wish to be together.

As the river of guests flowed into the ballroom, Karreya noted an immediate change, both in her surroundings and in her fellow guests’ demeanor.

There was no music, and no food or drink to be seen. No chairs for revelers to rest from their exertions. The ballroom windows were shuttered and draped in dark fabrics. Voices lowered to ominous whispers, footsteps slowed, and anticipation sharpened to a cutting edge.

And on the dais at one end of the room, two empty thrones awaited, one shrouded almost entirely in black.

In this room, it was a simpler matter to blend in. Tensions were high, and many individuals moved from group to group, so it was not as evident that she was alone. And the darkness behind the pillars on the edges of the room gave her numerous spaces in which to become one with the shadows, moving with purpose as if continually on her way to somewhere.

As she drifted among the people over the course of the next hour, Karreya listened to the murmurs and the whispers and the speculation... many of them dark, all of them troubled.

There were those who anticipated war with grim satisfaction. Those who dreaded it. Those who feared their king, and those who admired him. Those who genuinely mourned their queen, and those who viewed her death with suspicion. And somewhere between the truth and the lies, Karreya found a troubling picture of a kingdom in peril, teetering on the brink of internal conflict over the burden of one man's ambitions.

Eventually, the roar of too many voices and the sting of too many untruths pressed in on her, and she wished for quiet. For a place to watch but not to hear.

The balcony. It seemed likely there would be an entrance outside the ballroom itself, hidden enough that random guests would be unlikely to stumble upon it.

As a leaf on the wind, she moved through the crowd, flowing around the groups and threading the currents with ease. Once she reached the threshold, she paused and looked back, to find that only one pair of eyes marked her—the enigmatic blue gaze of Lord Kellen, who gave her an almost invisible, slightly wistful nod. Wishing her well.

And in an uncharacteristic moment of charity, she nodded back. She had not once been tempted to stab him, and that in itself was unique enough to warrant a moment of recognition.

But the moment passed, and she turned away, under the arched doorway and into the nearly empty hall beyond. Only a

few stragglers were yet arriving, and as Karreya scanned her surroundings for a door that might lead to the balcony, she spied a lone figure waiting in the shadows at the end of the hall. Draped in darkness, hands folded, eyes lifted to a portrait on the wall.

He could have been a painting himself—an artist’s rendering of loneliness and grief brought to life. His clothing, his posture, his isolation—all of it was perfect... And all of it was a lie.

As if by some unheard signal, he turned and walked towards her, down the dark hall, nearer and nearer, until she could make out the black embroidery of his mourning robes and the silver hairs in his beard.

He did not seem to see her, and almost too late, she remembered she was not a servant or a drudge. Her current costume rendered her less invisible than usual, and so she stepped aside, setting her back to the wall as he moved closer, bowing her head and bending one knee in what she hoped appeared to be a curtsy. Leisa had demanded she practice, but she had proven a less than apt student in the art.

The man simply walked on, and curiosity compelled her to take another look as he passed by.

As if finally acknowledging her presence, the man’s head turned, and she felt the pressure of his gaze.

Even in Abreia, it was likely a thing that was not done, but Karreya found herself responding to that pressure—daring to meet his eyes. They were dark and piercing, commanding and cold, iced over with mingled grief and resolve.

And directly beneath that face, with its graying beard and its lines carved by sorrow, was another. Unremarkable, golden-eyed, and utterly familiar.

Just when it seemed those dark eyes would pass over and dismiss her, they jerked back. A spasm crossed the firm-lipped mouth, and the man’s step hitched, as if he’d nearly stumbled.

A moment later, he recovered and continued on, his attention once more turned forward, as if he had never seen

her at all.

But he had, and at last Karreya could confirm what they had until this moment only suspected. The King of Garimore was indeed an imposter, and his name was Modrevin. Mirror mage and murderer. Second Blade of the Dragurin line and aspirant to the Imperial Throne of Zulle. The man she'd crossed the ocean to find and return to his home.

She'd found her father at last, and he had walked away from her once more.

But this would not make her falter. Could not. She had come too far, and in the end, perhaps she could turn this to her advantage.

Turning to the wall, she searched the long hallway until she noted a place where the stone was worn smooth, as if by the pressure of many fingers. Running her hands across the surface, she located the catch and pressed it, then slipped through the hidden doorway and up the stairs to the balcony.

She found herself in the musicians' gallery at one end of the long ballroom, opposite the dais, and from the shadows, she watched as the King of Garimore moved silently through the waiting throng and took his seat. There were guards, both on the periphery of the room below, and on the sides of the balcony, but they were focused on the crowd, and did not seem to note Karreya's presence.

As the king surveyed his audience, the final few guests slipped in, and Karreya noted with a start that Leisa was among them. She made her way swiftly through the press of bodies until she reached Lord Kellan's side and stood on tiptoes to whisper in his ear, just as the doors to the ballroom shut with an ominous thud.

Lord Kellan's expression grew pale and grim as he turned to his father, but by then it was too late.

"People of Garimore." The king's voice was deeper, more resonant than her father's had been, and his speech held no trace of his land of origin. "We have arrived at a crossroads in the history of our kingdom—indeed, in the history of Abreia

itself. In the centuries since the Five Thrones were established, we have enjoyed peace only at the cost of vigilance. We have guarded against the dark magic of these lands, guarded against the complacency that comes with peace and prosperity, and now we must guard against the desire to forget our past.”

Her father’s present appearance might be a lie, but those words were not. He believed in them, at least, and that realization sent a chill down Karreya’s spine. How deeply had he fallen into this pretense of his? How convinced had he become of his own rhetoric?

“We have suffered a great loss, and now we must reckon with the looming shadow of the enemy that has brought violence and bloodshed to our shores.” He paused and gazed out over the heads of his people, dark eyes burning with fervor. “The Zulleri Empire has struck, and it was a grievous blow. Not only against me—or against all of us who mourn for my beloved wife—but against Farhall, Eddris, Iria, and perhaps even Katal.

“We must assume that this is only the beginning. The opening gambit in their strategy to take these lands and establish their rule on every continent within their reach. And we cannot—we *must* not—allow this to happen.” His hands gripped the arms of his throne, knuckles turning white. “Our peace and our prosperity would be forever at an end. Your farms and your families would burn in the fires of their vengeance, and these lands would be bound by the shackles of imperial governance. Your children would go to swell the ranks of their armies, and your own heads would decorate the walls of the imperial palace as a testament to the empress’s power. All of this will come to pass, unless we—the people of Abreia—are willing to rise up in opposition to the vast might of the Imperial Army.”

The king rose from his chair and took a half-dozen steps to the edge of the dais. Looked out over the crowd, his posture commanding and yet unthreatening. A man who stood ready to do what he must in the face of overwhelming odds.

Karreya’s magic screamed inside her head, a dissonant chorus of panic and repudiation, but she could do nothing to

stop what was happening.

“Would that I could stand against this tide alone, but it is too vast and too dark for one man, or even one Throne, to confront. It requires all of us standing together in one accord, and it is with deep regret that I have been forced to accept the denial of my fellow sovereigns. They have chosen not to believe the evidence of my words, the evidence of my wife’s blood, even the evidence of their own eyes as they have suffered their own losses.”

He did not name those losses... Did that mean he was unconvinced that his assassins had done their work?

“And so I stand here with an even heavier heart, to declare that Garimore no longer has any choice. We have extended the hand of alliance and it has been rejected, time and time again, and now time is a luxury we no longer have. The lands of Abreia must be united against this threat if we are to survive, and I am willing to sacrifice whatever might be necessary to ensure that these lands remain peaceful and prosperous for the benefit of our children’s children’s children.”

Peaceful and prosperous? The taint of untruth stained those words, but Karreya did not need her magic to remind her of the barricaded roads, trampled fields, and starving soldiers outside these walls. She could not be the only one in the room wondering what history would make of such “sacrifices.” But the voices below were silent, perhaps because they knew all too well of the guards standing above them, and of the blades that waited in the shadows of the ballroom.

It was only Karreya who wore none of those chains, and so she stepped forward towards the edge of the balcony, to where the lights from the ballroom below just kissed the darkness. To where the gold of her unbound hair and the shimmering embroidery on her sleeves could catch the light and glimmer softly in the gloom. To where her face might just barely be visible to one watching from below.

The king was the only one who faced her, and so he was the only one who saw as she emerged into the light. The only

one who marked her standing vigil as he spun a dark new future out of rhetoric and lies.

And she knew he saw her, because his face and his posture shifted. His confidence wavered, and for only the barest instant, he allowed her to see his surprise.

He did not know her—there was no recognition in the slight, startled flare of his nostrils—but some part of him knew what she represented, and it prevented him from calling his guards. He could not be certain whether she stood for or against him, only that she stood apart, and so he returned to his speech, but with a widening crack in his stern facade.

“Today I stand before you to announce that the fight to protect our peaceful kingdom has already begun. Even as I speak to you now, plans are in motion to bring all the people of Abreia together as one, so that we may confront our common enemy with a single voice raised in defiance. And I also stand before you to say that there will be no turning back. We have set our hands to the sword, and we will not yield until our beloved queen has been avenged.”

A shout of affirmation rang out around the ballroom, rising from a hundred throats to echo from the ceiling. But a hundred more remained silent and watchful, wearing the grim aspect of men and women who knew what war portended. Who understood the price that was yet to be paid.

“Our resolve must not be allowed to falter,” the king continued, “nor can our kingdom stand divided, and so I have come to realize that there must be a wind of change. One that will remake and renew us into the strongest that Garimore can be.”

His gaze flickered to Karreya, even as he lifted a hand, beckoning the guards from the shadows.

They moved forward, and on the balcony, the hidden archers stepped into the light and bent their bows.

“Those whose vision for the future is too small to allow for a united Abreia must now step aside, so that we may do what is necessary in the name of peace.”

Murmurs swelled and spread, but he only raised his voice higher. “The following lords have repeatedly demonstrated that they have only their own interests at heart. Lord Iverling. Baron Lasseter of Southshore. Viscount Wynthrop. The Earl of Basingreen. And finally, the Duke of Pergisham. You and all your heirs will be stripped of your titles, and your parties detained on suspicions of aiding and sympathizing with the enemies of the crown.”

The room erupted with outrage, panic, and every emotion in between, but it was like fish flopping on the shore when the tide receded. There was nowhere for them to go, and Karreya observed grimly as the guards rounded up everyone the king had named, binding the hands of anyone who protested their actions. She watched as Leisa looked frantically for a way out, but there was no escape, and her hands, too, were bound. When she struggled against the bonds, one of the guards struck her across the back of the head with a cudgel, before shoving her into the small group of prisoners.

Somehow Karreya did not react, but only stood witness as Leisa’s limp form was caught by Lord Kellan before she hit the floor. She continued to watch in silence as they were led away under the sorrowful eye of the king, and only when the last of them had left the room did he turn once more to glance at her face, his dark eyes narrowed in thought.

But his regard lasted only for a moment before he turned back to his remaining lords.

“Those who remain may be called upon in Garimore’s hour of need,” he said, “and I have no doubt that I can rely on each of you to do whatever is necessary as we unite the Five Thrones as one. Either we stand together, or we fall, and there will be no returning if ever we fall under the shadow of the Empire.”

His speech at an end, the king stepped down from the dais and made his way out of the hall in silence, and Karreya could do nothing but watch as the remaining courtiers eyed one another with burgeoning fear and suspicion.

Who among them was truly loyal? Who might be counted on to spy for the king? Ought they be more afraid of the tyrant to come, or the one who was already in their midst?

Her father had learned much during his time away, and applied the lessons of imperial rule with a deft hand. This task of hers might be more difficult than she imagined, and yet, she had no choice but to see it through.

Merging back into the shadows, she left the balcony and descended the stairs, finding her way into the corridor where she could still hear the faint sounds of boots and shouting. The prisoners had not gone quietly, and she could only pray that Leisa had not been seriously injured.

Come what may, she would find a way to rescue her once she had spoken to her father.

After binding her hair back with a single deft twist of her wrist, Karreya strode down the empty hall, drawing a dagger as she went. Two quick slits in her long flowing skirts allowed her better access to her weapons and decreased the likelihood of them tangling between her legs. Thankfully, the boots she wore beneath were already soft and flat enough to allow her to move quietly.

She was too late to shadow her father's steps, but Leisa had provided her with a detailed layout of the palace—one that included the location of the royal apartments and the servants' stairs. It was a simple matter for one of Karreya's skill to find her way unseen, landing a few short minutes later on the king's balcony with only a whisper of sound. The doors were locked, but otherwise unsecured, so she let herself in and strolled silently through the royal suite.

The lamps burned low, and no fire brightened the fireplace, so she stationed herself across from the window in the king's sitting room—unmoving as a stone, as patient as the stars. She could wait all night, and yet somehow she knew she would not have to. He would come, and he would expect her to be here, and at long last, she would have her answers.

Even if none of them were the answers she hoped for.



She heard when he arrived. When he sighed deeply before turning away an offer of tea, entering his bedchamber, and dismissing his servants for the night.

Only then did he make his way to the sitting room. He did not turn up the lamps, only crossed to the window and stood there, looking out over the grounds below.

“Have you come to bargain or to kill?” he asked abruptly.

So he knew she was imperial, but nothing more.

“You wish to bargain with Empress Phaedrin Myrna Draguris, Queen of the Dragur and Supreme Commander of the Undying Legion? What bargain can be possible for the king of a weak and pitiful people?” Her voice was as flat and emotionless as she could make it. The voice of an assassin—cold and deadly.

She had never told him of her magic, so he could not know that she saw through his transformation. He could only wonder whether she knew him as more than he pretended to be. And it would only add to his fear—the possibility that after all his pretending, an imperial assassin had actually come, and she had come for *him*.

“A bargain is always possible,” he said, and raised his right hand to touch something that lay beneath his robes. “And these people are not as weak as when I found them.”

He must be wearing the medallion. The one that would protect him from mind mages, which meant he thought himself less vulnerable.

Which meant this was the ideal moment to attack.

“No bargains are possible for you,” she said. “Did you truly believe you had escaped?”

“Escaped from what?” He sounded very much as if she had puzzled him, but he was afraid.

“Your destiny,” she said softly, emerging from the shadows so that he could see her outline in the moonlit room. “You might believe you outran it—that you have beaten the specter of your past—but you cannot run from history. Most of all, you cannot run from yourself... Modrevin.”

The name left a bitter taste on her tongue, but it struck home, staggering his confidence and driving him a step back to stare at her wildly, hands clenched in the fabric of his robes.

“Who are you?” he whispered hoarsely. “How did you find me, and how do you know that name?”

Karreya had not expected it to hurt. But she knew he had seen her. He had identified her as imperial, and yet, there was no shadow of either doubt or recognition.

“How do you *not* know my face?”

A puzzled frown pulled at his lips. “I left everything behind eleven years ago,” he said. “And there was no one who would have missed me. Even my mother saw me as a useless waste of resources, so who would there have been to remember?”

Karreya’s anger surged, and she moved forward on its rising tide. Into the moonlight, within five paces of the man she’d once called Father.

“Who would have remembered?” she asked bitterly. “Did you think as little of me as your mother thought of you? Or did you simply never care enough to ask yourself whether there was any greater purpose to your life than your grand ambitions?”

His expression remained blank for three breaths as he scanned her face. And then... then... His eyes widened, his jaw gaped, and his grip on his robes was lost as his hands fell slack to his sides.

“Ka... Karreya?”

A strange blend of curiosity and pain held her still and silent despite his query.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” He was staring as if he’d seen a ghost. “Did *she* send you? Is this to be my reward for my efforts—to be cut down by my own child in the very moment that I reach for the fruits of my labor?”

Not so very long ago, it would not have occurred to her that his response might be strange. It was the only world she knew. But now... It seemed sad beyond measure that her father’s first thought upon seeing her face was that she must intend to kill him.

“Perhaps I have come only to retrieve you,” she said instead. “Perhaps it is time for the Empire’s Second Blade to return and take up his duties rather than running from them.”

“*Duty?*” He spat the word. “What could I possibly know of that? What duty, what honor was I allowed, if not this? Always, I was passed over, forever denied what should have been mine by right. Second Blade? I should have been First without being required to prove myself! But instead, I was cast off, set adrift, given no recognition but my ability to produce an heir more to Mother’s liking.” His mouth twisted as he gazed at her. “And has that been you, Karreya? Has she embraced you as First Blade, given *you* the position that should have been mine, or has she sent you off to play in the shadows as she did me, with every belief that you would fail?”

He spoke no words he did not believe, and the emotions playing across his face could not be mistaken for anything but jealousy.

Her father was jealous of his own child.

Somehow, in eleven years, he had not changed. Grown more patient and cunning, perhaps, but...

Wait. His words echoed strangely in Karreya’s mind.

“What do you mean, *sent?*”

For a handful of moments, he stared at her, and then burst out laughing.

“Oh, my poor child. You truly did not know? But if you did not know, then why have you come?”

What did she not know? What piece was she missing? Karreya's thoughts raced from moment to moment, hoping to recall anything that might help her understand. Senaya said Modrevin had been passed over. Relegated to the hopeless position of being required to produce an heir. That the Empress had refused to grant him her favor.

But what if she'd been wrong?

"I came to return you to Zulle," she said, with all honesty. "I do not have the appropriate magic to be Grandmother's heir. She is fading, and I knew of no one else but you."

Her father's eyes glittered in the moonlight. "Then she did not send you. You came of your own will?"

"Yes." Karreya took a step closer, watching every twitch, every breath. "After you left, I was sent to the Enclave, but I escaped in order to find you and take you home."

"And you are not... not yet First Blade?"

"I have no desire to bear that title. It is because I wished to avoid it that I am here."

He let out a long breath and laughed again, this time with relief. "And here I was so afraid that she had lost patience. But there is still time before I must return triumphant. Still time to achieve my victory."

This conversation was not progressing along any of the trajectories Karreya had prepared herself for. He was meant to fear the knowledge that anyone from Zulle could reveal his identity. Instead, he seemed almost relieved.

"Does... Does Grandmother know where you are?"

The gaze he turned on her then held nothing but contempt. "I have never understood why the Enclave prides itself in creating such simple, innocent killers. You are like dogs, to be turned on your prey and let loose, never questioning your orders or their reasons. Unable to grasp the currents of power because you lack insight and cunning."

He could not truly hurt her, Karreya reminded herself—not unless she allowed it. So there was no harm in permitting him

to mock and underestimate her. Let him go on believing she was no more than a weapon in the hand of the most powerful wielder. Such a miscalculation would only be to her advantage in the end.

“Of course she knows!” Her father’s voice rang out in the otherwise silent room. “This is the place of both my redemption and my exile! My one chance to prove that I am more than capable of becoming the heir she desires. She has promised that if I can do this thing—if I can return these lands to imperial rule as one united people—she will grant me what should have been mine by birth.”

Then... The Empress knew all along. She knew exactly where her son was and what he was doing. It was not by chance but by her own will and with the promise of her favor that all of this had occurred.

“How long?” Karreya uttered the words with no hint of emotion—nothing that might tell her father how deeply he had disturbed her. “How long did she grant you before she makes someone else her heir?”

“Fifteen years,” he told her. “There are less than four years remaining to me, but it will be more than enough. The first three thrones will soon fall, and then I will have sufficient ships and troops to take the battle across the mountains to Katal.”

“You do not have that long,” Karreya said bluntly. “I have seen Grandmother. She fades, and her enemies have noticed. If you do not return within the year, she may die without an heir, and there will be a war such as the Zulleri have not seen since before the Dragurin line was first established.”

The first glimmers of doubt appeared in those unfamiliar dark eyes, echoed by the golden eyes beneath.

“But why? Why have you come here to tell me this?”

Why had she? What had she thought was going to happen when she vanished from the Enclave and found her way to Abreia on a tiny, struggling merchant ship?

“Is this *your* chance?” he asked suddenly, a note of suspicion entering his tone. “Has she promised to elevate you above me if you can stop me?” Another laugh, and this time it was a bitter one. “It would be just like her. Just as she used to pit me against Senaya. The perfect daughter, until she proved what I always said of her—that she was weak and unfit to rule.”

“As I said before, I do not want the throne,” Karreya returned steadily. “And neither did Senaya. No one, I think, who deserves to have power, could ever want such a thing.”

“You speak like a child,” her father snapped. “And you have acted like a child, which means you are useless to me. Go home, and live out your days as a mindless weapon.”

“And then what?” Karreya held her turbulent feelings at bay, intent only on her reasons for being here, her thoughts racing as she looked for a way to achieve her goals. “You will unite Abreia, return to Zulle, be established as the next emperor, and then...?” She turned and paced across the room, and his eyes followed her. He was still not entirely certain she would not harm him, and it might be the only advantage she had left.

“And then I will solidify my power, destroy my enemies, and ensure that the line of the Dragurin Emperors will live forever.” He sounded so certain. As if such a goal was a simple matter of intent. But he spoke as one who had never been permitted at court, had never been forced to navigate the deep and treacherous waters of imperial politics.

“And how will you do that,” Karreya asked softly, “without an heir?”

For the first time, her father seemed to regard her with something like respect. “Oh, so that is why you have come?” A smile creased his face—satisfied and more than a little predatory. “You wish me to acknowledge you now, to secure your own position while granting to me the task of eradicating the enemies of the crown. You wish to court my favor and rest in my shadow now that victory is all but assured.”

He understood nothing.

“I came to Abreia for no other reason than to tell you that you must leave this place and return home,” she said in a flat, hard voice. “Otherwise, everything you have hoped for will be at risk.”

His smile faded. “I will not be deceived,” he replied, shaking his head. “The Empress will never grant me what I desire unless I fulfill the terms of our bargain. I must achieve what she demanded. Then and only then can I return.”

“And if I make your name a curse among the people of this kingdom?” Karreya queried boldly. “I can tell them who you are and what you want. I can warn them of your plots and your threats and your intentions, and then they will want nothing more than to eradicate your very name from these lands you have sought to conquer.”

And yet, he remained unmoved. “Oh, you simple, foolish child. You think I have not prepared for this moment? I have spent the past decade ensuring that everyone is aware of my fear and hatred of magic. I have done everything possible—including ridding these lands of other mages—to ensure that I cannot be found out. You could climb to the roof of this palace and shout it to the winds, or gather my nobles together and make your heartfelt pleas, and they would only laugh at you.”

It seemed she had been wrong. She had nothing he wanted, nothing he feared—except death, and that was not a step she was willing to take. Not in cold blood. Even if she freely acknowledged that he should never be emperor, she could not—would not—be the hand that took her father’s life unless it were in self defense. Whether her trainers would call her a failure or not, she knew instinctively that such a line could not be crossed without losing a part of her soul.

And if she could not kill him, she had no other moves. No remaining options, except for a strategic retreat. Her father’s intentions were immovable and his plans secure, and if she did not warn Vaniell and Kyrion and the others, they would march their armies right into his waiting trap.

Her only hope was to escape, and yet if she did so, she left Leisa in his hands—injured and alone, doomed to whatever

fate awaited the nobles who had dared to stand against their king.

It was a moment of terrible choice for one who had learned so recently to care. Who had never dreamed she would be called on to change the fate of kingdoms or protect the lives of her friends.

But when she thought of Leisa, of Kyrion, and of Vaniell most of all, she believed she knew what they would tell her. She recalled Leisa and Kyrion's final desperate kiss of farewell, and understood what it was that they all risked—what they all were fighting for, and what it was that she had to do now.

“Then you leave me no choice,” she said, bowing her head slightly. “I bid you farewell, Father.”

“Oh, but you don't actually think I will allow you to leave now, do you?” His smile became a smirk. “My soldiers were in place long before I ever entered these rooms.”

But just as she had underestimated his plans, he had underestimated her.

“Your soldiers?” she said, and offered her own mocking smile in answer to his. “They are useless, but you would not know that, would you? You lasted less than a year in the Enclave, so you do not understand who or what I am.

“Eleven years, Father. Eleven years of learning to be the perfect spy, the perfect weapon, the perfect element of surprise. You employ your own assassins and trust in their abilities, but I have met one and they are weak and obvious. So do not bother trying to stop me. Do not bother searching your palace for me once I am gone. Easier to capture the wind or the shadows.”

He'd frozen in place, as if she had finally given him pause.

“And after I am gone, know that I am not your ally. Know that I will be watching and waiting in the darkness. Waiting for the moment you make a mistake. And when you do... I will be there.”

He moved suddenly—a swift step forward together with a grab for her wrist—but Karreya was no longer there. And as she merged with the shadows and fled into the night, she slipped one hand into the secret pocket of her skirt and wrapped her fingers around the cold, hard surface of the spell gem.

It warmed beneath her skin, and as it did so, she thought of Niell. Willed him to hear her. Begged him to know that she was not only thinking of him—she needed him.

And she hoped, as she had never hoped before.

That he could find her—find Leisa—before it was too late.

CHAPTER 15



They were in the air less than an hour later, arrowing south above the clouds on a chill northerly wind. Kyrion's worry and fear were a palpable force that drove him to incredible speeds, each powerful wingbeat a wordless cry of urgency that echoed with his desperate need to get to Leisa.

It was a race against time and the cruelty of whomever had captured her, and the further they went, the darker Vaniell's imagination grew.

But he had to believe that she was alive. Had to believe Karreya was with her and the two of them were safe somewhere...

A moment later, he let out a choked cry as a fire erupted in his chest—a burning, clutching sensation that seared through his mind and left him with a glowing ember of pain between his temples.

Pain that pointed south...

“What is it?” Kyrion growled, the wind whipping his words so that Vaniell could barely make them out.

And for a moment he could not answer—not only because he was fighting the ache in his head and struggling not to fall off, but because he did not know how to tell Kyrion what he'd done.

“It's Karreya,” he gasped out finally. “She's in trouble.”

The wyvern's wingbeats slowed momentarily, and he banked to fly lower, out of the worst of the wind. “How do

you know?”

Vaniell closed his eyes and focused on the pulling sensation. He tried to feel more than a simple sense of direction and succeeded only in making his headache worse. “I gave her an enchantment,” he admitted. He hadn’t even been sure she would find it, let alone use it. But now that she had, he was torn between the competing emotions of fear and hope.

“I didn’t have a chance to test it, but I believed it would allow her to summon me if they were in need. Act as a beacon so that we could find them.”

“And you told no one? Why?” Kyrion’s voice had gone deeper, and he sounded almost angry.

“Because I wasn’t sure if it would work.” Vaniell didn’t know if there was any way to make the night elf understand—not when he was still caught in this maelstrom of worry and fear for the woman he loved. “That’s the way of enchantments. I try new things, and sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. I had no time, so I had to improvise with one of my available spell gems, and I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up if it all came to nothing.”

The wyvern flew on in silence for a few moments. “Was it similar to the gem you gave Leisa?” he asked finally, in a voice gone flat and seemingly empty of emotion.

“Yes and no,” Vaniell replied, pressing his fingers to his temples and breathing deeply as the pain began to ease. “They had different goals, but both were a risk. Both were a desperate attempt to do what I wasn’t sure *could* be done, but felt I had to try anyway. The one I gave to Karreya was meant only to alert me to her need, while the one I gave to Leisa was intended to provide a way for you to speak to someone. To give her an ally, and you a potential way of escape that would not jeopardize the lives being held over my head.”

Kyrion dove lower to avoid a dense cloud bank, then leveled out before speaking again. “And did you know it would create a permanent link between us?”

Horror drained all other thoughts from Vaniell's mind. A *permanent link*? Unthinkable. To chain two living beings together against their will...

"No!" Vaniell's eyes shut against a surge of pain and guilt at the thought of what he had done. "That was never meant to happen. Whatever you may think of me, I would never have done such a thing knowingly. It is an abomination and a gross misuse of magic."

But he'd misused his magic terribly in other ways, so how could he expect anything other than mistrust?

"Did I..." How could he even ask this? "Is your relationship... is it my fault? Did I leave the two of you no choice?"

He'd believed Kyrion and Leisa to be deeply in love, but what if it was only his magic that bound them?

"I am not angry, Vaniell of Garimore," the wyvern rumbled. "Cease your babbling apologies. If it eases your guilt, know that my love for Leisa has nothing to do with your magic. We are bound by far more than enchantment, and if it were not for your bumbling attempts to aid us, both of us might well be dead by now."

"That does not make my carelessness any less reprehensible."

The wyvern snorted. "You cannot fool me any longer, Princeling, so cease trying. You are no more careless than I am. I only wished to warn you that your enchantment may have unintended consequences for both you and Karreya."

But the warning might well be too late. The beacon had been activated, and a connection had been made. What if he had somehow done the same thing to Karreya that he had done to Kyrion and Leisa? What if the enchantment he intended for good had linked their minds inextricably?

Reaching out for that bright, pulsing knot of magic in his head, he touched it gently with his mind and received no thoughts or images, only a tug of need and a burning sense of direction, just as he'd intended. Perhaps that meant his magic

had not misfired. That it functioned according to his original direction and would have no permanent consequences. He could only hope...

And it was pointing in the same way they were already going, so that was another bit of good news—or at least it was not *bad* news. It meant Karreya was still alive and free. He would choose to trust that Leisa was also alive, and that he and Kyrion would reach the city in time. Perhaps his optimism was unfounded, but his heart refused to accept any other possibilities.

They were safe. It was the only option, and he would do whatever was necessary to make sure of it.



They traveled into the night and beyond, and their flight soon seemed like one continuous nightmare of cold and urgency and aching muscles.

With only the grim, hulking form of Kyrion's wyvern for company, it grew increasingly difficult for Vaniell to maintain his optimism. He could feel the night elf's growing sense of dread, and could almost taste his apprehension by the time they finally landed only a few miles outside Hanselm.

It was somewhere between midnight and dawn on a clear summer night, and the air at ground level was startlingly warm and still in comparison to the winds aloft.

"We'll go on foot from here," Kyrion announced, drawing in deep, panting breaths as he shifted forms and staggered to his feet. "I can't risk being spotted by archers, but I can still feel Leisa. She's in the city somewhere."

Vaniell grabbed his arm and refused to flinch when the night elf's glowing gaze narrowed with rage.

"Stop," Vaniell insisted firmly. "Sit down for a few moments. You're about to collapse and we both know I can't carry you."

“It’s already been too long,” Kyrion countered, his voice little more than a hoarse rasp. “She’s been injured. Perhaps captured. For all we know, she’s been in that monster’s hands for days now. And if he finds out who she is...”

He did not need to elaborate. If Modrevin found out that Leisa was a mirror mage and his own niece, there was no knowing how violently he would react.

“She’s smart and strong,” Vaniell reminded him. “And Karreya is still there, so they may be together. Just take a moment, or you won’t be able to help her even when we do find them.”

Kyrion’s lips curled slightly in a silent snarl of frustration, but he somehow held back his anger and let his chin fall to his chest. Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths before lifting his head and turning to look at Vaniell.

“Thank you,” he said stiffly. “You are not wrong. I have a difficult time thinking clearly when I can feel her distress.”

It was almost uncomfortable to bear the weight of those thanks, but Vaniell nodded in acknowledgment. “You’d do as much for me,” he returned. “And we’ll be on our way as soon as you catch your...”

It was nearly dark at the edges of the farm field where they’d landed, but the moonlight shone brightly enough to illuminate the suddenly stiff set of Kyrion’s shoulders. His head jerked up, and his eyes went glassy and blank. His hand raised to clutch at empty air, and then a terrible cry ripped from his throat—a wordless howl of agony and despair.

His knees hit the ground, his chin fell, and then his fingers clutched the dirt, shaking uncontrollably. “*Leisa.*”

A yawning pit of fear opened in Vaniell’s stomach and sent him to his knees at Kyrion’s side.

“What is it? Kyrion, what can I do?”

“*Leisa.*” Tears of raw grief streaked the night elf’s face, and a shudder of agony ripped through his body. “She’s gone,” he whispered, and then the light left his eyes and he collapsed, face down in the dirt.



They had landed near a small grove of oak trees where three farmed fields met, so after a frantic few moments of searching for a pulse, Vaniell concealed Kyrion's limp form within the shelter of the grove and waited for him to wake.

He could not carry him, and he would not leave him. Not in the heart of Garimore, where anything *other* was feared and hated. So he built a small fire out of magic and kindling and sat beside it, gazing into the darkness and wondering whether this was the end of all their hopes.

If Leisa was truly gone... If she and Karreya had failed in their mission, it was likely that Modrevin would be more than prepared to face the combined armies of Farhall, Eddris, and Dunmaren.

And without Kyrion... No. Vaniell refused to consider the possibility that Kyrion would not recover. And yet, even if he did, he might well determine that the humans were collectively responsible for his wife's death and remove Dunmaren from their treaty.

Or he might simply blame Vaniell. For hatching this imprudent plan in the first place. For assuring everyone that it was possible. For taking this insane risk and choosing hope over certainty.

Hope... It seemed a distant, unattainable dream in the depths of the night, as he waited, alone and uncertain, racked by grief and guilt, wondering whether morning would ever come.

The beacon in his head still pulsed, brighter now that he was closer to Hanselm, but still so far beyond his reach. He dared not leave Kyrion, but with Leisa gone, he was reminded of his fears for Karreya. Of what her father might do to protect his secrets.

The night seemed to grow even darker as Vaniell huddled miserably by the tiny fire, sinking deeper into the entangling web of his own fears. His heart began to race, and it felt as if

he could not breathe until he finally shut his eyes against the darkness and focused.

Focused on the brightening light of Karreya's call.

It truly was growing with each passing moment. As if she were not standing still, but moving closer. And there was more... He could feel more than just need. He could feel determination. Anticipation. Suspicion. Movement, and then watchful stillness.

Vaniell lifted his head and opened his eyes, startled by the sudden conviction that she was truly there—standing across the fire, watching him. And in his grief and exhaustion, his mind provided a vision of her emerging from the darkness dressed in night itself, with more daggers than fingers and her pale blonde hair flowing about her shoulders, bright as spun gold in the firelight. Her golden eyes were wide and wary, and she stood poised like a deer prepared for flight, uncertain of her welcome.

Vaniell blinked, but the illusion did not vanish.

He blinked again, rubbed his eyes, and leaped to his feet.

She had not disappeared.

“Karreya?” he choked out, still convinced that this was some trick of the mind, an apparition brought to life by his own desperate need.

“You came.”

It was Karreya's voice. She was real, and the truth of it broke him.

Had he stopped to think, he might never have done it, but he had been so afraid that he merely acted. Strode across the clearing and pulled her towards him, wrapping his arms around her shoulders with desperate strength. She froze for a moment as he clutched her closer, tucking her against his shoulder, burying his face in her hair and squeezing his eyes shut against the threat of tears.

“You're all right,” he whispered. “I'm so glad you're all right.”

And with those words, she let out a strange little sigh, turned her face into his chest, and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I should stab you,” she murmured, “but I am too relieved that you are here.”

“Stab me next time?” Vaniell suggested softly, his words somewhat muffled by the golden waves of her hair. “How did you even find me?”

She pulled back to look at him. “I do not know how, but I believe your beacon and my magic were working together. Once I left the city, I knew which way to go, much as I know truth from lies.”

“What happened in there?” He searched her face, looking for signs of distress or injury. Not that she would show them openly, but perhaps she was there when Leisa...

Her body stiffened, and she took a step back from him, arms falling to her sides and chin lifting so she could look him in the eye.

“I failed,” she said simply. “You were correct—the ruler of this land is indeed my father, but he has planned too well to be deterred. Niell, he is here with my grandmother’s full knowledge. He will not stop until he has fulfilled the terms of her bargain with him and obtained what was promised.”

It was not the news they’d hoped for, and yet, hope was not entirely dead unless...

“What of Leisa?” Vaniell inquired urgently. “Where is she? Kyrion’s link with her went silent. He believes she’s...” He couldn’t say the word aloud.

“I don’t know.” Karreya’s usual unshakeable confidence seemed battered by her experiences within Hanselm’s walls. “She was with Lord Kellan when my father arrested everyone who does not support his war or his empire. They were taken, and when I tried to find them, I could not discover a way to do so without revealing my presence. The guards and locked doors would have meant too much death. I sensed you were close, and so I judged it best to warn you first. Let you send

word to the others, so they will know what they face on the field of battle.”

She was right, and yet...

“You did the right thing,” Vaniell told her. “Never doubt that. We will find a way to send word, but we also cannot leave Leisa in there. I have to believe she is only unconscious, not dead. Modrevin would not have killed his prisoners. Not in secret. If they’re marked to die...”

Karreya’s eyes suddenly went wide and wary.

“I did not tell you that name,” she said coolly, “and neither did Senaya. How did you learn it?”

“Does it matter?” Vaniell could not quite understand her discomfort. “Is there some reason why I should not use it? I have wondered for so many years who might be wearing my father’s face. Refused to call him by the wrong name, because I wanted to remember what he’d done. Having his real name... it seemed like a gift. Like I could finally feel that my enemy was more than a faceless, invulnerable phantom.”

“It is not wrong for you to use it,” Karreya assured him. “And I am sorry I did not think to tell you. But if someone else in these lands knows of his name and his presence... I am not certain why, but that fills me with unease.”

“She is not an enemy,” Vaniell said hastily, “though you may have known of her. Her name now is Yvane, but many years ago she was much like you—a tool of the Enclave who escaped and chose a different life.”

Karreya reached out swiftly to grasp his arm, her expression stark and searching. “And you are certain she did not harm you in any way? The Enclave’s weapons are many and varied, and some have dark magics of the mind.”

“And so she did,” he agreed, placing one hand over Karreya’s where it rested on his arm. “But she has walked away from that, just as you have. Wants nothing more to do with it. She...”

Karreya’s face shuttered and her gaze dropped, but she said nothing, either to confirm or to contradict.

Had she not truly decided what she wanted? Was she still thinking of returning to the Empire?

“I’m sorry,” Vaniell said, his heart sinking and his hope beginning to dim. “I did not mean to assume. When this is over... Whatever you want... I won’t try...” Words stuck in his throat as they had never done before.

“No, Abreian.” Karreya’s expression grew suddenly fierce as she closed the distance between them. Her hand lifted, ungloved and free of weaponry, to settle on his cheek, light as a butterfly’s wing and just as tentative. That bright, burning beacon in his head blazed up like a star, reflected in the fiery heat of her gaze.

“Do not stop trying,” she commanded him fiercely. “Do not stop speaking. I want to hear all of your words. I want to hold all of your feelings. I do not always know how to speak of what I feel, only how to act, and even that is a mystery where you are concerned because I have never felt like this before. I have never cared what anyone thought of me, and it is difficult enough to manage my own heart without wondering what you are thinking.”

Vaniell remained frozen, heart pounding with the inescapable conviction that his next words, his next move, might matter as much as anything he had ever done in his messed up, miserable life.

“You think you’re the only one who feels tangled up inside?” he asked softly. “I don’t know what you’re thinking either, and it’s making me crazy. I want to tell you everything, but I’m afraid it will scare you off. I want to keep you close because you make me happy even when everything is a mess, but I want to push you away because I can’t bear the thought of my past hurting you.”

And Karreya—his gorgeous, deadly, impossible assassin—just looked puzzled. “If you wanted to know what I am thinking, Abreian, why did you not just ask?”

Because...

Well, why hadn’t he?

“Because I was a coward,” he said bluntly. “You are so honest and unflinching, and I knew you would tell me the truth. And I was afraid to hear one more person remind me that I was alone.”

Karreya tilted her head and eyed him with evident satisfaction. “You have changed. When last we parted, you were less certain of yourself. What is different?”

Everything. Everything was different, but he did not know if he could explain it to Karreya.

“I believe it is because... I am no longer fighting alone,” he said, though he knew she might not understand why this meant so much to him. “Ever since the first time my magic was used against me, I have felt as if I could trust no one. As if I dared let no one in, for fear of betrayal. But I have family now, who inexplicably have my back, as if they’ve forgiven me for all the years of animosity that stand between us. And I have... friends.” He still marveled at the word. Perhaps he would never grow used to the idea that more than one person in the world considered him a friend.

“And you have me.” Karreya was still close enough to look up at him out of fierce, golden-brown eyes. “I will not abandon this fight, Niell. I will not abandon...” She stopped, her mouth closed, and he could have sworn a slight blush washed over her cheeks.

“Me?” he asked hopefully, allowing a tiny smile to pull at his lips. “Is that what you were going to say? That you won’t abandon me, because you’re afraid someone else will stab me before you do?”

“No!” The expression on her face seemed almost defiant. “I do *not* want to stab you, Niell. Not anymore. I do not want anyone to hurt you, ever. It makes me angry to think of it, and I do not like being angry. It clouds my thoughts, the same way that you do when you smile and say that I am beautiful.”

Vaniell could only stare as the firelight made shadows dance on her golden hair and reflected from her golden-brown eyes. In her black gown, she might have been the incarnation of death itself, and he could not look away. Could not bring

himself to care what his people might think, or even what his brother might say.

“You are beautiful,” he told her quietly. “But that is not the only reason that I...”

Karreya froze. “That you what, Abreian?”

The moment drew out as they stared into one another’s eyes, flames crackling behind them while the cry of a night bird echoed through the darkness.

Did he dare to say it? To commit himself irrevocably to this course and damn whatever forces attempted to keep them apart?

He’d warned Jarek that he would not be the kind of king they expected. And Jarek had replied that perhaps that meant he would be the kind of king their people *needed*.

And maybe—just maybe—it meant that the man called Vaniell of Garimore was not simply a thorn in the side of his kingdom. Not simply a never-ending source of irritation. He could be more than an irresponsible wastrel and an unspeakable cad.

Perhaps there was something of value in the man he’d become, and now all he needed to do was to *be* that man.

“Karreya...”

CHAPTER 16



Whatever Niell had been about to say was interrupted by a groan from the other side of the fire.

“Kyrion?” Niell stepped back abruptly and darted around the flames to drop to the ground at the night elf’s side. “Tell me what you need. Anything.”

Karreya found it was possible to be simultaneously relieved that Kyrion was awake and frustrated that she would have to wait yet again to hear Niell speak of his feelings.

“Leisa.” Kyrion’s voice was a harsh rasp, from a throat that seemed raw with agony. “Find her.”

“We will.” Niell had never sounded so certain of anything. “Listen, I don’t know how your bond works, but I don’t believe that she’s dead. Karreya said Leisa was with Lord Kellen when they were arrested, and someone knocked her unconscious, but there is no reason to believe that anything worse has happened.”

“I felt that blow,” Kyrion muttered, struggling to his feet. “This is different. This is more.” His hands rose to cover his face, then clutched at his hair for a moment before they fell, revealing a man in torment.

His eyes were empty, his face drawn and haggard. “She is simply... not.”

Karreya shook her head. “I cannot tell you exactly what has occurred, as I was unable to find my way within the walls of the dungeon. But my...” She paused, recalling Niell’s words. She needed to give him his proper name. To strip away

the mystique lent by his magic and his lies. “Even if Modrevin intends to kill his prisoners, he would not have done so yet.”

Niell nodded grimly in agreement. “They are political enemies, and he needs to remind his other nobles of the price of disagreeing with his decisions. There would be a public display of their execution, with as many as possible in attendance.”

“He is correct.” Karreya knew all too well how that was usually accomplished, and where her father would have learned such lessons. “It is a tactic my grandmother uses to great effect.”

“Then I will go.” Kyrion’s tone was flat, leaving no room for negotiation. “Alone if necessary. If there is a chance she is alive, I will find a way in. I will tear down the walls if I must, but I will not wait for kings or armies or negotiations.”

For the barest instant, Karreya sensed Niell’s hesitation, as he considered the stakes of whatever choice they made. Thoughts danced behind his gray eyes, but when he finally clenched his jaw and faced Kyrion, he did so with a conviction that belied any doubt.

“I am with you,” he said, with a single confident nod. “As circumstances now stand, whatever happens next is largely beyond our control. Modrevin cannot be swayed by threats, and we can do nothing worthwhile to expose him. The armies will march, and we must trust that Danric and Allera and Lythienne can hold them at bay. Perhaps...” He shook his head and shut his eyes. “Perhaps it was always going to come to this. Perhaps Abreia never had a chance to avoid this wretched, bloody, unspeakable war. I wanted to think we could stop it, but maybe I was always fooling myself.”

“No.” Kyrion’s voice was still raw but firm. “It is never a mistake to stand in the way of great evil. The only mistake is in becoming the evil we seek to prevent.”

Karreya felt those words like a knife to the chest. They sank deep and ripped through the happiness of finding Vaniell, only to expose the fears she had not yet dared to face.

All of this suffering had been caused by her father's ambition. And all of this could end with her father's death.

At first, she had demanded that his life be spared, but she now grew more and more certain that it was a selfish wish. She had wanted him to go home. To spare her from being her grandmother's heir. But she could no longer doubt that such an outcome would be catastrophic—for the people of the Empire as well as the people of Abreia.

But if her father could not be the heir, and Senaya *would* not, there was only one other option, and it was the option she had abandoned her life and come all the way across the ocean to prevent. The option that would separate her from Niell forever.

And yet... if it would save this land, if it would save the Empire from her father's rule, was it not a sacrifice she should be willing to make?

If she were willing, then her father no longer needed to live. But how did one say aloud that it was now acceptable for her father to die?

Karreya examined those words silently and felt nothing in response, but that did not mean it was the right decision. Her own sense of right and wrong had been shaped by unspeakable forces, and while she understood her lack, she could not yet always see an alternative path.

She already knew it could not be her hand that wielded the knife, and if she were not prepared to do so, how could she be cruel enough to ask another to act in her stead?

"Both of you must hear me." Kyrion's deep voice interrupted her thoughts. "I bear you no ill will, but Modrevin is my enemy. Beyond what I have suffered, he has caused countless other deaths and brought Abreia to the edge of destruction. Should I find myself face to face with the man, I will not hesitate to strike."

Niell's jaw clenched, but he offered the night elf a nod of understanding. "I will not beg you for his life, but neither am I fool enough to pretend that I could do what is necessary. Even

after all that he's done... I'm ashamed to say that I don't know if I could kill him by my own hand."

"I hate him," he continued helplessly, "but he is also the only father I knew for much of my life. He is not Melger, but all of my memories of Melger are somehow his. I want him to pay for his crimes, but what would that make me if I killed him? What would I become with his blood on my hands?"

It was the same question Karreya asked herself, and still failed to answer. If one must become evil to defeat evil, then what was the point? And yet, if no one stood up to confront evil in the first place, did that not become just another form of evil?

"I am well enough to go on," Kyrion said. "If you require rest, then stay, but I must find Leisa."

"Lead on," Niell said. "Though we should probably take a moment to consider our approach. Karreya, is there anything we should know about the state of the city?"

She could only shrug. "I do not know what it was like when last you saw it, but it is not open to visitors at present. The gates are closed, passes are required in order to enter, and there are far more guards than are needed. Horses are being confiscated, and many men have been taken away to swell the army's ranks. The people are afraid, which means it is not a peaceful place."

"So we'll have to find a way in," Niell mused. "Can the passes be easily forged?"

"No need," Karreya said, sliding her own pass from the pocket of her skirt. "This will allow two people entry for another day. They do not mark them, so there is no way for them to know who first held the pass. You and Kyrion can enter through the gate, and I will choose a different path."

"Won't work," Niell reminded her grimly. "They'll never let a night elf in, so it'll have to be Kyrion who finds another way."

"Do not fear," Kyrion said in a low voice, as he scattered the fire's remaining coals and then stamped them out. "Recall

that this city was my home for ten years. They cannot keep me out should I choose to enter.”

“Just... try to be as careful as possible,” Niell requested carefully. “We don’t want them on their guard, so a trail of bodies is not going to help us.”

Kyrion’s eyes glowed silver as he turned his gaze on Niell. “I am angry, but that does not mean I have become a fool,” he growled.

“Apologies.” Niell lifted his hands in surrender. “Shall we go?”

“I will find my own way and meet you within the city.” Kyrion was clearly anxious to be moving, and unwilling to wait for the humans. “Can you gain entrance into the palace grounds?”

“Yes.”

Karreya and Niell spoke at the same time, then threw each other a quick, unreadable glance in the darkness.

“The garden folly,” Niell said quietly. “If you can bear to revisit it. No one else will go there.”

“We will meet by nightfall,” Kyrion agreed, and then he was gone. Vanished into the darkness like wind and shadow that had accidentally taken on flesh.

And Karreya was alone with Niell.

Alone with the night and the urgency of their errand and the memories of him about to say *something* that she desperately wanted to hear.

But he was not looking at her. He was looking towards the walls of the city, and then he sighed, as if something pained him deeply.

“You do not want to go back?” she guessed.

“I do not,” he said softly. “And yet I do. I was never happy here. Never had anyone I fully trusted. But I have fought so long to expose Modrevin that... Somehow I came to care about everything he was destroying. Everyone he has

manipulated and used. I need to see this through, for me, and for them.”

“Then that is what we will do,” she said simply. Whatever was required, they would see it through together. At that thought, some of the tightness around her heart seemed to ease, and as they both stared out across the dark fields towards Hanselm, she reached out and took his hand.

Curled her fingers around his palm and held it firmly.

She sensed his surprise. Watched as he lifted their joined hands to stare at them for a moment.

“Sometimes, I wonder how it’s possible that you haven’t stabbed me yet,” he mused, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “And then you find ways to comfort me when I didn’t even know I needed it. Is this for anything in particular or...” He trailed off, a question in his hesitation.

“You once told me that you are scared of the dark, Abreian.” He’d meant it as a flirtatious joke, but he had not lied. “But if you do not wish to hold my hand, then...”

“No.” He snatched it towards him and pressed the back of her hand against his chest, clenching his own fingers tighter. “It’s mine now. You gave it to me, and I am not giving it back.”

To her shock, Karreya found herself smiling in the dark. “Very well. But I can only spare it until we reach the city. Then I will need both hands free if I am to protect you.”

He did not release her, only kept her hand pressed tightly to his chest as he turned his head to look down at her. “Only remember what I told you in Viali, Karreya. I meant it then and I mean it now more than ever.”

He had told her many things. But which one now put that worried note in his voice?

“Do not even think about dying for me, do you hear? I won’t have it. You are...” Something seemed to choke him for a moment before he forged ahead. “You are so much more than a weapon to be used. So much more than the blades you wield. You are wise and honest and beautiful and courageous

and I hope that someday you will see all those things as clearly as I do.”

Wise. Honest. Beautiful. Courageous. They were only words, but to Karreya, they meant far more than the sum of their letters. They were the words of a man who saw her, who cherished her, and who wanted more for her than anyone else ever had.

And they reminded her of what she’d known the first time he told her not to die for him.

She was far more likely to kill for him.

But she would never tell him so, because beneath those laughing eyes and crooked smiles and polished manners was a fragile heart—one that had been broken too many times to count. He had taught her to see herself as more than a weapon, but that did not diminish her abilities, and she would use every one of them if it meant keeping Niell alive.

“Come,” she said instead, tugging on his hand and pulling him into the predawn darkness. “We have several miles to go, and you walk like a pampered nobleman.”

Niell sighed, but allowed her to pull him forward. “You say that as if it’s a terrible crime. I *am* a pampered nobleman, and I’m particularly repulsed by the idea of long walks. That’s what horses are for.”

All true, and for some reason, that made Karreya smile again.

“If you do not care to walk, then we can always run.”

He groaned under his breath. “You do know how to motivate a man, even without threatening to stab him.”

But he walked after her, never letting go of her hand, and even under the shadow of her personal failures, looming war, and an unknown future... It was enough.



The walls of Hanselm were in sight by the time dawn brightened the horizon. Overhead, the sky was clear and blue, but to the south, dark clouds billowed, lending an ominous cast to a scene that was already grim.

Even Karreya could see that the surrounding fields should have been green and lush with crops at this time of year, but too many lay fallow and filled with weeds.

On Vaniell's face, she could see the harsh reminder of what this war would cost his people, and something in her ached at the knowledge of his pain. Somehow, he sensed her scrutiny, and shot her what was probably supposed to be a reassuring smile.

"How strict are the gate guards? Are they asking questions or simply looking for passes?"

"We were questioned," she confirmed, "and subject to a cursory search, but they seemed inclined to believe we were truly seeking work. Or perhaps they did not care enough to stop us."

"Hmmm." Vaniell ran a hand through his hair and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should come up with a convincing story to explain our presence."

"How certain are you that you will not be recognized?"

"Not certain at all," he confessed. "Most of the city guard has been tasked with hunting me down at one point or another, so we will have to rely on luck to some degree. Hopefully, they will not be expecting to see me, or they will refuse to believe that a prince of Garimore would ever be crass enough to simply *walk* in through the gate. On my own feet. Like a *commoner*." He gave an exaggerated shudder.

"There is no need to be dramatic," Karreya stated reprovingly. "I will be happy to provide a distraction."

"But being dramatic is what I am best at," Niell objected with a wink, and there was little she could do but roll her eyes and conceal the impulse to laugh at his antics.

They were close enough now to see the gates and the few travelers that were about this early in the morning. But oddly,

everyone seemed to be standing back, clearing the road as if to allow passage to someone or something important.

Ah. There it was...

Horses. Emerging from the gates, four of them riding abreast, carrying officers in formal red uniforms. A flag bearer followed, and then another four horses, and another.

Niell's face grew pale and drawn as they stepped to the side of the road and watched an entire battalion of lightly armored cavalry ride out of the city and down the main road to the north.

And they were not alone. Three more battalions, some in heavy armor and some on lighter, more maneuverable mounts, rode past—nearly four hundred horses in all.

They were followed by infantry. Thousands of soldiers, marching down the dusty road on their way northward. To Farhall.

It seemed war was no longer coming... It had arrived.

By the time the gate had cleared to allow foot traffic, it was midmorning, and Niell was quiet as they approached the guards. He'd said not a word as the Garimoran army marched by, but Karreya had seen him scanning their ranks as if counting, wondering whether their allies stood a chance.

Karreya held herself in as relaxed a pose as possible as she removed the pass from her pouch and handed it to a stone-faced man in Garimoran uniform.

"This is nearly expired," he said sourly. "Why are you seeking entrance when you'll only have to leave again tomorrow?"

"We," Niell said, snatching up Karreya's hand and bringing it to his lips, "are getting married. I've been summoned to take up arms, but I could not leave without ensuring that my beautiful lady will be waiting on my return."

Married? Karreya wanted very badly to smack the smugly grinning Niell across the back of the head, but had to settle for

standing quietly by his side, like a completely unsurprised wife-to-be.

“And you couldn’t manage to get married somewhere else?” the guard inquired sarcastically.

“We wanted to tell my mother.” Niell assumed a somber expression. “She runs a boarding house in Port Street, and so cannot get away for long. We hope to gain her blessing before the happy event.”

The guard rolled his eyes, but handed back the pass. “Just be sure you leave the city on time. And don’t be planning to leave your wife here on the sly. If she’s found with an expired pass, it’s three weeks of camp labor.”

“I thank you for your warning, good sir,” Vaniell returned with utterly false gratitude. “We wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing.”

Pressing another kiss to the back of Karreya’s hand, he moved on through the gate and into the streets beyond, a grim expression quickly overtaking the feigned smile. But despite his mood, it soon became clear that Niell was intimately familiar with the city, as he led them through little-used alleyways and shortcuts where few others seemed to linger.

“You did not spend all your time in ballrooms and salons,” Karreya noted thoughtfully. “How is it that a prince is so comfortable navigating the alleys and byways of the city?”

“Part of establishing myself as an utter reprobate was running away as often as possible and spending my time with the sort of people my father was sure to disapprove of,” Niell admitted. “And it came with the added benefit of building a network of allies and informants along the way.”

Karreya snorted. “It perplexes me that you are yet so surprised that others expect you to be king.”

“I didn’t do it to be popular,” Niell replied grimly. “Or to garner the support of the children of the nobility. I assure you, that was an entirely unintentional outcome.”

Because he had been taught from his youth to view himself as shameful. Expendable. A secret to be hidden or a scandal to

be hushed up. But he was so much more than that, if only he could learn to see his own worth.

They spent much of the day dodging guard patrols and searching for Niell's allies, while troops of soldiers continued to march through the city on their way north. The mood was heavy and grim, and as the dark clouds to the south grew ever closer, Karreya found her own sense of danger growing with them.

She'd learned not to ignore her instincts, and now they were screaming at her that some unforeseen threat lurked just beyond her sight, just out of reach. But until it showed itself, there was nothing she could do—only follow Niell as their wandering finally ended just before dark, in an alleyway near the palace wall.

Niell looked around carefully for watching eyes before he led the way through the unmarked door into an abandoned house, where the entry hallway ended in a blank wall. Turning to the right, he tapped on the bricks until one gave way, and the blank wall opened to reveal a narrow stair.

He grinned at Karreya's expression and bowed as he gestured her forward. "Leads under the palace walls," he said. "I didn't build it, but I suspect someone very like me must have done so. Drove my... Drove the king positively mad when I kept disappearing and he could never figure out how."

Karreya made her way down the stairs into the darkness, which was soon illuminated by the soft glow of Niell's magic. At the base of the stairs, a tunnel stretched off into the distance, with a smooth dirt floor and walls of rough stone. And after only a minute or two of walking, the tunnel ended—in another set of stairs leading upwards.

Niell moved past her with the light and took the stairs two at a time. When he reached the top, he tucked the enchantment away before releasing the door catch and easing it open an inch at a time.

Karreya listened carefully for the sounds of weapons, footsteps, or even breathing, but heard nothing except for some cheerfully chirping insect beyond the door.

“It’s late enough that no gardeners will be about,” Niell said. “Stay close and we’ll be safe in a few moments.”

And then he simply walked out into the twilight garden, slid his hands into his pockets and strolled along as if he had not a concern in the world.

After taking a moment to swear at him under her breath, Karreya followed, tucked her hand beneath his arm, and glared up at him.

“You seem very certain you will not be caught, Abreian.”

“No one comes to this part of the garden during the day, let alone at night,” he assured her. “And if they do, we are far less likely to be noticed if we look like we belong. From a distance, with you in that dress, we might easily appear to be any pair of courtiers enjoying a romantic moonlit walk.”

Karreya was shocked by the surge of longing that swelled up at the thought. There had never been a place in her life for romance, but here, now, with Niell... She felt something very like regret. If only they could be those two nameless courtiers, tucked away in a corner of the garden, enjoying one another’s company with no darker purpose, no twisted family connections keeping them apart.

Her thoughts kept her silent long enough that Niell turned to look down at her, a question in his eyes.

“I only hope you are correct,” she said stiffly, unwilling to share the ridiculous turn of her thoughts. “I have no taste for stabbing innocent gardeners who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“And I would never ask you to do such a thing,” Niell reminded her earnestly, his expression turned intent and serious. “From here on out, at least allow me to attempt words before you apply a blade.”

She was about to answer, but they stopped abruptly before ducking past the branches of an ancient yew tree. In the cool shade beyond was a folly, with an arched doorway that opened on silent hinges and closed behind them with a nearly inaudible click.

The space within was small and circular, with stone benches lining the perimeter. It was empty but for the marble statue of a woman in a cloak, who looked back over her shoulder as if in fear.

“Welcome,” Niell said, “to my home.” He did not sound like a man who’d just come home—he sounded weary and heartsore. “I cannot tell you how desperately I wish that I could have brought you here under better circumstances.”

“Under different circumstances, we might never have met at all,” Karreya said, eyeing the statue closely. “And that... that is not a thing I would choose to give up.”

Niell glanced down at her, surprise written on his drawn, tired features. “I would say the same,” he told her. “But that does not mean I cannot wish that life had been different for both of us.”

There had been no place for wishing in the Enclave. Indeed, wishing and dreams had always seemed somewhat foolish to Karreya. But here in this strange little corner of the world, where it was only her and Niell... Karreya could find it in her heart not only to long, but to dream. To wonder what might have been, had the world not been shaped by the greed and cruelty of her grandmother.

“And what would you have wished for, Niell?” In that bare, silent room, where it was only the two of them, she suddenly felt bold enough to ask.

He let out a long, deep breath, then reached out and took her hand. She did not resist.

“It is a foolish wish,” he admitted. “I would dream of a world in which I was a carefree second son, and you were the daughter of some noble house. We would both be free to take those walks in the garden without ever wondering who might approve or disapprove. Without wondering whether my feelings have the potential to destroy you, along with everything we care about. Or I might dream of being a farmer in Iria, or a mage in Farhall, and you a girl from the same village, where we might meet and make eyes at one another at village dances.”

Then he sighed and squeezed her fingers. “But they are not merely foolish because we cannot change who we were born to be. They are foolish because it is the very darkness of our pasts that has shaped us. It is all the suffering and injustice and dark moments of loneliness that have made us who we are and brought us here to a place where we have a chance to end that same suffering for others. I do not look at you, Karreya, and see someone I want to change to suit me. I see someone who was tempered in the same cruel forge. I see someone who can look at the dark and broken pieces of me and not turn away. I see someone who can walk into the fire at my side without flinching. And even if I might wish that no one had ever caused you pain, that you had never known suffering, I could never wish for you to be other than who you are, because every part of you is perfect.”

It was as if he had cracked open her chest, taken the jagged edges of her heart, and pieced them together, and it was the sweetest agony she had ever experienced.

“I love every piece of who you are,” Niell said simply, and the words fell over her like rain in the desert. “Every sharp corner, every polished blade. I love that you won’t let me get away with being absurd, and that you question everything I say. That you pummel me with honesty and heal me with truth, even when it cuts so deep that I bleed. I love your ferocity and your sarcasm and your fire, and most of all that you will never lie to me about how you feel. And because I love you...”

No. Just no. She refused to allow him to finish that sentence because he had finally said the only words she needed to hear.

Her fingers pressed against his lips, silencing his next words.

“Do not say any more just now,” she commanded. “Your words were beautiful, but only those last three were necessary.”

His lips curved beneath her fingers. “How necessary?” he murmured.

And Karreya felt herself begin to blush under his scrutiny.

“Necessary enough that I feared you might ruin them if you continued to speak.”

“But you cannot know what I meant to say.”

“Something noble and self-sacrificing and utterly infuriating, beyond a doubt,” she informed him coolly, and he grimaced in a way that told her she had hit the mark.

“I don’t know if there is any other possible end to this story,” he said soberly. “And I didn’t want either of us to leave this place still wondering...”

“I do not wonder any more, Abreian,” she told him. “Whatever is to come, I have what is necessary to guide my path.”

“That makes one of us,” he said wryly. “But I’m glad, if only because...”

The door burst open, nearly flying off its hinges with the force of its swing. Standing in the arched opening was Kyrion, eyes aglow, emanating fury and magic so strongly that Karreya nearly drew a weapon to defend herself.

“Modrevin is gathering the nobles on the steps of the palace,” the night elf growled. “He intends to deal with the prisoners—*tonight*.”

CHAPTER 17



“Tonight?” Vaniell dropped Karreya’s hand and strode towards the door, stopping a few feet shy of the furious night elf. “Do you know what he intends?”

“No. Only that he has ordered them to be brought. The nobles are already assembling.” Kyrion’s eyes glowed and his hands flexed impatiently as if he were holding himself back by the thinnest of threads. “Come with me or do not, but I will stop him, no matter how many guards he throws in my way.”

And in that moment, Vaniell believed him. The night elf king overflowed with deadly magic, and in his hand, a blade was merely an extension of his body. He had been feared for a decade for many good reasons, and now that he had returned...

The palace steps might soon run red with the blood of anyone who dared to stand between the former Raven and the woman he loved more than his own life.

“I will come,” Vaniell said. “And I do not grudge you your revenge. But before you charge in without a plan, consider the cost. Consider the lives that stand between you and your goal. And consider most of all that it will take only a single arrow to cut you down.”

Kyrion took two steps forward and loomed over him with barely leashed frustration. “I will forgive you, Princeling, because you do not truly understand who I am or what Leisa is to me. But I will no longer wait. I will not hold back. Those

who choose to stand between me and Leisa will remember why they feared me, and they will step aside or die.”

Perhaps Vaniell did not understand. But he did know the pain that had pierced to his soul as he watched the Garimoran army marching through the gates, realizing how many of them would never come home. He knew that he wanted to prevent more senseless deaths, even though the majority of these events were beyond his control. For so many years, he had felt helpless in the face of tragedy and injustice, and it was that frustration that clenched his fists and allowed him to stand his ground.

“We will find her, Kyrion, but I’ll be hanged before I throw up my hands and allow you to murder innocents along the way. Just because my people have been forced to live under Modrevin’s thumb does not mean they deserve to die!”

Kyrion’s lip curled, and he appeared to be on the verge of striking out, or perhaps shifting to his wyvern form and turning Vaniell into a pile of bleeding meat.

But it was Karreya who broke the tension—who stepped towards them, drew a dagger, and held it flat between them. “If you attack one another, you cut yourselves on your own blades,” she said coolly. “And the only ones who suffer are those you wish to save. We must go and discover the truth, not argue over blame for a thing that may never happen.”

Kyrion snarled under his breath, but he stepped back, breathing hard, and Vaniell ran a hand through his hair as he wondered how close to death he’d actually come.

“Right,” he said. “We should go. If we sneak around through the gardens, we can come up behind the crowd and hopefully remain unseen, but we’ll have to hurry.”

He sent Karreya a grateful nod, and then led the way out the door and into the night, heading towards the palace at a run.

There was a side passage that the gardeners used, but this time of night they should all be either inside the palace or returned to their residences outside the walls. Vaniell had

taken this path a thousand times before, but it felt surreal to be here now, with Kyrion and Karreya in tow, no longer hiding his rebellion but ready to do whatever was necessary to stop the King of Garimore from pursuing his murderous course.

They slipped in without challenge, and Vaniell led the way through the narrow corridor and out again, ending up very near the stairs leading up to the main portico at the front of the palace.

He wasn't sure what he had expected, but it was not the silent crowd of cloaked courtiers lining the carriage road that ended at the foot of the stairs, their numbers illuminated by scores of lanterns and torches alike. They stood tense and watchful, eyeing the doors and each other, neither milling about nor speaking, as if afraid of being overheard. Afraid of what was coming... Afraid they might be next... Afraid of everything, just as he had always been.

How many of them held the secret desire to stand against Modrevin's tyranny? How many had never felt free to do so, for much the same reasons as Vaniell—because they had something or someone to protect?

And was there any chance that the three of them could break those chains of fear and helplessness for good?

The doors at the top of the stairs finally opened. Ten, twenty, perhaps thirty guards marched through, surrounding the prisoners in their midst. They descended the stairs in a tightly meshed group, each guard with a weapon drawn, watching the crowd warily as if anticipating resistance.

From their position at the rear of the crowd, Vaniell could see little, and felt Kyrion grow tense at his side.

"I still cannot feel her," the night elf muttered. "And I do not see her. She is not here."

A wave of murmurs ran through the crowd, and Vaniell looked up to find a familiar, dark-clad figure waiting on the portico.

It was too far to make out details, but he thought there was more gray in the king's hair and beard than before. Yet the

man still managed to appear wise, stern, and kingly, with a gravity of manner that lent solemn dignity to any occasion—even an execution.

But why do this here? Why now? Why gather the people at night and make an example of these prisoners by torchlight? Why risk staining the golden stone at his gates with blood that might never wash out?

Unless he had some other purpose... Unless he believed it would never actually come to the point of lopping off heads.

“He has some other plan...” Vaniell murmured as he searched the darkness around them. “This is all for show. He’s not going to execute them. He wants to scare them, which means...”

A high-pitched scream rang out, then another, and a ripple of terror shot through the crowd, originating from the end nearest the gates. At Vaniell’s side, Kyrion went cold and still, and beneath his hood, his eyes began to glow with a harsh silver light.

“What do you see?”

When Kyrion didn’t answer, Vaniell turned and moved swiftly along the edges of the crowd, as some of the gathered nobles began to back away towards the gardens in search of an escape. And as the crowd thinned, Vaniell was finally able to see the carriage road in front of him, and catch a glimpse of the figure that waited there, alone in the darkness, facing the palace.

It was a man in full armor—tall and broad-shouldered, shrouded in a dark cloak, with a hood over his head and an enormous broadsword at his side.

And as Vaniell began to swear viciously under his breath, the king’s voice rang out over the crowd.

“Perhaps many of you have heard the rumors that my Raven was no longer among us, and that you no longer need fear his blade of retribution. Those rumors seem to have emboldened those who would plot rebellion and sow discord, even at this dark and difficult time in our kingdom’s history.”

Melger's piercing gaze roamed the heads of the crowd, and none seemed willing to meet it.

"Allow me to assure you that he has never left us. That he will never cease to guard these lands with his unwavering vigilance, and that those who seek to undermine the security of Garimore's throne will never escape his vengeance." He paused, as if for dramatic effect, and Vaniell heard sobbing from somewhere amidst the group of prisoners.

"I am not a king who lacks mercy, nor am I without compassion for those who fear the depredations of war. Therefore, I have decided to offer one last chance for those who have spoken or acted against the crown. If you will kneel at the foot of these stairs, and swear fealty once more, you will be forgiven and I will spare your lives. Should you refuse..."

The dark figure drew his sword, then rested it point down before him, gauntleted hands resting on the pommel.

Exactly as the Raven used to do.

"Should you refuse," the king repeated, "I will no longer hold him back, and these stones will run red as a reminder..."

A metallic clank echoed through the crowd. Every eye turned from Melger to the dark-armored bulk of the Raven—whose threatening form had just fallen to his knees. As if moving in slow motion, he lurched and then fell forward, landing full on his face on the golden stone of the carriage road.

And there, where he had so recently stood, was Kyrion.

Cloaked in shadow, eyes glowing beneath his hood, the Raven's sword now held in one gray hand.

"Yes." His voice grated through the air, harsh with menace. "These stones will indeed run red, but with *your* blood, imposter."

The crowd disintegrated into chaos. Cries of fear mingled with running feet, terrified courtiers collided and fell, and shrieks of pain rose from those who were trampled in the rush to be anywhere but between this terrifying newcomer and the King of Garimore.

But still standing in the road were the manacled prisoners, surrounded by guards who now turned towards Kyrion, weapons held in shaking hands.

“I have no quarrel with you,” Kyrion told them, lifting the broadsword as if it weighed nothing, and spinning it casually through the air. “I want only two things. I want the red-haired woman who was taken alongside these prisoners, and I want the life of your king. If you stand aside, I will not harm you.”

“He’s going to run,” Karreya said in Vaniell’s ear. “My father has no physical courage, and if he realizes who Kyrion is, he will flee.”

Vaniell was searching the crowd of prisoners and finally spotted the one he needed most...

Slipping his enchanted key into Karreya’s hand, he leaned closer, keeping his eyes fixed on the frozen form of Modrevin. “Can you free Lord Kellen?”

“I can,” she promised. “And the others too, if you wish it, though I cannot promise to leave the guards unscathed.”

“Only do not put yourself at risk,” he said, squeezing her hand and looking down at her with utmost confidence. “I trust you to do what’s needed.”

“And you.” She reached up suddenly and placed her palm on his cheek. “Stay alive, Abreian. And know that no matter what happens, I will find you.”

Swift as a rising wave, she rose on tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. They were soft and warm and light, like the touch of spring sunshine after a dark winter, and then they were gone as she vanished into the surrounding chaos.

There was no time to savor the feeling. No time to linger in the rush of joy that accompanied it. Vaniell could only tuck it away, deep in the only corner of his heart where bleak cynicism could not reach, and promise himself that their first kiss would not be their last.

He would see her again. He would kiss her again, properly this time. And he would find a way for them to be together. No matter what stood between them.

As he took his first steps toward the stairs, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kyrion heft the massive sword and begin advancing on the guards. They spread out to face him, weapons held in trembling hands, but ready to do their duty, because they had no idea who they truly faced.

And up at the top of the steps, Modrevin watched as if in a dream.

“Kyrion, your hood!” Vaniell shouted. “Show him your face.”

And miraculously, the night elf listened. He released the catch of his cloak and stripped it away, and in the stunned silence that followed, three of the guards dropped their weapons.

“Stand firm,” their leader ordered. “This is the very threat we have prepared to confront, and there is only one of him. We must protect the king!”

Kyrion moved towards them, one slow and deliberate step after another. “Before you throw away your life in defense of a liar, Boregar, you should know who I am.”

While the eye of every guard was on Kyrion, Karreya slipped behind their ranks and began unlocking the prisoners’ manacles one by one. And as she did so, Vaniell turned and raced for the stairs, knees trembling with urgency, praying she could release them before the battle was joined.

“You have faced me before,” Kyrion called out, “but you have never defeated me.”

“How do you know my name, night elf?” Boregar spat. “I have never seen you before.”

“You saw me nearly every day for ten years.” Kyrion’s voice seemed to freeze the very air around them until it crackled with tension, holding every eye but Karreya’s. “It was I who wore that black armor. I who was enslaved by your king’s magic to obey his vicious whims. But the skill was mine, and you know well what will happen if you continue to stand in my path.”

“It is *you* who lies,” the guard said fiercely. “Our king has ever stood against the use of magic. He would never employ the likes of you, or choose such a wicked path as you suggest.”

“If you choose to stand with him, then you can die beside him,” Kyrion roared, and he leaped, swinging that impossible sword over his head in a move that would have sliced clean through anyone fool enough to stand in his way.

Vaniell opened his mouth to cry out in protest, knowing he could do nothing to stop the violence and the bloodshed but needing to try.

The words died in his throat. The world slowed to a crawl, and he could not move so much as a finger as everything seemed to happen at once.

As if someone had stepped on an anthill, the prisoners scattered, targeting the guards as they went, catching them by surprise and relieving many of them of their weapons. Kyrion met the leaders with the clang of steel against steel, while Modrevin watched as if in disbelief, unable to contend with the disintegration of his plan. He took a step backward, and then another, and Vaniell’s eyes were still on his face when the gates to the palace grounds blew in with a roar that shook the very stones beneath their feet.

An eye-searing burst of flame raked the ground, and smoke billowed up as the grass and the trees caught fire.

Three guards lay on the carriage road, their blood staining the golden stone, but the others were no longer concerned with Kyrion. Every eye had turned to the walls, every tongue froze in terror, and every heart stopped as the flames died and revealed the impossible creature advancing through the rubble of the shattered gates.

A dragon.

No horse-sized wyvern like Kyrion, but a true dragon, with a hulking scaled body that filled the gap in the wall as it advanced towards them.

Golden scales glittered in the light of its own flames, and amber eyes glimmered with barely contained rage. It was the

size of a merchant ship, even with its wings tucked close, and its teeth were the length of a man's leg. Each step was a drumbeat that echoed through the earth beneath, and Vaniell was so paralyzed by horror that he almost passed over an incongruity. And yet it lodged in his brain, insisting that he look, that he pay attention, that he *see*...

There, between the dragon's wings, perched between the base of its neck and its shoulders—a harness. A saddle. A *rider*.

And somehow, he knew.

Empress Phaedrin Myrna Draguris, Queen of the Dragur...

Karreya's grandmother was through waiting. She had come for her heirs, and the clouds they had been watching all day were not clouds at all. She had sent her legions and her dragons, and Garimore was now aflame. And if they did not somehow accomplish the impossible, all of Abreia would follow.

On the periphery of his vision, he saw Kyrion turn and lift his sword, as if preparing to simply attack the winged monster on his own.

“Kyrion, no!”

The sound of his voice broke Modrevin out of his stupor, and the imposter king's gaze jerked to Vaniell's face. Recognition lit his features, and as if a spell had been broken, he turned and ran—back into the palace, at a speed Vaniell had never imagined the man could reach. A coward at heart, just as he had always been.

And yet, his flight left Vaniell with a terrible choice. He needed to follow the imposter, but the dragon was the greater threat. The prisoners had scattered, but it would be all too easy for the dragon to hunt them down and pick them off. Reaching into his pockets, Vaniell sorted desperately through his enchantments, but he'd designed none of them with dragons in mind. None of them could stop fire, and as for teeth...

Two figures raced up the steps towards him.

“Go,” one of them urged, and despite the grime on his face and grim set of his mouth, Vaniell recognized golden-haired Lord Kellan, holding a sword in his hand as if he knew what to do with it. “I’ll get the prisoners to safety as best I can. You do what you must.” He jerked his head towards the doors where Modrevin had vanished, as if he understood all too well what Vaniell was planning.

“Wait...” Vaniell reached out and grasped Kellan’s shoulder. “A red-haired woman. She was with you. What did Melger do with her?”

Kellan shook his head, blue eyes revealing his unease. “He did nothing. She simply disappeared from the cell last night. She was injured, but still trying to use her mirror to free us when...” He held up both hands in a gesture of helplessness. “She began to glow, and then... she vanished. As if she melted into the air. I have not seen her since.”

Hope flared to life in Vaniell’s chest, even as the dragon took another step forward and bellowed in rage, flaring its wings but not taking off. As if it were waiting for something.

“Get out of here,” Vaniell ordered grimly. “Do what you can to evacuate the city.”

“Don’t worry about us.” Kellan shot him a razor-edged grin. “We’ll improvise. Do whatever we can to hold off the dragon while you find that bastard and deal with him.”

“No.” The second figure paused two steps below Vaniell, looking up with an expression that nearly stopped his heart.

It was Karreya, and her golden brown eyes met his with confidence, with urgency, and with a heart-breaking sense of farewell. “I will confront the dragon,” she said. “And his rider. This battle was always meant to be mine. I honor you for your willingness to sacrifice, Lord Kellan, but it will do you no good to fight this creature.”

“Karreya...” The words stuck in Vaniell’s throat. What words could there be for this moment filled with blood and smoke and death and an uncertain future?

But it was Karreya who found the only thing there was to say. “I love you,” she said. “Do not die, Abreian.”

“And I love you,” Vaniell said. “For once, I won’t tell you not to stab anything, as long as you promise to come back to me.”

“I will not risk a lie,” she said softly, “but I will give everything in my power to save this land... and you.”

And then she was gone, before he could tell her not to risk so much, that he wasn’t worth it, and that he could not bear it if she died for him.

It was not how he wanted to leave her, but there was no time, not if he hoped to catch up to Modrevin, so he gritted his teeth and turned his back on the dragon. Turned away from the flames and the chaos and the battle that raged beyond the palace doors.

His place was the darkness within, wondering if he was doomed to forever be caught between two terrible choices. To forever find himself alone, hoping for the impossible.

And yet as he took his first step across the threshold, into the strangely empty entry hall beyond, he felt a presence at his shoulder. Glanced to the side, and found the tall, menacing form of Kyrion, eyes still aglow and massive sword held in a one-handed grip. As if prepared to plow through anything and anyone in his path, including Vaniell...

“Leisa may still be alive,” he told the night elf urgently. “Kellan says she disappeared.”

“I heard,” Kyrion growled. “And I am not here for her. If what I hope is correct, then she is well, and she is beyond both my help and Modrevin’s reach. Leisa is strong, and she is wise, and wherever she is, I must trust her to find her way back.”

Once again at a loss for words, Vaniell could only nod.

Until Kyrion spoke again. “I owe you thanks, Princeling. I have controlled my rage poorly since I set foot in this city, and without your aid, I might have done many things I would come to regret.”

“No need for thanks,” Vaniell said quietly. “Not between friends.”

Kyrion eyed him for a moment before answering with a fierce and feral smile. “Then let us hunt together... *friend*.”

CHAPTER 18



Karreyya watched as Vaniell disappeared into the vast golden maw of the castle, then turned to confront the dragon. The road between them lay empty, except for the body of the faceless man in armor, which remained face down in a pool of blood.

But as Karreyya reached the bottom of the steps and drew a dagger from her belt, she had eyes only for the woman who slid from the dragon's saddle and stepped forward to meet her.

To Karreyya, she had always been simply Madame Inci—stern, unyielding preceptress of the Enclave. Perhaps the most deadly assassin Karreyya had ever known, and one of those who had trained her since she was a child.

But here and now, she functioned as the hands and voice of her Empress, and everyone who survived the Enclave would know the difference.

In a strange and silent dance, they moved towards one another almost in unison, until they stood just out of reach of each other's blades, their faces lit by the eerie orange glow of the dragon's fire.

“Why have you come?” Karreyya thought she knew the answer, but wondered how much her former teacher would be willing to tell her.

Inci did not reply at once, but regarded her student impassively, as if cataloging her appearance, her actions, her failures, and her potential futures, all in one piercing glance.

The assassin was likely around fifty years old—and had ruled the Enclave for over fifteen of those years—but Karreya would never make the mistake of believing the older woman was weak or vulnerable. Despite the gray in her blonde hair, she was a perfectly honed blade, tempered to a killing edge and cloaked in emotionless serenity.

But it was her unique tracking magic that made her of particular use to the Empress. Once she had met a person, she could find them no matter where in the world they fled, and Karreya could only wonder...

“I have come for you,” Inci said, and Karreya felt less surprise than resignation.

“Not for my father?”

For the first time in Karreya’s memory, a hint of something like feeling crossed the older woman’s face.

“No. You are the one our Empress has chosen to continue her line.”

Perhaps her grandmother had grown tired of waiting on Modrevin to meet her demands. Or perhaps she had decided not to honor her promise. Either way, the outcome was the same, and Karreya felt an unwelcome swell of panic begin to fill her chest.

“But she knows I do not have the magic she requires.”

Inci remained impassive. “I am her messenger and the hand that does her bidding. What she knows or does not know is not mine to determine, or to judge.”

It seemed Modrevin could no longer be the heir, and Senaya *would* not. And there was no one else. No one but Karreya.

She had already asked herself many times whether she ought not be willing to make this sacrifice—to accept what her grandmother offered and use it to change the Empire for good. It even sounded like the right answer—the path of self-sacrifice and noble intentions.

But what was the gain in sacrificing one's self to a fire that burned everything in its path? If she threw herself into this life that she knew would destroy her, how did it help anyone?

"I do not have the temperament or the skills to be Empress," she told Inci, and she knew every word to be true. "Should I accept the throne, the Empire will fall into chaos and war."

"If it is not mine to judge, then neither is it yours," Inci persisted. "This is but your next mission. The Empress's will is all, and we live according to her wishes and her commands."

It had not been so very long ago that those words would have lived in Karreya's own heart. She had believed and followed them with the utmost faith, spoken them aloud with unwavering conviction.

But no more. She could no longer imagine a world without the simple joy of friendship, the wonder of discovery, and the freedom to choose her own sacrifices.

And so, despite the uncertain future, despite the danger, and despite the voice that insisted she had no place in this world, Karreya knew her answer.

"No," she said quietly. "I will not go with you."

Inci's face did not change. "It was not a request, but a command," she said. "We are but extensions of the Empress and we do not choose."

"Perhaps that is what I once was," Karreya allowed, "but no longer. I am my own. But I am also... a friend. An ally. A person, not a weapon."

"You have only ever been a weapon," Inci said. "It is why you were born. It is the reason you have been trained. And a weapon is meant to be wielded."

"You are wrong," Karreya insisted, a part of her screaming at her own temerity in speaking against the woman who had ruled every aspect of her life for so long. And yet, it was as if some invisible weight had fallen away from her heart, allowing her to see and to speak truths that had always been there.

“I am meant to make those decisions for myself, for good or for ill. I am meant to make difficult choices and bear the consequences. And I choose not to go with you. If I ever return to the Empire, it should be of my own will, and in my own time. Not to resume my place at the Enclave. I could no longer be content in that life, and I will not continue to kill to support Grandmother’s ambitions.”

“It is a selfish choice,” Inci said, her voice grown cold and hard. “And if you think to take refuge here, then know that you cannot hide. This city is even now under attack by a full battalion of the Empress’s chosen, together with a company of combat mages under the direction of Third General Urquadi. We have brought three war dragons, and they have destroyed everything in our path as we made our way to this place. Do you truly believe there is any power in this degenerate land that can stop us from laying waste to their so-called ‘Thrones’?”

“I do.” And as Karreya watched the spasm of doubt that crossed Inci’s stern features, she wondered whether she had not been so successful at hiding her magic as she had once believed.

“The people of these lands have learned to work together,” Karreya continued, holding herself loosely poised as she spoke. Expecting an attack at any moment. “They care for one another. Forgive one another’s failures. Act for the good of others and not themselves alone. And perhaps most important of all, they do not collar those who have magic and treat them as less than human.”

“They are weak,” Inci sneered.

“And yet they will defeat you.”

“That will do you no good in the end,” Inci replied, and struck.

Karreya had known it was coming, and yet it was almost a shock after being absent from the Enclave for so long. She had encountered little challenge since landing on these shores, and so the ferocity of Inci’s attack knocked her backwards and reminded her of what it felt like to fear.

But that fear was a force that made her stronger, faster, better, and she welcomed it. Embraced it. Danced along its razor edge and freed her instincts from the chains that bound them.

For the first time since coming to Abreia, she could fight without holding herself back, and it was with a rush of exhilaration that she crossed blades with the woman who had made her what she was.

They fought with daggers, with hands and feet, with speed and lethal intent. Ducking, slashing, sliding, breathing with focus and letting the rhythm of that deadly dance guide each strike. There was no sand underfoot, no curious onlookers, only the golden stone, the smoke, and the sounds of chaos from beyond the gates. All of which faded into nothing as the fight intensified.

Karreya was younger and faster, with greater stamina. But Inci was wily and experienced, taller, and with a greater reach. It was not whimsy that had made her preceptress of the Enclave—it was sheer, deadly skill, and Karreya knew that she was never more than a single heartbeat from death. Her lungs burned, both from smoke and exertion, and still they circled.

Inci's free hand moved—almost too fast to be seen—and one of her belt knives flashed through the air, leaving a stinging trail across Karreya's upper arm.

Blood soaked her sleeve, not enough to incapacitate, but enough to weaken over time.

“First blood,” Inci murmured. “You are finished, Little One. Admit defeat, bow to the Empress's will, and no one ever need know of your defiance.”

“Do not disrespect your own words,” Karreya ground out, teeth clenched against the pain. “Have you not taught me that quitting is the first and worst form of failure?”

She could not last much longer, though—Inci was correct about that. It was time to end the fight, one way or another, and for an instant, Niell's mocking grin flashed through her

memory. The way he took bold risks, using audacity as his greatest weapon...

Karreya smiled and threw her dagger directly at Inci's face. The older woman slapped it away and darted forward, but Karreya was already inside her guard. A moment later, they stood locked together, blades at one another's throats, frozen in a deadly embrace.

"Are you ready to kill me?" Karreya challenged. "Ready to risk your Empress's wrath?"

"You have grown soft," Inci spat, displaying anger for the first time Karreya could recall. "I did not train you to show mercy."

"Then perhaps we are both failures," Karreya told her. "Or perhaps we are both women who deserve to make our own choices, rather than staining our hands with the choices of others."

They were pressed so tightly together, Karreya could feel the harsh breaths as Inci gasped for air. The steady thud of the other woman's heart. Could see the small shifts of emotion as her brown eyes locked on Karreya's face.

"There are no choices, Little One. Not for me."

The dagger in her hand shifted ever so slightly, and Karreya knew she'd lost. But she did not flinch, only stood tall, never dropping her gaze, meeting whatever might come with courage as she waited for the kiss of the silver blade against her skin...

But all she felt was the soft, cool slide of silk.

Inci jerked backward with an oath, opening her hand and allowing a silken handkerchief to fall to the stones at her feet.

"It seems little has changed in twenty-seven years, Avincia."

The voice was as familiar as it was unexpected, but Karreya did not take a deep breath or drop her guard as Inci shifted to include the newcomer in her field of view.

“You,” she hissed, eyes gone wide with shock and dismay. “How are you not dead?”

“The usual way, I suppose.” With the silver shimmer of her mirror held aloft in her left hand, Senaya approached from the direction of the gate, sparing not even a glance for the golden bulk of the dragon. “I have simply not yet ceased to breathe.”

“After so many years, why throw your life away now?”

Senaya let out a sigh, and her lips curved gently. “It seems I have at last learned a lesson the Enclave could never teach us.”

Inci drew another dagger from her belt, but held it behind her back to protect it from Senaya’s mirror magic.

“And what lesson is that?”

Senaya tilted her head and smiled softly. “We have all been told that love will hurt. And it is true. There is no more exquisite pain than that caused by deep and genuine love. But what we were never told is... It is worth every moment of agony. Every breath that shreds our lungs and leaves us bleeding from wounds no one can reach. Everything of value has a cost, and with love, that pain is the price. But I would choose to pay it, over and over again, for the chance to love and be loved once more.”

She released a long breath before she continued, and it sounded like letting go. Of her pain, her fear, her resentment... Whatever had brought her back, she seemed to finally be at peace with herself.

“Because... there is also no greater joy,” she said. “No greater peace than to know that you are seen, that you are chosen, and that you are fully accepted as you are.”

“Such things are fantasy,” Inci snapped. “An illusion of the mind.”

“Yes, the Enclave teaches that feelings are an illusion,” Senaya agreed. “But when we *choose* them, they become so much more. Whether we choose hatred, envy, resentment, or love, they change us and make us different than we were before.”

“You have nothing to save you but talk,” Inci replied, shaking her head. “And it makes you weak. I am here for one reason only, and I will not be turned aside. Even if I must burn this land to the ground, I will accomplish my mission and return to my Empress.”

At last, the waiting dragon began to move. Its immense golden head lifted, and it moved towards Inci, one heavy step at a time, as clumsy on land as it was graceful in the air. Subject to her commands, thanks to the gem embedded in the scales between its horns.

The creature was as much a slave as every mage in the Empire, and Karreya’s rage flared as she considered the life it was forced to lead. When would it end—this abuse of other living, breathing, thinking beings for the sake of one woman’s power?

The dragon’s wings unfolded and beat the air, buffeting Karreya and Senaya with gusts of wind.

“Burn,” Inci said softly, and the dragon turned its head and set the world aflame. Grass and trees blazed up, an ornamental fountain became a plume of steam, and Karreya felt the sweat drip down beneath her collar as the heat pressed closer.

“Give in,” Inci said simply. “You cannot win. I do not wish to harm either of you, but I must fulfill my mission. I will burn this place to the ground, one city at a time, until you are willing to submit to the Empress’s commands.”

Karreya felt a sudden surge of despair as she glanced over her shoulder at the palace of golden stone where Niell even now searched for her father. Should she agree to go with Inci, even if only to save Niell’s life?

The dragon lifted its head and turned to the other side of the carriage road, sucking in a breath in preparation...

“No. Be at peace.”

The voice was soft, but it cut through the sound of the flames like a shark through the water—swift and unstoppable. The dragon reacted as though it had been slapped, shaking its

head, dropping its chin, and folding its wings as it bent its neck and regarded the newcomer standing in the road.

It was a woman, small and simply dressed, her face covered by the hood of her cloak. There was nothing threatening about her voice or her posture, but when she lifted that hood and cast it back, both Senaya and Inci stared as if they'd seen the specter of death itself.

For a moment, the woman did not speak again, only approached the dragon and laid a gentle hand on its neck. The enormous head turned, and that terrifying mouth full of teeth closed, only to bump the woman's shoulder gently, as if in affection.

"Yes, you are beautiful, love," she murmured. "Do not fear. I will not harm you." Her gaze shifted to take in Senaya and Inci, who remained frozen in what Karreya could only call terror.

Who *was* this tiny woman they feared so greatly?

"I will not harm *any* of you by choice," she said. "Not unless you attack. I have set aside my powers for all purposes except defense and the freeing of any mage who finds themselves under the control of another."

"How did you find us?" Senaya's voice was hollow with some remembered pain, and the newcomer sighed.

"It was well known that I could sense others' magic, but less well known that I could learn to imitate it, given enough time."

Even by the flickering light of the flames, Karreya could see the color drain from Inci's face.

"Yes," the newcomer said with a wry nod. "I have been able to use Inci's tracking magic since very shortly after I arrived at the Enclave. Once I knew she might be here, it was simple enough to intercept her path."

"It is how you always found me," Senaya whispered. "I was never able to run far enough."

“That is correct.” The other woman’s head bowed. “But that was also another life. My magic eventually broke me, and I was only put back together by love and time and patience. And I am here today only because I owe a great debt that must be repaid.”

“Then”—Senaya’s expression grew hopeful—“you are free, Yvane? You no longer serve the Enclave?”

“I have not for many years.”

As the two women shared a glance strangely fraught with understanding, Inci began to laugh.

“Don’t you understand? You are never free! Both of you are here, now, because you will never escape. Not so long as the Empress lives.”

She reached up and pulled down the neck of her tunic to reveal a narrow band of metal wrapped around her throat. “I have served her for decades, but still, she binds me. And if I fail here, there is an entire company of combat mages beyond these gates. They will take you, she will bind you both, and there will be no escape.”

Karreya gazed at the collar in shock. She had always believed that Inci served of her own will, so total was her devotion to the ways and strictures of the Enclave. But Inci, too, wore the collar.

Perhaps it was not too late after all...

“Senaya,” Karreya said sharply. “Can you...”

Senaya nodded, and Karreya leaped. Inci’s attention was on Yvane and the dragon, on the mirror in Senaya’s hand, and her dagger was behind her back, so she was a mere fraction of a second too slow.

Karreya knocked the dagger away, twisting Inci’s elbow back and up before forcing her preceptress to the ground, face down, arm behind her back. She knew she could only hold her for the space of a few breaths, but Senaya was prepared, and it was enough. With a quick twist of Senaya’s fingers, the catch of Inci’s collar was opened, and the Mistress of the Enclave screamed as it fell from her neck in pieces.

For a handful of heartbeats, she grew still and stiff, almost as if the shock had stolen the very life from her bones, but then she went limp beneath Karreya's knee.

"Let me go," she said at last, her voice strangely hoarse and subdued. "I will not attack you. You know that I speak the truth, so please allow me to rise."

So Inci had indeed known of Karreya's magic.

Moving cautiously, Karreya stood and took two steps back as Inci came to her knees and rested for a moment before rising to her feet. Her shoulders were slumped as if in defeat, and she drew in several deep breaths before turning and lifting her gaze to Karreya's face.

Karreya took another step backward in shock, as she saw the tears filling those formerly harsh brown eyes. Tears of pain, of regret, and of anger. And strangely, also of longing.

"I suppose you believe you have saved me," she said. "But you have killed me, as surely as if you had stabbed me in the heart."

Her gaze turned to Senaya. "But before I die, I will make this one request, for the sake of everything we once were to one another."

How had these two once known each other?

"Go back," Inci said bluntly. "Remember what we swore when we were young and not yet broken by cruelty. When rebellion still raced through our veins. When we still believed that change was possible. Go back, and challenge her for the crown. Break the stranglehold of brutality and corruption and save our people from destruction. Because that is all that will come without a strong enough hand at the helm."

But Senaya shook her head. "We are not the same people we once were, Avincia. You ask too much of me. My mother has spent seventy years subjugating her people with ruthless inhumanity, and I cannot break those chains. Not without becoming the very thing she is."

"Have you forgotten who you are?" Inci snarled, striding forward to stand toe to toe with Senaya, her expression raw

with rage and anguish. “You are a Blade! First of all Blades, forged in the fires of unimaginable pain. She twisted you, but you did not break, and you alone can change the Empire’s future!”

“You think I did not break?” Senaya replied harshly. “I did. And I have lived in pieces ever since the day my love was taken from me. Perhaps I was once a Blade, but there is not enough left of me to stand against her, not as I am.”

“Please.” To Karreya’s shock, the indomitable Inci fell to her knees at Senaya’s feet. “We were closer than sisters once, Sen, and I know you. I know how strong you are. There is no one else who can change the Empire. No one else who can rend those chains and free us from Phaedrin’s cruelty.”

“I am not the only Blade,” Senaya said quietly. “I cut myself off from that future, and I will not go back.”

“Do you suppose the throne will fall to your brother?” Inci demanded. “Your mother has removed him from her line, and she will not take him back, no matter what she has made him believe. She will take this child instead, and she will break her, just as she has broken all of us. And then what?”

Senaya was silent.

“Save us,” Inci pleaded. “Save the people of the Empire from what Phaedrin has made of it. Save the future generations from this merciless fate that puts collars around our necks and turns us into killers against our will.”

“There are other paths,” Senaya insisted.

“There is only the path where I return to Zulle with Karreya, hand her over to the Empress, and wait.” There was no lie in Inci’s words. She believed them wholeheartedly. “Wait for her magic to break her. Wait for the vultures to descend. And wait for the Empire to collapse into chaos, bloodshed, and war.”

When Senaya did not respond, she bent her head, and drew a slender dagger from within her boot.

“Then you have made your choice. But now that my collar is gone, I too, have a choice. And I...” Her hand shook, but

her voice remained steady. “I will not do it. I have been forced too many times in my life, and now I can at last choose for myself.” She shifted then, to face Karreya, and locked eyes with her.

“Know this then. What I have not been able to tell you before today.”

Karreya braced herself, but nothing could have prepared her for the truth.

“Twenty-three years ago, the Empress chose me for my magic.” Inci’s face remained expressionless, but her eyes were haunted. “She used her power to change my appearance, bonded me with her son, and demanded that I bear an heir to continue her line.” She swallowed once, then forged ahead. “After you were born, she changed me back, returned me to the Enclave, and then I never saw you again—not until you entered my walls at the age of twelve.”

Her voice was flat and uninflected, as if she felt nothing at the words, even as shock and horror pulsed through Karreya in time with her heartbeat.

This... This woman was her *mother*? The one who had trained her with unflinching and unrelenting discipline—the one who had forged her into a living weapon—was the same person she’d longed to find for so many years?

Senaya had said that only a mage utterly lacking in love and compassion could change another living being, and it did not surprise Karreya to learn that her grandmother was capable of it.

“Until today,” Inci said, her voice softening ever so slightly, “I was bound to the Empress’s will. To speak no word of our relationship. To train you as any other member of the Enclave. To make of you a worthy Third Blade. And lastly, to return you to Zulle, where she will complete what I have begun and mold you into the heir she believes will continue her legacy.”

She straightened her shoulders and bowed her head.

“I will never be truly free, but here, today, I have the opportunity to make a single choice. There is but one thing that I can do for you, and that is to put you beyond my own reach. Forever.”

Her movement was so swift, so utterly soundless. She moved with the speed that had made her a legend to be feared, only this time, there was no mission. There was only her own tragic determination not to be used, and she struck at the heart that beat beneath her own ribs with the same unerring accuracy that she had instilled in Karreya through thousands of hours of training.

And only when Karreya caught her and lowered her gently to the ground did her lips finally curve in a defiant smile.

“I have defied my Empress at last,” she whispered. “Do not waste this, my child. And do not underestimate what she will do to reclaim you. Fight wisely. Fight well. And know that I have loved you with whatever pieces of my heart this world has left me.”

And then she was gone.

There was only the roar of the flames, and the stones beneath Karreya’s knees, and the strange pull of a distant grief that made no sense. How did one mourn for a mother who had been ever present and yet unknown? How did one move on from a tragic sacrifice like this one?

Blood spread across the front of Inci’s tunic, staining Karreya’s hands, dripping on the stones, and still she did not know what to do with those last words.

She was loved? Could that have been love?

“What do I do?” The words tore from her throat, a question asked of no one in particular, because who could answer it?

“You live.” The woman named Yvane appeared as if by magic, standing there unchanged in the midst of the flames and the violence. She was a plain, still figure in her simple robe, but Karreya’s magic insisted there was so much more hiding behind those unwavering dark eyes. “As she said, you

live wisely, and you live well, because that is all any parent desires for their child.”

And then she turned to Senaya, who stared at Inci’s body as though unable to grasp the reality of her death. “Once, we were the same as these two. I was charged with returning you to your mother at all costs, and I chose to run from that command. I believed that you, too, deserved to live and to know love. But so did Avincia. So does your daughter, and your niece. So do all the people across the vast reaches of the Empire who have known nothing but cruelty and subjugation. No one deserves to feel as though there is only freedom in death. I know you believe you have nothing left to give, but consider this... You have lived, you have suffered, and you have survived. You have known love and fought for your freedom to choose it. Fought to save the ones who matter to you. Do not discount the strength that comes from these simple things.”

She reached out and rested a gentle hand on Senaya’s shoulder. “I choose to repay my many debts by taking on the battle that is to come. Whether I prevail or whether I fall, the rest is up to you.”

With a nod for Karreya, she raised her hood and turned away. Returned to the dragon and settled herself in the saddle between its shoulders. After a few simple words and a gentle pat, it spread its wings and launched itself into the sky, higher and higher until it disappeared into the darkness entirely.

CHAPTER 19



*I*t was home, and yet it was not home. The opulent halls of the palace where Vaniell had spent his youth seemed oddly empty, and not only because there were no guards or elaborately dressed courtiers to fill them with life and color.

The people who had always given this place meaning were gone, and Vaniell felt their absence with every breath he took, every stride that carried him deeper into the palace.

At least Danric and Aunt Pip were happy and safe. At least there was no one left that he needed to protect. No one who could be used against him.

“Where would he be hiding?” Kyrion muttered. “Where does he feel safest?”

Somewhere he believed the dragon could not reach him. Somewhere the forces arrayed against him would not think to go...

“He will try to regain the illusion of control,” Vaniell stated swiftly. “Somewhere that makes him feel powerful.”

They exchanged a quick glance before Kyrion said, “Audience chamber.”

Kyrion broke into a run, and Vaniell did his best to keep up. Twice, they encountered a group of palace staff scurrying through the hall, but both times, their approach seemed to terrify the servants into disappearing.

Someone needed to gather them together. Tell them what was happening and lead them to safety. If the dragon attacked the palace itself, the safest place might be in the dungeons below, but Vaniell doubted anyone would agree to enter that subterranean labyrinth without a compelling argument.

They rounded a corner, and discovered a handful of guards arrayed against them in a semicircle, blades drawn.

“There is no need to...” Vaniell started to say “no need to kill them,” but he was too slow, and Kyrion had no intention of stopping.

Rather than raise his blade, he lifted his left hand and unleashed a torrent of pure magic. Like a strong wind rushing through the halls, it bowled over the guards and sent their weapons flying. Then, with a flick of Kyrion’s fingers, the wind died and turned thick and sluggish. The prone guards struggled to rise, only to find themselves pinned to the floor by the invisible hand of Kyrion’s power.

“That’s...” Vaniell found himself feeling terrified anew by the strength of the night elf’s magic. He’d always known Kyrion could wield vast amounts of power, but *this*?

“It will hold until we have finished with the imposter,” Kyrion growled and Vaniell swallowed his misgivings. The guards would live—at least until he’d had a chance to tell them the truth about Modrevin—and that was all that mattered in this moment.

They continued through the echoing halls of the palace, past the ballroom and finally took a right into a short hallway that ended at the imposing double doors of the audience chamber.

Kyrion did not so much as pause, but hit them with his shoulder, once, twice, then a third time, and the third hit broke through whatever barricade had been placed to bar the way.

Vaniell stepped forward, and they moved through the doorway, where they found themselves facing Modrevin’s final desperate attempt to hide from the consequences of his unspeakable tyranny.

The chamber was not large, but it was built to impress, with tall ceilings, polished marble floors, gilt wall sconces, and red velvet curtains. The dais at the head of the room was reached by a dozen steps, leaving the petitioners on the floor at a level well below that of the golden throne at its center.

But that very height meant that Vaniell had a clear view of the man who waited beside the glittering chair, eyes wild and hair askew, his grip on the back of the throne white-knuckled in its intensity.

And standing between them? Instead of guards, Modrevin had gathered a crowd of palace staff—maids, footmen, gardeners, cooks, and even the steward, Unger. All of them huddled together in a terrified mass, facing Vaniell and Kyrion, and all of them held some form of weapon in trembling hands. There were swords, daggers, axes, even a kitchen knife, all either borrowed from the castle armory or simply taken up along the way.

A snarled oath ripped from Kyrion's throat as he stalked forward, looking as if he intended to charge right through the crowd.

"You will have to kill them to reach me." Modrevin's voice was fierce and almost shrill. "They are loyal to me above all, and they will never allow me to fall while they yet live."

He'd probably given them some unspeakable choice. Defend their king, or go beyond the walls as bait for the dragon that awaited there. Or perhaps he'd threatened their families. With Modrevin, there was always some trick of control through fear. Some leverage that allowed him to bend and twist and manipulate.

"You assume that I care whether a handful of pitiful humans live or die," Kyrion responded harshly. "You are the one who made a monster of me, so why would you test the strength of my thirst for your blood?"

"You are mistaken," Modrevin said, beginning to sound more sure of himself. "They are not a test for you, my Raven, but for my son."

At the sound of those words on Modrevin's lips, Vaniell flinched. How could this man continue to pretend that they were related? How could he think Vaniell would still value his esteem?

"To what lengths will the boy go to save them, I wonder?" Modrevin's voice grew smooth and mocking. "Will he choose to spare them at the cost of his own desires? Value their pitiful lives above his own? Or will he choose to take his revenge for the wrongs he imagines I have dealt him, thereby proving himself the same heedless wastrel he has always been?"

The imposter was desperate indeed if he no longer cared who might discover what a monster he was.

And then Modrevin turned his attention towards Kyrion. "And if he does choose to spare them, I wonder how my son will react when you give in to your hatred and kill them in order to reach me? Because you will, Raven. You see, I know you. I know your mind, and I know your soul, and in the end?" His voice dropped to almost a whisper. "You will kill them all."

Vaniell expected his friend to react with denial. With cold anger. Even with violence. But not with fear.

As Modrevin's last words fell into silence, Kyrion's eyes flew wide. A cry ripped from his throat—perhaps the most pained and desperate sound Vaniell had ever heard. Slowly—ever so slowly—the broadsword in Kyrion's hand rose through the air, gripped by fingers that shook with the strain. The tendons in his wrists and his neck stood out from his skin, and his teeth bared as sweat began to bead on his forehead.

"*No!*" It was a sound of purest agony and despair, and when Vaniell turned towards Modrevin in confusion, he saw understanding blossom on the imposter's face.

Understanding, along with a vicious sense of satisfaction and anticipation.

"Oh, but this is delightful," the king murmured. "I don't know how, but you, my darling son, have finally justified every moment of heartache you have ever caused me."

What? What had he done? Apprehension rose like bile in Vaniell's throat, but he did not understand. What was happening?

“That's right, my Raven. I want you to kill them. Kill them all, except for my wayward child. I want him to watch, to see what he's done, and to experience the full agony of his failure again and again and *again*.”

And to Vaniell's utter horror, Kyrion turned to obey.

One step, and then another. Though he fought the compulsion with every muscle in his body, still he moved across the floor.

And then Vaniell finally understood. A wave of bitter recrimination and despair washed over him as he realized what he'd done. What he was still doing, even long after he'd repented of his actions.

The gem he'd given Leisa all those months ago had forged a permanent connection between her and Kyrion, one that did not fade with time or distance. It had been a misfire on the part of Vaniell's own work, possibly due to the fact that he'd believed her to be a mundane and magic-less human.

And the gem he'd given Modrevin must have done the same—forged a permanent bond between the king and the Raven that lingered even when the enchantment was gone. Because like Leisa, Vaniell had not yet understood Modrevin's magic or his identity when he created the enchantment.

And now Kyrion would pay the price for Vaniell's failures and hubris, just as he had always done.

Vaniell cursed himself with every epithet in his vocabulary, but it was too late to change it. Too late for everything. He should have guessed. Should have kept Kyrion miles away from this place, but he'd failed, and this was to be the cost. To watch as his friend was forced to do unspeakable things, compelled and betrayed by Vaniell's own magic...

Unless he could find a way to break this terrible link.

“Kyrion, no!” Vaniell broke through the paralysis of horror that gripped him and planted himself directly in the night elf's

path. “You don’t have to do this. I will find a way to break it. Remember, the gem is gone. The armor is gone. Whatever is happening is only an echo, and it can be defeated!”

But in Kyrion’s silver eyes he saw only a vast chasm of pain and betrayal. He’d gone back, somewhere in the depths of his own mind—back to a time when his will was not his own, when he was never alone in his own head, never permitted to sleep or to deny his master.

He was fighting, but the battle was with his own memories, and Vaniell did not know how to help him. In other moments of crisis, he could enchant his way out, but there was no enchantment here—only the memories of magic, and he did not know how to fight those.

And then he heard laughter.

Modrevin—a man who rarely showed emotion of any kind but for anger—was laughing at the spectacle of Kyrion’s pain.

“For a moment, I believed all was lost,” he said in between chuckles of mirth. “But I have snatched my victory at the final hour. With the Raven on my side, even a dragon will stand no chance against us. Even the Empress herself...”

He rambled on, but Kyrion was still advancing on the terrified men and women he’d been ordered to kill, and Vaniell continued to stand in his way as he searched desperately through his memory for something... anything...

It was as if he balanced on the edge of a precipice, about to fall, when the air beside Kyrion began to shimmer strangely, wavering like a heat mirage on a hot summer day. The ripples grew violent just before they were slashed by a line of light, so bright that everyone but Kyrion was forced to shield their eyes.

The light faded. Vaniell dropped his arm, and then his jaw fell open with stunned disbelief.

It was... Leisa?

The familiar red-haired woman stood at Kyrion’s shoulder, but it was not Leisa as Vaniell remembered her. This Leisa’s blue eyes glowed with the same inner fire as Kyrion’s, and

every visible inch of her skin bore shimmering silver patterns that marked her as not merely human...

Leisa was part fae.

And just like that enigmatic people, she had somehow learned to walk between worlds. When she disappeared from the dungeons, she must have entered the fae realm, only to reappear at the time and place of her own choosing.

“This ends now,” she said, her voice resonating with an uncanny echo of power.

In her hand, a small silver box unfolded to reveal a curved mirror that flowed and shaped itself to suit her needs. She turned slightly, tilted its glimmering surface, and every visible weapon in the room simply... vanished.

Several of the servants began to weep and slumped to the floor, hands empty, faces stark and drawn with the echoes of terror.

Kyrion’s broadsword, too, was gone, but when Leisa turned to face him, it quickly became evident that the battle was far from over.

“Kyrion, love, what’s wrong?” She stepped in front of him, reached up to cup his face in her hand, and Vaniell watched as the night elf gazed down at her with tears in his eyes.

“Leisa, you cannot be here,” he said hoarsely. “You must go, now. Take these others with you, but do not stay.”

Her only response was to plant her feet. “I’m never leaving you again,” she said stubbornly. “Whatever we face, we face together.”

“No, Leisa. Please...” But his agonized plea was lost in the icy tones of Modrevin’s voice.

“So, it seems a mirror mage still lives among the degenerate people of this land.” The king’s eyes glittered with malice. “Thankfully, that is easily remedied. You, my child, can die as swiftly as all the others, and by the same hand.”

His voice raised in a whip-crack of command. “Raven, kill her.”

“What...” Leisa’s disbelieving exclamation was cut off when Kyrion lunged forward.

Her reaction was barely fast enough, but somehow she ducked under his swing, drew her dagger, and parried when he struck with a knife pulled from beneath his tunic.

“What are you *doing*?”

“Leisa, *please*, I cannot stop. We are *still linked!*”

Vaniell saw the moment when horrified understanding dawned in her eyes, followed by an icy wave of rage. She threw a quick glance at Modrevin, then back at Kyrion.

“We can beat this,” she snarled. “I won’t let him have you. Never again, do you understand?”

“I’m fighting it, love, but if he forces me to kill you...” Pure anguish drew lines of pain on the night elf’s face. “I cannot survive that. I *cannot!*”

Leisa shook her head, dropping to the floor to evade his next strike with fierce concentration on her face.

“I won’t allow it. Do you hear me, Kyrion? You are mine, and I will never stop fighting for you!”

He struck again, not as swift or as fluid as usual, but still incredibly fast for a human, knocking Leisa’s mirror from her hand and then screaming with agony when his blade kissed her skin and raised a thin line of blood.

“Please,” he panted, hand clenching around the hilt of his dagger. “Go! Don’t make me hurt you. Don’t make me bear this pain. I cannot carry the weight of your death. It will crush me!”

It was the desperate strength of his plea that finally broke through Vaniell’s self-hatred long enough for him to act.

“Unger!”

The tall, red-clad steward straightened and bowed, an incongruous courtesy in the midst of violence. “How may I serve you, Your Highness?”

“Get everyone away from here,” Vaniell commanded sharply. “You’ll be safest in the dungeons, but whatever you do, just take them and *go!*”

The steward did not waste time with further obeisance, but jolted into action, moving hastily towards the door and urging the crowd of servants to follow.

It took little encouragement. Within moments, the room was clear of all but Vaniell, Modrevin, and the still-raging battle between Leisa and Kyrion.

Neither willing to hurt the other. Neither willing to give up. Both gasping for breath, bleeding from tiny cuts, and bearing the true anguish of their struggle on their faces. There was no way to hide the love that drove them, held them back, tormented them, and yet somehow still gave them strength.

But at last Kyrion fell to his knees.

“Leisa,” he panted. “Please. We have no choice. You must ensure that I cannot hurt anyone else. I can hold him off for a moment or two. Long enough for you to...” He choked on the words, and Leisa cut him off with a furious oath.

“How dare you even suggest such a thing, you *bastard?*” Leisa spat the words through her tears, then flung her dagger away.

It landed on the polished floor and slid, coming to rest against the steps at the foot of the dais.

Where Modrevin stood and laughed. Wearing the face of the man Vaniell had once called Father. He laughed and laughed until he looked at Vaniell and paused long enough to speak.

“How does it feel to know that your many years of rebellion have come to this? Garimore will fall to ruin, your mother and brother will both end up dying by my hand, and you must now watch your friends fight one another to the death. And in the end, I will still have won, and it is all thanks... to *you.*”

All thanks to Vaniell. Despite all of his magic, all of his scheming, all of his efforts to save his kingdom...

None of it had been enough to defeat the enemy lurking at Garimore's heart.

He'd told Kyrion that this man was the only father he'd known. That his memories of Melger were somehow tied to Modrevin, and they had always made him hesitate. What sort of monster would he become if he struck down his own father?

But as Vaniell looked into the eyes of the man now torturing his friends—armed with full knowledge of who he was and what he had done—it was as if his heart finally understood.

Melger was gone. The man whose approval he sought was long dead, and there was nothing behind that face now but evil—an evil that would do its utmost to gain power and control until it destroyed everything good, not only in Abreia, but in the Empire as well.

Karreya, too, had struggled with the knowledge of what this man had done, and what might be required to stop him. Had hesitated to take the life of someone who had once been her only family.

But this man was not Vaniell's family. He was an enemy who must be stopped.

Even if Karreya came to hate him for his actions. Even if it meant she felt she had no choice but to leave him. If someone must bear the guilt for this man's blood, perhaps it was fitting that it be Vaniell—the wastrel prince, finally living up to his responsibility for the people of Garimore.

With a measured stride, he moved towards the dais, blocking out the sounds of battle, focused entirely on the man before him.

As he reached the steps, he scooped up Leisa's dagger and then raced up the stairs until he stood face to face with his adversary.

Melger. Modrevin. Mirror mage. The face of his longing to belong and the face of his nightmares. None of them were real.

“Stop this,” he said quietly. “Your ambitions are at an end. It's over, and your dreams will never come to fruition. All of

this killing, all of your efforts to gain power, have come to nothing. Everyone sees you for who you truly are, and they will never bow to you again.”

“Even if I were to stop,” Modrevin sneered, “what do you expect will become of *you*? They all know you for who you are and what you’ve done. You left your own mother to die, and even now your friends suffer because of your pride. Do you really believe they’ll let you live? Forgive you for the unspeakable magics you’ve performed at my command?”

To his own surprise, Vaniell found that he did not even have to think about his answer. “Yes,” he said simply. “They will.”

Modrevin scoffed, but Vaniell was not finished.

“In my time away from you, I’ve finally learned to see myself clearly—both the boy who longed for approval, and the man who yearned to redeem himself. I’ve taken a long hard look at all my broken pieces and accepted that they are a part of me. And... It turns out that those who truly love me have also accepted those broken pieces, just as Mother did. They accept me for who I am, not for what I can do for them. Where I have wronged them, I apologize, and they do the same. We help each other up and we keep trying to do better. Which means...”

He gripped the dagger in suddenly nerveless fingers.

“It means *they* are my family. Not you. No matter what you say, no matter what you do, I will never allow you to control me again, so I will ask you one last time. Stop this. Stop hurting others merely because you can.”

“Or what?” Modrevin taunted. “You’ll stop me? All you ever did was whimper for my approval, and then run away when you didn’t get it. You couldn’t save your mother, and you can’t save them. All you have is useless magic and a coward’s heart and I...”

From behind him, Vaniell heard Leisa gasp in pain, followed by a hoarse cry from Kyrion, and he shut his eyes on the familiar face before him. Swallowed every bit of self

doubt, every memory of longing and failure and disillusionment, every desperate wish for someone to save him from the hell this man had created...

Then he opened his eyes, looked on the face of his enemy, and stabbed.

Forward and up, crying out in sick revulsion as he felt the dagger slide between layers of cloth, pierce between Modrevin's ribs with a horrible wet, ripping sound, and then stop, buried to the hilt in the imposter king's heart.

The world around him seemed to slow. Modrevin's jaw dropped soundlessly as he stared down at the dagger, then up at Vaniell's face, as if unwilling to believe that his useless puppet of a son had stabbed him. Vaniell's hand remained frozen on the weapon's hilt. His breath caught in his lungs, and no sound penetrated the fog of disbelief that clouded his mind.

But as Modrevin fell backwards, sliding off the dagger and slumping to the floor with blood gushing across the front of his robes, time seemed to catch up with him once more.

There was blood on Vaniell's hands. Blood on his clothing. And he could barely breathe between the sick knowledge that he'd been responsible for a man's death, and the intense wave of relief that the terror of this man's reign was finally over.

Falling to his knees beside the body, he retched and wept and wondered whether he was losing his mind, until he felt a strong hand clasp his arm.

"Come." It was Kyrion. His fingers trembled, but his grip was steady and sure.

"Leave him, Vaniell." Those soft words were Leisa's. Both of them had survived, and relief freed Vaniell's voice from the chains that held it back.

"How can I just leave him here?" Despite his efforts, years of ugly memories churned beneath the surface, with the constant presence of this man's face. His voice. Again and again, Vaniell relived the vision of his mother's death, with this man holding the knife. "There's a part of me that still insists I've just killed my father. It is what everyone else will

believe. His blood on my hands makes me a blight and a horror to everyone beyond these walls, and yet... I still want to kill him again.”

Tears ran down his face as a sudden surge of rage caught him by surprise, nearly choking him with its strength. “Even if it makes me a monster, I want him to suffer more. I want to make him feel everything he made me feel, everything he made my mother feel. But now he’s just dead, and I never got to ask him... Never made him change back. Karreya will never get to see her father’s face again. It’s just *over*, but a part of me is also afraid that it will never be over. Not for her, and not for me.”

Kyrion’s grip pulled him inexorably to his feet and turned him around until he was forced to meet the night elf’s gray eyes. “*I know*,” Kyrion said, and of all the people in the world, he might be the only one who truly did. The only one who could understand the maelstrom of emotions that felt like it might well tear Vaniell apart.

It was a moment that had somehow begun over eleven years ago, when Vaniell had made his worst mistake. Said yes when he should have said no. Acted out of fear instead of courage, and given the imposter the weapon he needed to terrorize the entire Abreian continent.

And now, in this moment when Kyrion might have most cause to hate his former adversary, he looked on him not with the hatred he deserved, but with compassion.

“Longing for justice does not make you a monster,” Kyrion said. “But justice is not always about death. It is also about restoration, both for these lands and for the many people who have suffered under this tyrant’s rule. Including you.”

In that moment, such a thing seemed impossible, but Vaniell nodded and gripped Kyrion’s shoulder in return. “I am sorry,” he said. “I know it will never be enough, but I never dreamed...”

“Today you have done *nothing* to be ashamed of,” Kyrion said fiercely. “Do you understand?”

With a sweep of his arm, he tugged Vaniell into a sudden embrace—as strong as it was swift. An act of forgiveness. Of respect. Perhaps even... of brotherhood.

And when he released him again, it was with a light of warning in his gray eyes. “I will hear no one speak against the worthiness of the future King of Garimore,” he warned sternly. “Not even you.”

“If he’s going to be the king,” Leisa chimed in, “we’d best be about saving something for him to be king *of*.”

And at that, Kyrion turned to his wife, eyes aglow once more as he stalked towards her and swept her into his arms, holding her tightly and bowing his head against her shoulder.

“I will help you save whatever you wish,” he murmured into her hair, “after I am certain that this is not a dream and you are still alive.”

“Of course I’m alive,” she said gently, wrapping her arms around him in turn. “What else would I be?”

Her husband jerked back to stare at her. “*Of course?*” He demanded incredulously. “When you did whatever it was that took you from your cell, I couldn’t *feel* you anymore! You were simply gone from my mind! I’ve spent the last day caught between mourning and hope, afraid to believe, afraid to find out that you were gone.”

She sucked in a quick breath, and her eyes filled with remorse. “Kyrion, I had no idea. I’m so sorry, my love.”

“Did you truly walk between worlds?” He seemed torn between terror and wonder at the possibility, but Leisa’s face lit up with joy.

“I did! My uncle suggested it was possible, but I never knew... I was just so desperate to save them. I was trying to use my mirror, and then... It just happened. It’s incredible, Kyrion. I can’t wait to tell you what it was like!”

“But what if you’d been unable to come back?” he insisted. “I am begging you to at least tell me before you attempt anything so dangerous again.”

Leisa shook her head. “I don’t know how, but I could still sense our bond, even there. It’s how I pulled myself back, and how I knew where I needed to be.”

“Even so...”

From somewhere beyond the walls, a terrible groan and a crash reverberated through the room.

The dragon. Imperial troops at the gates... Even after Modrevin’s death, the destruction he’d set in motion was not yet at an end—the battle for Garimore had barely begun.

There was still an empire to defeat and a kingdom to save. And if Vaniell was lucky, a woman who would someday forgive him for what he had done.

“I suppose we’d best go and see what’s still standing,” Vaniell said, and turned his back resolutely on the scene behind them.

Then, without a single backward glance, he moved towards the door, together with Leisa and Kyrion, leaving the past behind as he walked shoulder to shoulder with the friends and family he had chosen.

And as the sound of their footsteps died away, the doors swung shut, leaving the room empty but for a flickering lamp, a dagger, and a forgotten, blood-soaked corpse.

CHAPTER 20



*L*ive wisely... live well...

Those words continued to echo through Karreya's mind as she knelt on the stones, with blood on her hands and the sounds of battle and chaos filling her ears.

From beyond the broken palace gates came the sound of screams. The roar of fires. The tread of heavy boots. Inci had said there were battle mages, so that meant even greater chaos. Boundary mages could use the forces of fire and war to unleash havoc—toppling buildings or opening pits in the ground. Mind mages could send their enemies running in terror from apparitions that existed only in their imagination, only to have the brutally efficient imperial troops slaughter them from behind as they ran.

The city of Hanselm would be utterly devastated if she did not move. Warn them. Help them withstand the onslaught.

Rising from the ground, she turned away from the lifeless form at her feet and looked at Senaya.

Karreya had seen her aunt as many things—simple seller of herbs, reluctant mirror mage, anguished mother, and now perhaps simply a grieving woman. One who had returned to save her daughter and been asked to save an empire instead.

It was deeply unfair, Karreya realized suddenly, to ask so much of her. Unfair to expect someone else to take up the task she was so hesitant to accept for herself. Senaya deserved the chance to live in peace. Know her daughter. Watch her grandchildren grow. And she could have it, if only Karreya

was willing to lay aside her own fears and embrace her destiny.

“Thank you for returning,” she said. “I have not seen Leisa, but I am certain she is all right.”

“She probably believed that I truly abandoned her,” Senaya said heavily. “Perhaps it is best if I do not see her. It will be enough to know that she is safe before I...”

“Survive,” Karreya returned sternly. “We will defeat these invaders, and you will survive. You will meet her again, and explain that you left because you knew, didn’t you? You rode south because you knew they were coming.”

“I guessed,” Senaya admitted with a sigh. “But I was not certain until I saw the smoke and realized they were slaughtering everything as they came. And I did not lie, as I am sure you know. I could *not* watch my child tempt fate as she did. There seemed a better way to protect her, and so I took it.”

“Mother?” Leisa’s shocked question came from behind them, accompanied by the sounds of running feet. “How are you here?”

“The usual way,” Senaya replied, looking twenty years older as she regarded her daughter cautiously. “I rode, and then I walked.”

“I’m glad,” Leisa said fiercely, and then, to everyone’s surprise, walked up and threw her arms around her mother’s shoulders. “He’s dead,” she said softly, her voice trembling with emotion. “He’s dead and he can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Karreya heard those words as if through a fog, realizing with a strange sense of detachment that both her parents were truly gone. After they’d been missing from her life for so many years, they had died together, in a foreign land, within moments of each other, and for entirely different reasons.

Her father had died in a desperate attempt to claim power.

Her mother had died in a desperate bid to protect her.

And now perhaps it was her turn to die. But for what? Die here protecting a land and a people not her own? Or return home and sacrifice her life to the cause of overthrowing her grandmother's rule?

“Karreya?”

It was Niell. She heard the fear in his voice, heard his concern for her, and turned to reassure him that the blood was not hers. But when she saw him...

She knew. Not merely by the blood on his hands and his coat. There were new lines on his forehead, and a new gravity in his gray eyes. It was the face of a man who had seen death and now carried the weight of it on his shoulders.

There was so much to tell him. So much she needed to say, and no time for any of it. Not if they were going to save his city and his people.

“I am well enough,” she said simply. “But there are battle mages in the city. Also, an entire battalion of troops, together with one of my grandmother's most trusted generals. One of the dragons is now an ally, but there will be more. Lord Kellan is gathering what forces he can, but they will be entirely outmatched unless we can accomplish the impossible.”

“I suppose that is my specialty,” Vaniell said with a grimace. “But I have never felt less capable of a miracle in my life.”

“Then it is a lucky thing you're not alone,” Leisa chimed in, shooting him a wry look. “You seem to forget your allies rather quickly.”

“Force of habit,” he confessed. “I've been fighting alone for... a very long time. But since you offered, is there anything you mirror mages can do to protect the palace?”

Leisa cast a cursory glance at the shattered stones and timbers of the gate. “I think so,” she said. “Though I've never attempted anything of this magnitude before. Mother?”

Senaya appeared rather startled to be addressed so, but nodded, despite seeming distracted. “It is a fairly simple task,”

she said. “We can reconstruct the gates, though it will not be proof against them being broken a second time.”

“If it will delay any ground troops, that will serve well enough, thank you.” Vaniell threw them a grateful nod. “Once the gates are whole, we will have a defensible place to begin sending refugees from the streets of the city. The palace steward is encouraging the staff to take shelter in the dungeons, and will be expecting to receive more survivors as we find them.”

He looked at Kyrion. “I ask because I do not know, not because I would have you throw your life away. How effective will your wyvern or your magic be against the imperial battle mages?”

Kyrion bared his teeth in a feral smile. “I have never encountered one, but now is as good a time as any to discover my limits.”

“Kyrion.” Leisa addressed him sharply. “Not without me, you don’t.”

The two shared a look of fierce affection that brought an ache to Karreya’s heart, but there was no time to examine the feeling.

“Once we have repaired the gates, I should be able to hold them against all but the most determined assault.” Senaya did not look at Leisa, but it was clear to whom she was speaking. “Aid me, and then go. But use caution. Yvane will be planning to intercept the other dragons, but their riders’ control is not absolute, and should they slip, it will be even more dangerous for anyone sharing these skies.”

Leisa tilted her head. “I should dearly love to know how Yvane came to be here, but we can share that story later. Be safe, Mother. I expect to find you here—well and whole—when we return. There is still so much I need to tell you.”

Had the situation been any less dire, Karreya might have smiled as her aunt and her cousin finally seemed to reach an understanding. They had achieved acceptance, at least, and perhaps even a tacit admission of love.

But she had her own task.

“We have accounted for the dragons, the mages, and the refugees, but there are still the imperial ground troops to consider. They are well trained and will be under orders to maximize destruction so as to further destabilize the kingdom and create as much fear as possible.”

At that point, Karreya turned and spoke directly to Niell. “They are no match for me individually, but a full battalion is five hundred troops. Even if their numbers were diminished on the road to Hanselm, there are still far too many for me to hope to defeat them on my own.”

“What is your plan?” he asked calmly.

“The invasion force is commanded by Third General Urquadi—a formidable warrior, but also an honorable opponent. The Empire still has a sacred tradition of single combat. If I can find him and defeat him, we may yet be able to stop them from razing this city to the ground.”

Vaniell’s gaze was steady and unflinching. “That sounds entirely too simple. What are you not telling me?”

There was so much she had not told him. “Urquadi has never been outmatched in single combat. He is taller, stronger, and employs a halberd in battle. I believe that under normal circumstances, I am fast enough and skilled enough to win, but I do not know exactly where we will find him.”

Her prince merely shrugged, and the corner of his mouth lifted in a ghostlike imitation of his former insouciant smile. “Sounds like an interesting challenge. When do we leave?”

“We?” Karreya echoed, her own lips drawing down in a scowl. “*We* do not go anywhere, Niell. This is my task and mine alone.”

“And I say you can stuff that idea right back in the stable midden where it came from.” His tone was calm, but utterly implacable. An iron resolve had entered his gray eyes and his folded arms suggested he would prove impossible to sway. “This is my kingdom. My people. I am the only remaining member of my house, and the protection of Garimore is now

mine to ensure. I will not stand aside or crawl into a hole while others bleed and die for this Throne. Either we go together or I will lock you down in the dungeons with the others until this is over.”

Silence greeted this pronouncement as Leisa bit her lip, and Kyrion made a choking sound.

“And before you say ‘you and what army,’” Niell continued, “know that I have no idea and haven’t actually thought that far ahead. I just needed you to understand that I’m serious.”

From the look he was giving her, he knew what he risked. Part of him already feared she would be unable to forgive him. But even so, he forged ahead—willing to go as far as necessary to stand beside her and protect his people, even though he knew nothing of combat or war.

It was part of why she loved him. Part of why she did not want to say yes. She could not bear the thought of breaking his heart, and even if she succeeded in this challenge, he was going to be broken in the end.

But it was too late. He’d moved the last three steps towards her, taken her hand and grasped it in fingers already stained by war and sacrifice. “Karreya, please.”

“Very well,” she murmured, curling her fingers around his. She would be selfish this one last time. Spend whatever time was left in his company. And perhaps when it was over, she could say goodbye without too many regrets.

Meeting his eyes as bravely as she could, she shot him her best glare of intimidation and disgust. “Try to keep up, Abreian.”

He lifted her hand, kissed the back of it, and smiled—that utterly gorgeous grin that had once so shocked her with its brilliance. Now it was a blade in her heart, stabbing her with the knowledge of all that she would never have.

“Then we have our plan.” Leisa looked around at their small group as if memorizing the faces that surrounded her. “No matter what happens, remember that the goal is to stay

alive. We can always fight another day. No grand, tragic sacrifices. We survive, we regroup, we move on, understood?”

Every voice but one murmured agreement, and then Kyrion’s form vanished, to be replaced by the black wyvern. Leisa and Senaya strode towards the gates, their mirrors already unfolding. And still Vaniell held Karreya’s hand as if unwilling to let it go.

“Before we do this...” He did not meet her eyes. “There is something I need to tell you.”

“Not now,” she said quietly. “Not now, Niell.”

He looked down at her then, and he must have seen the knowledge written across her features.

“You know, don’t you?”

She could not speak of it yet. Could not spare the energy to confront her feelings. Not so soon after learning of her mother’s identity and watching as the life left her eyes. So instead of answering, she tugged him forward, towards the broken gates. They broke into a run, and a moment later they were leaping over the rubble, pressing past the smoke, into the city streets.

Karreya looked back briefly just as Senaya and Leisa joined forces and the pieces of the gates began to shift in a stunning display of power. Soon the gates would be whole.

Their defense of Hanselm had begun, and in only a few hours, they would know whether they had succeeded.



They encountered the first of the imperial troops not far from the palace gates. Three men in the Empress’s flat gray armor were smashing the window of a flower shop and setting the interior ablaze, while the proprietress huddled in the street.

Karreya’s dagger was in her hand before she could question herself. The first of them took a swing at her, but he was expecting terrified townspeople, not a trained assassin. He

fell with her blade in his neck, and Karreya claimed his sword for her own as she called out to his companions.

“The Third Blade of the Imperium summons you and commands that you kneel.” Her voice took on the harsh quality of command, and the two soldiers stopped long enough to take her measure.

“There are no Blades here,” one of them scoffed. “Only traitors. Kill her.”

The first one impaled himself on her sword, and the second received a dagger to the eye.

Meanwhile, Vaniell crouched next to the terrified shop owner and murmured instructions. She shot him a wide-eyed look, but soon scurried off into the darkness towards the palace.

“How many?” Vaniell muttered, more to himself than to Karreya. “How many will we not reach in time?”

“You cannot torment yourself with those thoughts,” Karreya insisted. “We will save all that we can. But we must find our way outside of the city walls. That is where Urquadi is most likely to be—directing the battle from a safe distance.”

Karreya wished that everyone who had ever derided Niell as the Wastrel Prince could have seen him as they made their way through the dark, smoke-filled streets of Hanselm. Climbing over rubble, dodging attacks, directing shocked and injured townspeople towards the relative safety of the palace, or even improvising enchantments against the attacks of imperial mages. He was angry, frightened, determined, fierce... And yet utterly in command of himself. Thinking first of his people, and never hesitating to put himself in danger for their sakes.

But as the violence spread, his face grew more and more grim, his trademark grin long since vanished as soot and blood covered his skin. The city did not have long. Bodies lay in the street, amid shattered glass, broken fountains, and ruined goods, while trees, stores, and homes burned.

Strange as it seemed, they had yet to even catch a glimpse of the imperial dragons. This destruction was the work of a single battalion—along with a handful of battle mages—and it represented the inevitable outcome of any encounter with the Zulleri Empire. And while Karreya did not hesitate to throw herself into this battle, she knew well that Abreia’s survival was now in grave doubt. Garimore had experienced but the smallest taste of her grandmother’s wrath, and the people of this land were ill prepared to face it.

Should the imperial troops come in force? Abreia would be no more. Garimore—and Niell—would cease to exist, and that alone was enough to convince her that she must not falter in her determination.

They were nearly to the city gates when the night and the smoke vomited up the grim, blond-haired Lord Kellan, along with a mismatched crew of his supporters.

“You’re alive, then.” He and Vaniell clasped arms and shared a heartfelt look of commiseration. “Does the palace still stand?”

Vaniell nodded once. “There’s a mage or two holding the gates, with instructions to send all refugees inside the palace itself. Any survivors you find will be safest there.”

“Understood.” Kellan raked Karreya and her blades with an assessing gaze before turning his attention back to Vaniell. “We’ve been setting up barricades where we can, but I doubt they’ll hold for long. We don’t have enough mages to counter their magical attacks, and it’s only a matter of time before that dragon returns.”

“The golden dragon is now an ally,” Karreya informed him coolly. “Though there will be others, so you must continue to be wary of danger from above.”

“Do what you can, but don’t throw your lives away,” Vaniell added wearily. “If all your defenses collapse, make for the palace and defend the walls. And if the other dragons attack, hide your people in the dungeons.”

“Where are you headed?”

Vaniell shared a glance with Karreya, as if to ask what was safe to tell.

“To confront the imperial commander,” she said briskly. “With the army marching north, we are pitifully outmatched, so our only hope is to destroy their chain of command. If I can locate their general, he will be bound by honor to accept my challenge. Should fate smile on me, I may be able to defeat him and take his troops for my own.”

Kellan’s gaze grew sharp and assessing. “You are imperial. And yet you would seek the defeat of your own people?”

Whether he was guessing or whether he knew, Karreya discovered she did not care.

“I care for the people of this land as well as my own,” she told him flatly. “Today I fight for the lives of the innocent people of Abreia, but my intentions are not limited to these lands alone. The citizens of the Empire have suffered for generations under this dynasty of conquerors. Therefore, I do not seek the defeat of my people, but their liberation, and should Abreia fall, it is unlikely that any will be able to stand against the might and cruelty of the Empress.”

After a long pause, Kellan looked at Vaniell, who, rather than distancing himself, moved a step closer to Karreya’s side and took her hand. “She’s telling the truth, Kel. Yes, she’s imperial, but it’s only because of her that we’ve made it this far. Only because of her that I’m still alive and standing here today.”

“And perhaps only because of her that these invaders are here at all?” Lord Kellan asked ruthlessly. “Unless she’s claiming that this has nothing to do with her. But after so many years of ignoring us, why would they attack now?”

Karreya could have hissed in frustration, but she held herself back. “If you choose to place this at my door, I cannot stop you,” she said. “Yes, their primary goal was to retrieve me and return me to my family. But I did not ask for this. I did not give the order to kill and destroy. I left my family precisely because this is how they choose to live. Believe me or not, had I never come to these shores, this scene would yet have

happened. Perhaps ten or more years into the future, but you would not have avoided it. The Empire has become a vast, ravening beast that will not stop until it has swallowed up everything it touches. And eventually, it would have come for you.”

She did not expect him to believe her, but it was true. Had she never come here, had she taken her grandmother’s place before she had seen and learned what Abreia had to teach her, her time as Empress would have been short and bloody. One of the jackals of the court would have cut her down, triggering a violent war of succession that would end only when another of the corrupt power-hungry nobles took the throne.

And then? More war. More conquest. More violence, in a never-ending cycle.

She had not been strong enough then, and she might not be strong enough now. But here, she had others to protect. A reason to fight for peace. And she knew herself, as she never had before.

“All right.”

Startled, she blinked at Lord Kellan and regarded him quizzically. She had not expected him to surrender his suspicion so easily.

“If His Highness trusts you, then so do I,” he said. “Unless you prove us both wrong. Go and fight this general of yours, and we’ll do our best to hold back the tide.”

“Thank you,” Vaniell said soberly. “And best of luck to you.”

Lord Kellan threw him a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes, snapped off a jaunty salute, and then disappeared back into the shadows and smoke.

CHAPTER 21



They found the city gates shattered and broken, but there was no time to stop. From somewhere overhead came the harsh cry of a hunting wyvern, and all Vaniell could feel was a brief rush of relief that Kyrion was still alive. Karreya jogged at his shoulder, eyes sharp and keen, blades held ready even as they left the city behind and passed into the darkness beyond.

He didn't know what he'd expected of the enemy general. Perhaps that he would be lurking somewhere in the night, awaiting his moment of triumph at a safe distance.

But he should have known better. The Empire had no need to hide—not when her forces were stronger and had gone unchallenged for so many years.

A few hundred yards from the gates, on a slight rise of ground, stood a ring of torches, holding the shadows at bay with their flickering light. Within that ring was a tent, a bonfire, and a crowd of people—perhaps a dozen armored soldiers, three women in robes, and a single figure on horseback. He sat at ease in the saddle, wrists crossed in front of him, awaiting victory.

This had to be the general Karreya spoke of. Most of his body was encased in armor, but his helmet was off, revealing a man in perhaps his late forties with dark hair gathered in a tail, watching the city with an expression that might have been hewn from granite. He was tall and bulky with muscle—possibly twice Karreya's size—and Vaniell nearly stopped breathing as he considered what she intended to do.

He tugged her to a stop in the darkness, one hand on her arm. “Karreya, wait. Please.”

She paused and looked back at him. “Do not tell me not to do this,” she said coolly.

“I won’t,” he promised. “No matter how much I want to. I know perfectly well that you’re the only one who *can* do this. The only one who might have a chance. But you can’t go before I’ve told you the truth about what happened... back there.”

It was the last thing in the world he wanted to do right now. She was about to throw herself into a battle she might have no hope of winning, and all his instincts insisted that he say something profound or romantic, something to inspire or comfort her.

But Karreya valued nothing so much as truth, and that was what he needed to give her.

“What truth do you suppose I do not know?”

Vaniell held out his hands in the near darkness—hands still stained with blood. “I killed him,” he said hoarsely. “Your father. Not indirectly, not through inaction, but with my own hands. I didn’t think I could. It always felt wrong, somehow, even when I knew he wasn’t really my father. But he was using my magic to force Leisa and Kyrion to fight one another, and I couldn’t let it go on. Couldn’t let either of them die that way.”

His chin dropped as he struggled against the memory of that moment. “I’d only ever imagined what it would be like... to deliberately take a life. And it was so much worse. I still feel sick. But... I also feel like I did the right thing. And then I feel guilt, not only because I took your father from you, but because why didn’t I do it sooner? I could have saved so many lives, and yet, what kind of person struggles with the guilt of *not* murdering someone?”

Karreya took a step closer and pressed her hand against his cheek with uncharacteristic gentleness. “I am sorry,” she said.

Wait, what?

“Karreya,” he choked out, “I’m trying to apologize to *you*. I understand if you hate me for it, but I had no choice. Not in that moment. I didn’t plan it, but there was no other way to stop him...”

She rose on tiptoes and kissed him. Her lips were soft and gentle, and even though they both smelled of blood and smoke, he could have stayed there, like that, until the end of time, with her sword-callused hands on his face and her warmth pressed against him.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her closer, heedless of daggers or enchantments, needing only to feel the unmerited acceptance she offered. To linger in the joy of knowing that he had not lost her.

After a moment or two, her kiss turned desperate. Seeking. Wanting. As if she were trying with every breath to tell him something important.

Sliding his other hand into the silk of her hair, Vaniell cupped his fingers around the back of her neck and tugged her closer still, wishing this moment could last forever. That he would never have to end this kiss and send the woman he loved off to duel a giant in armor.

But the moment did end. Karreya broke the kiss and stared up at him for a moment, still holding his face between her hands. “There are so many reasons why I love you,” she said simply. “Not least because even when you are pretending, you are entirely yourself. You do what is difficult, even when it brings you pain. You do not shy away from the truth, and you do not ask others to suffer in your place. But you also trust those around you and do not try to make them less in order to make yourself greater. And you keep your promises. Which is how I know that I can trust your answer when I ask for your promise now.”

“What would you ask of me?”

“I will not beg you to understand,” she said quietly—almost regretfully. “I will not even request that you someday look back and forgive me, because that may not be possible.”

“Karreya, I will forgive you anything except dying.” Vaniell paused as he choked back something between laughter and a sob. “But you are frightening me. Just tell me what terrible thing you are going to ask.”

“That you do not follow me.”

It was indeed a terrible request.

“Do not try to help me. Do not try to save me from this. I know what I must do, and I ask only that you bear witness.”

He knew she deserved his unwavering support, but how could he say yes? How could he let her go alone?

“I believe that I can win,” she said, “and even if I do not, a challenge need not always end in death. However, if fate decrees against me, I ask that you do everything in your power to survive. And if I live... that you forgive me, even if you do not understand.”

She watched him hesitantly, and even though his heart cried out for him to deny her, such an answer would be for himself, not for her.

“Anything but dying, love,” he repeated at last. “I said it, and I meant it. And while I don’t care for being left on the sidelines, I know my strengths, and they are not in battle. So I will watch, I will wait, and I will hope, because I trust you with every fiber of my being.”

She pulled him down for one last kiss, and then she was gone.



Under the cover of night, his footsteps obscured by the sounds of battle and the roar of flames, Vaniell moved closer to the hill where the enemy general waited. And despite the chaos, it was not difficult to hear the exclamation that arose when Karreya stepped out of the darkness and entered that ring of torches.

The light glinted off the pale gold of her hair, the golden embroidery on her clothing, and the shining steel of the blades she held low at her sides. And on the face of the Zulleri general, Vaniell saw first surprise and then a grudging sense of respect.

“Blade Karreya. So you are here.” He spoke with the unhurried confidence of a man accustomed to command. “It is an honor that you would join us.”

“General Urquadi.” Vaniell drew in a quick breath at the sound of her voice. She no longer sounded like the Karreya he knew. Her accent was sharper, her tone deeper and colder than a Farhall winter. And as she strode closer to the general’s position, it was with the assurance not of an assassin, but a queen... no, an Empress.

This was Karreya Draguris, Third Blade of the Zulleri Empire, heir to the throne of Myrn Draguri. A woman forged in the fires of the imperial court, and honed to a keen edge by the brutality of the Imperial Enclave. Despite being surrounded by enemies, she held herself straight and tall, a deadly column of shadow crowned in gold.

“I have spoken with Avincia, and received the Empress’s message,” she said. “Your mission here is therefore at an end. Recall your troops, and we will depart at once for the coast.”

A bold gamble, and one that made even the armored form of Urquadi pause as he regarded his Empress’s granddaughter.

But his hesitation was short-lived.

“Our mission here has not yet concluded,” he said gravely. “Only once the dragons have arrived and the city is destroyed will our demonstration of the wrath and the might of the Zulleri Empire be complete.”

“I am the duly acknowledged heir to my grandmother’s throne,” Karreya reminded him in a soft, dangerous tone. “Do I not then have the authority to choose the time of our departure?”

Urquadi inclined his head with respect, but remained obdurate. “Only the Empress’s chosen representative may

change the terms of our engagement.”

Karreya continued to regard him with unflinching arrogance, her focus demonstrating her utter indifference towards the soldiers and mages that surrounded them. “Avincia is dead,” she pointed out calmly. “She chose to challenge me, and she did not succeed.”

Vaniell could only wonder what had happened once he’d entered the palace to confront Modrevin. He noticed she had not said that she’d killed this Avincia, only that she was dead. But would the general notice the difference?

“Her passing is a great loss to the Empire and will be appropriately mourned,” Urquadi responded impassively, his confidence not noticeably shaken. “But in the event of her death, command falls not to you, but to me. Only Her Eminence may change her orders, and until we return to Zulle, that is impossible.”

Vaniell saw when Karreya accepted the inevitability of battle. Her entire posture changed, and even the smallest motions grew more fluid as she tilted her chin and stared the general down with a self-confident poise any queen might have envied.

“Impossible is the realm of cowards and fools,” she said. “Which one are you, General?”

Her taunt provoked no visible response but a tightening of his hands on his horse’s reins.

“I am but a servant to the Empire,” Urquadi replied, utterly unmoved. “I do only as I am ordered by the one who has proven her right to command me.”

It seemed he’d provided exactly the opening Karreya was searching for. “Then in the name of proving my rights as a Blade of the Dragurin line, I invoke the ritual of challenge.” Her tone suggested she’d just invited Urquadi to go for a stroll in the garden. “According to the ancient traditions of our people, should I defeat you in combat and force you to kneel before me, these troops are mine to command.”

Genuine surprise widened the general's eyes for a moment as he regarded the woman before him. "You do not wish to fight me, child of the Enclave," His voice seemed almost gentler than before, but perhaps that was mere illusion.

"You are correct," Karreya acknowledged. "I have no desire to match blades with a man of honor and courage who has done no wrong. But I have sworn to protect this city and this people, and my word is sacred to me."

"If that is the case," Urquadi said, "it seems our choices are few. But I beg you to fully consider your course. Should you win, you face a task beyond your abilities. Should I win, I face the wrath of the Empress for the loss or humiliation of her chosen heir. Either way, the Empire is weakened and our enemies grow stronger."

"I will not disagree, but neither will I yield," Karreya responded evenly. "I have no wish to kill you, but I cannot stand by while innocent lives are sacrificed in the name of imperial conquest."

The general's face hardened. "If you cannot do what is necessary, I fear Her Eminence may come to regret her choice."

"I will be certain to tell her of your concerns," Karreya returned, "when I explain how I came to defeat her most celebrated general in single combat."

Urquadi shrugged, sighed, and swung his leg over the saddle, preparing to dismount.

But in that exact moment, a roar split the air over their heads, followed by a rushing wind and a billow of flame. A dragon plummeted out of the night sky, claws outstretched and mouth gaping wide, aiming straight for the hill where Karreya stood.

The soldiers cried out in fear and scattered. Urquadi's horse shied violently, and he stumbled backwards, falling on his back before rolling away. Karreya dropped flat, dagger in hand as the dragon swooped overhead, catching armored men in its claws and throwing them aside before snatching up the

general's horse in its jaws and disappearing again into the darkness.

“No!” Karreya called after it. “This is not your fight!”

But the dragon did not answer—the three robed mages did. One flung out a hand and instantly extinguished the flames left behind by the dragon's assault, while another drew a blade before suddenly seeming to multiply into five, ten, twenty versions of herself. The third spread her hands wide before bringing them swiftly together, a clap that was echoed by an ear-splitting crack of thunder overhead.

Fire, illusion, and wind, Vaniell realized grimly—all trained for battle, and all focused on Karreya. And even as she crouched low, backing away from the rapidly multiplying enemies, the imposing form of General Urquadi rose from the ground and began to advance, retrieving his halberd from where it had fallen.

“You cannot win,” he rumbled, appearing as unstoppable as a hurricane or a landslide. “Surrender, and accept your fate. This land is beyond salvation, and all you will accomplish is your own destruction.”

“No,” Karreya replied fiercely. “It is you who have ensured our destruction—by unleashing forces beyond your control. Who do you suppose will mourn you when your dragons remember the taste of freedom?”

The illusory mages closed in, both a shield and a distraction from the true threat. The wind mage lifted her arms, and the fire magic balanced a living flame on her outstretched palm, but Vaniell was already moving. Already reaching into his pockets, racing against time, looking for a weakness...

“I am sorry,” Karreya murmured, and sent one of her daggers hurtling through the air. It cut through the ranks of the illusions with unerring aim, tearing through their insubstantial forms to bury itself in the heart of their source.

The illusion mage let out a soft cry, and fell, and her apparitions vanished with her death.

“How did you...” Even Urquadi seemed taken aback, but did not pause in his advance.

It must have been Karreya’s truth magic. Lies and illusions had no power over her, and Vaniell breathed a muttered oath of relief as he approached the ring of torches. He’d promised not to interfere, but that was before the mages became involved. This was no challenge to honorable single combat, but a battle of three against one. Even if Karreya’s pride demanded otherwise, he would be hanged before he left her to face it alone...

And before he could think better of it, he was stumbling forward into the circle of flames, coming to a stop at Karreya’s side, his hands still in his pockets.

“What are you doing?” she hissed angrily. “You promised.”

“I promised to let you have the General all to yourself,” he pointed out. “Not to stand aside while you take on three battle mages at the same time.”

“Two,” she retorted.

“And a dragon,” Vaniell added. “You know I love you, but that’s a bit much, even for you.”

“The dragon is no longer a threat to us,” Karreya said. “And the mages are...”

“Mine,” Vaniell said softly. “Do you trust me?”

She did not pause, even for a moment. “With every breath in my body.”

“How about now?” He pulled one hand out of his pocket, holding up nothing but his worn, knotted up length of string.

Karreya raised one eyebrow, and then she smiled. “A bold choice. Both then and now,” she said.

And Vaniell smiled back. “And I regret nothing.”

She might have said more, but the bull-like form of the general suddenly moved, far more swiftly than a man of his

bulk ought to be capable of, his halberd poised for a killing strike.

Karreya did not flinch or falter, only darted towards him, joining the battle with a clash of steel on steel.

And Vaniell turned his back, facing the two remaining mages with a smile on his face and that simple piece of string looped around his fingers.

“You are an enchanter,” one of them sneered. “Everyone knows such a material cannot hold enchantment with any reliability. And that is all you bring to this fight?”

“Well, yes,” Vaniell said, continuing to loop and twist the string, forming a strange and complex pattern between his fingers. “You see, everyone has always called me the unreliable one. The one who never failed to disappoint. The one who never played by the rules.”

He was already riding the wave of intuition that had always informed his magic—a wave that kept him perpetually on the verge of disaster, never more than one step ahead. It was in that place that he felt most like himself, and his magic truly became a part of him. Every sense came alive with the rush of possibility, of adrenaline, of the unknown future that was just out of reach. And as that future loomed closer, he somehow saw the currents of power twisting across the knotted strands and guided them to where they needed to go... just so...

“But sometimes,” he said thoughtfully, “I think we need to look past the rules. Past our assumptions. Forget what *everyone* knows, so that we can find something new. Something unexpectedly perfect.”

From behind him came a grunt and the clash of metal, but he was too deeply ensnared in the bright lure of his magic. The final loop fell into place and he flicked his wrists, just as the wind mage brought her palms together with a whooshing sound, and the fire mage breathed flames from between her parted lips.

A towering tornado of fire sprung up between them, but Vaniell did not flinch. He held firm, grasping the tendrils of enchantment with his strength of will alone as the string flew, flashing across the distance to snare the mages' wrists in manacles of pure light.

The light flared, the mages cried out, and their magic was cut off as if by a knife.

The tornado died, leaving only a scattered pile of ash on the ground—easily stepped over as Vaniell moved to survey his handiwork.

The imperial battle mages lay back to back, their wrists bound together, unable to move their hands. Confusion and desperation twisted their features as they strained to escape the magical bonds.

“Flexibility,” Vaniell said wryly. “String will hold enchantment well enough so long as you allow your intentions to bend along with it. And speaking of flexibility, when you only know how to form your magic using your hands, sooner or later, someone will take advantage of it.”

He turned away, looking for Karreya, hoping to find that she was holding her own. And indeed, only a dozen paces away, she and Urquadi regarded each other with wary respect. Both were bleeding and breathing with difficulty. Both seemed uncertain of victory, but remained unwilling to yield.

He could not give in to his fear. Could not allow himself to dwell on thoughts of her defeat.

Lifting his gaze, Vaniell glanced to the east and noted the faint gray light of dawn on the horizon. To the west, the flames raged unabated, and the sounds from the city had faded. Had Hanselm's defenders already fallen? Or was there simply nothing left to destroy?

He turned back towards the duel that might yet decide their fate, but suddenly from the north he heard a rumbling, as if the wind mage had summoned another thunderstorm. But no—she still lay on the ground, her wrists bound, her magic beyond her reach.

Trepidation assailed him as he peered into the gloom, wondering what fresh horror awaited. What more were the imperial troops holding in reserve?

The smoke swirled gently, and the rumbling became hoofbeats. The snorting of nervous horses, the creak of harnesses, and the muffled clang of metal on metal...

A gentle morning breeze stirred the air, and the smoke parted to reveal a line of mounted cavalry. Swords in hand, horses anxious and sweating, their red uniforms awry with the haste of their arrival...

Red uniforms?

Vaniell rubbed his eyes—wondering if it was another illusion—but the line continued to advance, and he finally allowed himself to believe in the impossible.

Against all hope, against all expectations, the Garimoran cavalry had returned.

A wordless howl of victory ripped from his throat, echoing into the dawn sky like an arrow from a bow.

All was not lost. The people of Garimore still had a chance.

Breaking into a run down the low hill, he raced towards the leader and came to a stop just beyond the reach of the commander's saber-point.

"You're back," he gasped out, feeling a wild and triumphant grin pull at his lips. "You came back."

"P-p-prince Vaniell?" The commander appeared utterly horrified. "What has happened? Why is the city on fire? We saw the glow and the smoke and knew the city had been left undefended, so I... I made the decision to return. Should I have erred, it is my responsibility alone. But what..."

He gazed around in the pre-dawn gloom, his features pale and struck by dismay.

"Zulle actually *did* attack," Vaniell told him, trying not to wince as he realized that Modrevin's lies had proven more true than anyone could have anticipated. "With dragons, troops,

and mages. The streets are full of their infantry, so we've been sending refugees to the palace. But with your numbers, we can hopefully push them back and retake the city."

He eyed the man, searching his memory for a name, but failed. "And you are?"

"Commander Ibbley." The man saluted with a hand over his heart, almost as a reflex. But it was no more than a breath before he remembered himself enough to voice what was doubtless his most pressing concern. "King Melger—"

Vaniell cut him off without mercy or hesitation.

"Is dead." The commander blanched, but Vaniell would not give him the chance to regroup. "Like it or not, I am in command of the city's forces. Right now, the streets are being defended by a small group led by Lord Kellan, and if you join them, he can direct you to the areas most in need."

Ibbley gave him a puzzled look that finally melted into an odd expression of understanding and something like relief. "Understood, Your Highness. But what of..."

The sound of clashing weapons drew his gaze to the hill behind Vaniell's position, where Karreya and Urquadi clashed once more—her swift, slender shadow against his looming, armored bulk.

The general wielded his halberd alternately like a staff or an axe, moving from form to form with dizzying speed. With each swing, Karreya danced within a hairsbreadth of death, and yet she remained focused. Swift and tireless. In complete control. As Vaniell watched, fear and pride mingled until he was uncertain which emotion reigned foremost. Perhaps he had simply exceeded his capacity for such emotions. Or perhaps his trust in her was great enough that he believed in her assurances that she could win.

"That," Vaniell returned grimly, "is the general of the imperial forces. He has engaged in a ritual combat, with command of the imperial troops as the prize. Pray that he does not win this challenge, or our chances may yet be less certain than I would prefer."

Vaniell saw the cavalry commander's eyes widen as he watched the two combatants circle and clash, then separate only to circle again. How long could it go on? How soon would the larger man begin to tire?

And how angry would Karreya be if he intervened?

"There is no time to waste," he reminded Commander Ibbley. "We must focus our efforts on defending the city and putting out fires. But watch your backs, and keep an eye out for the dragons. We have allies who can aid us, so if you see the dragons engage one another, do whatever you can to seek shelter and wait."

"Understood."

The commander wheeled his horse and waved his men on, and Vaniell let himself take a deep breath as the columns of cavalry spilled into the city. Perhaps there was hope for Hanselm after all.

He turned back towards Karreya, hoping for an end to the battle, but instead, he found the two of them still locked in combat. A cry of panic ripped from his chest as Urquadi dropped his halberd, drew a sword, and attacked anew, his blade whistling through the air with impossible speed. Karreya bent herself backwards to avoid the blade's path, and without stopping to consider his actions, Vaniell began to run. Perhaps there was nothing he could do, but he was beyond thinking, beyond planning.

Because somewhere in the recesses of his mind, he'd heard the small, quiet sound of a voice not his own. One that whispered of victory at any cost. One that believed protecting those she loved was more important than her own life...

Without knowing how, without knowing why, he understood that it was Karreya, and that she was about to make an irreversible decision.

He might not be fast enough to stop her, yet he had no choice but to try.

CHAPTER 22



Sweat and smoke stung Karreya's eyes, rivulets of blood trickled down her arms and legs, and a cut along her ribs sent fire spreading across her side.

Urquadi, too, was breathing hard and bleeding from a dozen places, but his armor protected his vital organs and still he fought on, as if unaffected by his injuries. As if with every stroke, he sought not to injure but to kill. The challenge need not end in death—and indeed, Karreya had hoped her grandmother's orders would make him hesitate to take her life—but that was no longer a matter of certainty.

She had known there was more to being named Third General than experience, and Urquadi had proven his title was well-earned. He was swift, tireless, and canny, and thus far none of her tricks had made it past his defenses decisively enough to cause significant damage.

The injury she'd taken in the battle with Inci already slowed her down, and blood loss was beginning to take its toll. If she did not end the fight soon, Urquadi might well prove the victor.

But she could not bring herself to accept defeat. Could not allow her grandmother to triumph this time.

"Yield," Urquadi demanded, his voice harsh with command. "I will kill you if I must, before I allow you to interfere with the Empress's commands."

"I will never yield," Karreya replied, her teeth clenched against the pain. "This matters far more than my life. If you

must kill me in order to win, then so be it. But know likewise that I will do everything in my power to ensure that you never return to the Empire to report your victory.”

“You cannot win,” he growled.

“And I will not lose.”

“Then we will both water this ground with our blood!”

Urquadi suddenly dropped his halberd and drew a sword. Without a single twitch to telegraph his intentions, he swung in a blinding arc, the blade slicing towards her even as a dagger appeared in his off hand. He was no longer holding back, and his attack left no openings for Karreya to avoid the onslaught. So she did not try.

This was what it meant to know herself. To know not only what she was capable of, but what she was willing to do to ensure victory.

Survival was not essential. Winning was.

All thoughts beyond that moment ebbed away, leaving only the dance of life and death, the breath in her lungs, the blood in her veins, and the flow of her enemy’s blade. She embraced the future she had chosen, committed herself to this final attempt, and bent backwards, like a reed before the wind.

Urquadi’s sword passed within a hairsbreadth of her bodice, whistling through the air with the force of his swing. But avoiding its vicious arc meant placing herself in the path of his off hand dagger, and she did not flinch.

The shining steel blade bit deep through muscle and sinew, piercing her side with icy cold. Karreya heard a choked cry in the distance, but she did not falter on her chosen path. She spun away, building momentum as she turned, sliding off the blade and ending precisely where she’d planned.

Behind Urquadi’s guard.

And there, her left-hand dagger found its mark, sliding beneath the plate of his armor, between his ribs and up into his lung.

He took one gasping breath that ended in a wet cough.

Fell to his knees.

The ice in Karreya's side turned to fire. She could feel the wetness of blood soaking her dress, the dizziness that told her she could not maintain consciousness for long.

But it would be enough. The captured mages still lay nearby, watching helplessly as their fate was determined by others—vital witnesses to the outcome of this challenge.

She had to win. Had to stay on her feet until Urquadi fell.

“Karreya!” Niell's hoarse cry reached her ears, but it was strangely muffled, as if she were hearing him from underwater. She saw him racing towards her in slow motion, terror written on his features, and flung up her hand, nearly screaming with the pain that ripped through her side.

“Don't touch me!” she cried, her eyes on Urquadi. He was still on his knees, and she forced herself to move. Hobbled around until she was in front of him, she looked him in the eye until he was compelled to meet her relentless gaze.

“I still stand,” she said fiercely. “And you now kneel before me. By the terms of our challenge, I have won, and your command is forfeit.”

“My command,” Urquadi choked out, “is forfeit.” With a jerk of his arm, he flung his sword even as he fell forward onto his face, and Karreya caught it, biting back the pain of its weight on her injured arm.

The cost did not matter. Niell would be safe, just as she had sworn when she left him in the forest. His people would be safe, and Abreia would survive.

She had won.

“Karreya.” Niell's arm came around her shoulders, warm and strong, lowering her gently to the ground.

She could no longer feel her fingers. Or her feet. The sword fell from her hand, and her head fell backwards, allowing her to see that the sky was even now growing brighter. Morning approached, and with it the sun, but around the edges of her vision, shadows crept in.

“I have defeated him,” she whispered. “According to our customs, if you show the general’s sword to the troops, they will surrender.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Niell murmured, “after you are safe.”

Suddenly she was in his arms, being carried away from the field of battle, as effortlessly as he had once carried her away from that dock-front tavern all those weeks ago.

“No!” He needed to understand. “Take the sword. Please, Niell, you must take the sword.”

Cursing under his breath, he knelt, resting her on the ground long enough to pick up Urquadi’s blade and wrap her fingers around it. “Here,” he said roughly. “It is yours. But I’m getting you out of here.”

Karreya gripped the rough hilt and closed her eyes, leaning her face into Niell’s shoulder as he made his way over the uneven ground. Perhaps she should object to being carried, but it was difficult to care as she felt consciousness slipping away.

“Niell.” She fought to remain awake long enough to say one last thing. “Promise you will not let them have me when I am gone. I wish to be buried here. With you.”

“No one is burying you anywhere.” Niell’s voice was raw and savage with emotion, but she did not have the strength to comfort him. “Hold on and I will find someone who can help you. Please, Karreya.” His grip on her tightened. “Don’t make me do this without you.”

One way or another, he would do this without her, but she did not say it. Could not. It was dark and cold, and the only warmth was from Niell, where he held her against his body.

“I wanted to stay,” she murmured quietly. “I wanted to stay with you.”

“And you will!”

“Love... you...”

And then there was only darkness.

CHAPTER 23



“No!”

Vaniell clenched her harder, but Karreya’s body had gone limp. Blood from her wounds drenched his shirt, and there was nothing he could do but stumble to a stop. Lower her to the ground, rip off his coat, press it to her side, and plead with her not to leave him.

From somewhere overhead, a scream split the dawn sky. He looked up and saw only dragons. Three of them—red, gold and black—locked in a deadly aerial dance of wings and fangs and fire.

The golden dragon dove lower, only to barely avoid a burst of flame from the black. It was outnumbered, but still fighting. Outweighed, but unwilling to quit, just like Karreya. And like Karreya, it was bleeding from multiple wounds. One of its wings seemed to falter, and then it was struck from the side by the red dragon.

The golden let out a cry and began to fall, but from between its shoulders, a tiny figure made a daring leap through the air, landing on the red dragon’s back and engaging its rider in a furious battle for control.

Vaniell looked down at Karreya’s pale, still face, and begged for a miracle.

Even if they won, even if the imperial invaders were defeated, how could he face the aftermath without Karreya? Without her daggers and her glares and her blunt honesty?

Overhead, the golden dragon was out of the fight, and the red dragon's rider fell to earth without a sound. And then the red was circling, climbing, roaring in rage as it tangled with the larger black dragon, biting and clawing for supremacy.

The black dragon somehow twisted in midair, clamped its jaws around the neck of its adversary, and began to rip and tear at its scales. The red screamed and flailed, but it was caught and could not break free. Vaniell's heart ought to have sunk at the sight, but his heart was in his arms, bleeding from a dagger wound that he could not heal.

If the red dragon fell... It seemed to somehow carry all his hopes and fears on its wings. The weight of the entire battle for Garimore might yet rest on that single conflict, and as Vaniell watched, holding Karreya against him with silent tears streaming down his cheeks, he began to fear that it was lost.

Until a familiar scream sounded from far overhead—the harsh cry of a hunting wyvern—and the dark form of Kyrion arrowed out of the dawn sky to collide with the black dragon.

It screeched in annoyance—a sound that quickly turned to pain as the more agile wyvern attacked from above and below, with teeth and claws, and brief, white-hot bursts of flame.

The red dragon disentangled itself and then rejoined the fight, and within moments, the tide seemed to have turned. The black dragon faltered, its wings folded, and with a heart-stopping roar, it plummeted from the sky, landing somewhere out of sight.

And suddenly, it was over.

The imperial dragons had fallen, the Zulleri general was defeated, and Garimoran troops flooded the city. It began to seem possible they had won the day.

But at such a cost... The city was in ruins. Many had died, and who knew how many more had lost everything?

Vaniell knew he ought to feel the grim weight of those losses, alongside the exultation of their unlikely victory. That he ought to be driven to action by the urgency of his people's needs. But he could not seem to feel any of those things. He

could only kneel on the bloodstained ground, pressing his coat to Karreya's side in a desperate effort to bind her to life while wondering helplessly what greater price he might yet be asked to pay.

He almost didn't notice when the rays of a hopeful sun began to break through the clouds. And he barely even glanced up when riders on enormous wolves raced out of the misty dawn light and came to a stop before the shattered city gates.

"Niell?"

It was Karreya's name for him, but the voice was not hers. It was... an entirely unexpected arrival.

Danric strode towards him, wearing an expression of shock and concern as he dropped to one knee on the churned and bloody earth.

"Niell, what's happened here?"

He had no answer. It would take far more words than he possessed, and anyway, there was only one thing that mattered.

"Help her." The words were hoarse and his voice cracked, but Danric called back over his shoulder immediately.

"Lythienne! Come quickly!"

A tall, silver wolf loped into view, dissolving in an instant and reforming into the silver-haired regent of the night elves. She crouched in front of Vaniell and took in the situation with warm, compassionate eyes.

"I can help her," she said gently, "if you will trust me enough to allow it."

Trust? Again?

But Danric was nodding in reassurance, so with a choked cry, Vaniell let go, and watched as Karreya was lifted and taken away. Out of his sight. Perhaps forever.

And then he simply had no more to give.

A sob tore from his chest, and then another, and then in perhaps the strangest moment of his life, his brother's arms

came around his shoulders, comforting him, holding him together as he wept for the senseless death and destruction that surrounded him. He cried for the people who had died in the name of greed and conquest, for the innocent caught up in the violence of war, and for the enslaved mages and dragons who had never asked to be forced to kill.

And at last, he wept for himself. For the child who had only ever wanted his father's approval. For the boy who had sacrificed his own innocence to protect his mother. And for the man who had finally found his heart, only to have it ripped away again.

When the pain eventually eased and there were no more tears to cry, Danric helped him to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked softly. "Lythienne is an experienced healer, so if you have taken any injury, she may be able to help."

Vaniell shook his head. There was a pounding ache in his temples and his limbs seemed made of lead, but despite everything, he was unharmed. Everyone else had done the bleeding and the dying.

"The blood isn't mine," he said shortly, before the haze in his mind cleared enough to present a question. "Danric, how are you even here? I thought you would still be preparing the armies to defend Arandar. And how did you travel so far this quickly?"

Danric gestured over his shoulder at the small group of riders who had arrived with him, all mounted on the horse-sized dreadwolves favored by the elves of Sion Dairach

"One of Lythienne's people has flashes of seer magic. Pretty much the minute after you left, she told us we needed to go after you. That all would be decided soon and we should make haste. Lord Dechlan's dreadwolves travel faster than horses and see well in the dark, so a small group of us set out and rode into the night. Arrived just in time to see the dragons fighting it out."

The dragons...

“Danric, the dragons... what happened to them?”

“I don’t know yet,” his brother replied soberly. “But Kyrion and Leisa were there. I did not see them fall, so they should return soon with news.”

Vaniell turned his gaze in the other direction, toward the smoke rising from the city of Hanselm. There was less than he’d feared, and the sounds of battle had ceased. Perhaps it was time to see what was left of his city. Whether many of his people had survived, and how much would have to be rebuilt.

“Survivors are sheltering inside the palace,” he told Danric, “and I sent Commander Ibbley and the cavalry in to confront the imperial troops. There were not a large number, so I’m hopeful our defenders will at least be able to keep the invaders pinned down until we can surround them.”

He lurched into motion, headed towards the broken city gates. “Lord Kellan was leading the resistance in the streets, and before the dragons arrived, Leisa and Kyrion were dealing with the imperial battle mages. Whoever is left will...”

He stopped, turned back, and saw the ornate golden sword lying on the ground where it had fallen. He did not want to touch it—not when it was covered in Karreya’s blood—but she had insisted it was important. That it was proof of her victory, and the key to their enemies’ surrender.

So he retraced his steps, grasped the hilt, and held it out to his brother.

“Here,” he said woodenly. “This belonged to the imperial general, Urquadi. Karreya defeated him in single combat, and she told me that possession of this blade grants command of the imperial troops. I don’t know how, but it seems important, and you’re in charge of the army, so...”

Danric paused for a moment, his gaze compassionate, as if he understood what those few sentences cost. “It’s more rightfully yours,” he said quietly. “If you want it.”

“I don’t,” Vaniell said flatly. “I don’t even want to touch it. My city is in ashes and I will do whatever is necessary to help

my people rebuild, but this?” He shook his head. “I want nothing to do with it, brother.”

With a single nod, Danric accepted the sword, carrying it effortlessly at his side as they returned to the city.

They were followed by Danric’s companions, who included Princess Caro of Eddris, two night elves, and the enigmatic Lord Dechlan of Sion Dairach, along with his human wife, Kasia. Lythienne had disappeared with Karreya, and Vaniell tried not to think about it. Tried to reassure himself that he could do nothing for her at the moment. He had to trust Lythienne’s healing abilities, Karreya’s stubbornness, and her unyielding will to live. And in the meantime, it was Vaniell’s task to ensure that her sacrifice would not be in vain. That the blood on his hands would serve some purpose beyond senseless violence in the name of conquest.

He was already stumbling with weariness as they climbed the rubble at the entrance, and once within the walls, his exhaustion only grew deeper and more profound. It was not difficult to follow the path of destruction, and Vaniell quailed as he considered the task of rebuilding. So much of what had once been a beautiful and prosperous city now lay in ruins—shops destroyed, goods piled in the street and set ablaze, and every ornamental tree and fountain smashed to bits.

They encountered numerous injured Garimoran soldiers, loose horses, and the bodies of those who had tried to run and failed. Vaniell could only pray that the gates of the palace held firm. That those who’d sought refuge within its walls remained safe. And that somewhere within this labyrinth of rubble and smoke, he would find reason to hope.

On occasion, their path was impeded by a makeshift barricade. Some had been torn apart, but several were yet intact, forcing them to retrace their steps.

He was near to cursing with the hopelessness of their search when the sound of wings overhead drew his attention.

It was Kyrion and Leisa, and she was pointing to the north. “This way,” she called down. “There is still fighting in the

streets, but most of the imperials are cornered in the square near the stockyards.”

Vaniell broke into a jog and Danric followed, holding the sword in a white-knuckled grip as they began to hear shouts and the sounds of clashing weapons.

They rounded a corner suddenly and slid to a halt, faced with a vicious clash between a motley array of Lord Kellan’s rebels, Commander Ibbley’s troops, and the remains of the imperial battalion, fighting back to back now, but showing no signs of surrender.

Two robed mages huddled behind their number, but they seemed spent, their magic exhausted.

And suddenly, it was as if Vaniell’s fear and anguish and exhaustion were choked off by a surge of rage. This had gone on long enough. Too many lives lost. Too much blood painted the streets of his city.

He did not wait for his companions, or even stop to determine whether it would be safe. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out one of the last of his steel marbles and set it to his lips. Closing his eyes, he focused every bit of his rage, his will and his intent to end this war once and for all. And then he hurled it forward, between the lines of battle, where it hit the stones of the street and exploded with a thunderous roar.

Between the imperial troops and the Garimorans, a trench opened in the ground, wide and deep enough to swallow a horse. The enchantment continued on its way, carving a yawning gap across the entire square until it reached the blacksmith shop on the far side. And stopped.

And then there was nothing left but silence.

The two armies regarded one another across the gap, and the few who had been caught by the enchantment stood in the bottom of the trench, looking up in confusion, as if uncertain how to proceed.

And in that moment of uncertainty, Vaniell stepped back, looked to Danric, and nodded.

And after only a moment's pause, Danric moved forward, striding resolutely to the edge of the trench before addressing the imperial troops. His face was set, his shoulders square, and his tone rang with implacable resolve.

"I am Danric, former Prince of Garimore, now King of Farhall and duly appointed representative of the Five Thrones of Abreia. You have invaded our lands, destroyed homes, crops, and lives, and threatened the peace of our continent without provocation. But whatever your aims, you have failed. Your dragons have fallen, and your leader has been defeated." He lifted the sword in his hand and Vaniell watched as recognition dawned on the enemies' faces. "Your General Urquadi was honorably vanquished in single combat and this blade is now mine, along with the leadership of the troops under his command. Surrender, and we will return you to your home as a show of mercy."

Vaniell expected them to either drop their weapons or defy Danric's order, but every remaining imperial soldier dropped to one knee, bowed their heads, and raised their weapons in salute.

Only one remained standing, and he walked to the edge of the trench opposite Danric before following suit, his clenched fist tapping his chest as he took a knee. "By right of honorable victory, we are indeed yours to command, Your Majesty. But we beg you to show mercy and allow us to fall on our swords rather than return in disgrace."

Shock and revulsion shook Vaniell to his core, but he was ruler of himself once more and no hint of that unease showed on his face as Danric answered.

"You will live," he said grimly. "My first decree is that every one of you will live. Whether it is here or there, I will not presume to choose, but for as long as I have the power to decide, no one else will die for the sake of this senseless war."

Vaniell turned away then, searching the crowd for familiar faces, and found them. Commander Ibbley, Lord Kellan, Jacek, and then the black wyvern, who touched down gracefully and transformed into the tall, white-haired form of

Kyrion. He was clearly weary, but as his gray eyes met Vaniell's, there was nothing to be seen but relief. Approval. And understanding.

A nod passed between them, and it felt oddly like more than friendship.

It felt like... brotherhood.

But Vaniell could not yet allow himself to feel the warmth of it, or the relief of knowing that the battle was over.

“Karreya,” he said. “I have to find her. I have to know...”

“Go,” Danric said, his eyes filled with compassion. “Find Lythienne. We will take care of everything.”

And so he went. Kyrion walked beside him, too weary to transform again, but catching him every time he stumbled. Leisa walked on his other side, her expression fierce, her eyes still as bright as the silver markings on her skin that had yet to fade.

“My mother is a healer without peer,” Kyrion said firmly. “If anyone can save Karreya, she can.”

But Vaniell had seen the blade that pierced her. Had felt her blood pouring out onto the ground and seen her eyes close. Held her as her body went limp. It was difficult to imagine that even night elf magic would be enough. Not when he'd looked inside himself, and found that the bright warmth of the beacon was gone. He could no longer feel which direction to go, and the loss terrified him.

They found Lythienne beyond the walls, on the last bit of unstained grass beneath an oak tree that had somehow survived destruction. The sun seemed ignorant of the ugliness it had witnessed, and now shone down brightly from a sky marred only by the last rising plumes of smoke.

In a patch of shade beneath the tree, Vaniell dropped to his knees beside Karreya where she lay on the grass, a bandage wrapped around her torso. Her limbs were still, her clothing was torn and stained with blood, and those bright golden eyes were closed in her deathly pale face.

“Is she...” He took her hand in trembling fingers and choked on everything he’d never said to her, everything he wished he’d done to protect her, every feeling of unworthiness that wondered why, out of everyone in this world, she’d chosen him. That choice had cost her, just as it had cost everyone who’d ever loved him.

“I don’t know what you are imagining,” Lythienne said tartly from above him, “but I am not one of your incompetent human healers.”

Vaniell blinked up at her in confusion.

“Her wounds were deep and messy, but nothing beyond my skill,” the night elf said, her tone gentling with compassion. “She will sleep for some time, but she will recover.”

She would recover.

Karreya would live. Hanselm was safe. Modrevin was dead, and the Empress had *lost*.

It was more than he could take in. More than his heart could safely contain. Vaniell allowed himself to fall back and sit on the grass, turning his face up to the sky and watching as the smoke gradually cleared and the world grew brighter, one moment at a time.

The world would continue to grow brighter.

There was so much left to do, and the days to come would hold little time to rest or reflect on how the devil he’d gotten to this moment, where he was surrounded by such an unforeseen group of friends and allies. Where Danric embraced him as a friend, and he counted a night elf as his brother. Where he’d defeated a pair of imperial battle mages and laid claim to the Throne of Garimore. And most important of all, where he held the hand of a beautiful assassin and waited for the moment she would wake up so he could tell her how much he loved her.

A strange warmth and lightness spread from his chest to his limbs and he closed his eyes, trying to identify it. It was strangely unfamiliar, and yet...

Oh yes.

Hope.

There were still refugees to house, a city to rebuild, politics to be wrangled, and prisoners to be dealt with. So many burdens he'd never thought would be his. But even as he contemplated the uncertainty of the future, that same fiery warmth settled in his heart and refused to die.

Whatever came in the days ahead, he would not face it alone, and that hope changed everything.

"I think," he said, laying back on the grass with closed eyes and a crooked smile on his lips, "that a nap is in order. Someone wake me when all of the unpleasantness is over, would you?"

"You think that just because Karreya is unconscious that no one else will threaten to stab you?" Kyrion rumbled, jabbing the toe of his boot into Vaniell's ribs. "Get up, Your Highness, or I will leave you to my mother's tender mercies."

Vaniell sighed, opened his eyes, and rose reluctantly to his feet. "Soon," he said, with a theatrical sigh. "Soon, I will be king, and then maybe you will show more respect for my wishes."

"I very much doubt it," Leisa chimed in, "but then, it would not be the strangest thing to have happened in these past few months."

Indeed, it would not.

And as the three of them made their way back into the city, towards all the changes that awaited them, Vaniell gave silent thanks for the strangeness that had led them all here, to the end of a road he'd embarked on so many years ago.

There was finally hope, not just for him, but for all of Abreia, and he could ask for no better ending than that.

EPILOGUE



Vaniell tugged at his collar and told himself sternly that he was not nervous. Prince Vaniell of Garimore did not *get* nervous.

Except he wasn't actually Prince Vaniell any longer. The Garimoran nobles had unanimously accepted his claim to the crown weeks ago, so today was just a formality. He would be making his first appearance as king, before informing his people of a few key changes he intended to make, along with a handful of decisions that had, indeed, already been made.

None of which were up for debate.

He knew of at least one person who was likely to argue with him, and it was the thought of that argument that was responsible for his nerves. But the matter was too important, and he did not intend to lose. Not this time.

The knock finally came, and he answered it after a long, deep sigh.

"Enter."

The man who had come to fetch him was not immediately familiar, but once he took in the uniform of Farhall and adjusted his expectations...

"Zander, is it?"

"Indeed." The man was perhaps in his forties, with brown skin and curling dark hair liberally laced with gray. His countenance was stern and his back remained perfectly

straight as he bowed ever so slightly. “I was sent to escort you to the ceremony, Your Majesty.”

“Pah,” Vaniell scoffed. “I much preferred what you called me on the occasion of our last meeting. ‘You!’ wasn’t it?”

“And possibly worse,” the man admitted. “But I have hoped for some time that we would meet again so that I could tell you... You were right.”

Vaniell’s brows shot up. “A perilous admission, considering our relationship at the time. What exactly was I right about?”

“Your brother is indeed a good man,” Zander said quietly. “And I am grateful for both my own sake and that of my queen that you took it upon yourself to convince us of that fact.”

Vaniell looked down with a rush of embarrassment. He hadn’t done it for gratitude.

“But you were also wrong,” Zander continued.

“Ah, now there are words I am far more familiar with.” Vaniell offered the older man a quirky grin and a wink. “Of what do I stand accused?”

“You told me that if we ever met again, that you would have failed, and Abreia would be no more.”

Oh. He had said that, hadn’t he? Vaniell laughed softly as he remembered the lonely, desperate prince who had run from his engagement while carrying the weight of Abreia’s survival on his shoulders.

“I have never been more glad to be wrong,” he said soberly. “And I am happy to know that you found your way home.”

The former bodyguard to Queen Evaraine of Farhall bowed once more, this time deeply, and with unmistakable respect.

“If you would follow me, Your Majesty, the court awaits you.”

Vaniell sighed and nodded. “Of course. After you.”

The palace had never felt small before, but the walk from his royal apartments to the audience chamber seemed to be over in the mere blink of an eye. And yet, he had to face this moment eventually. Had to make his case and learn his fate, so he entered the chamber on Zander's heels, doing his best to look like a man who knew what he was doing.

He bluffed his way through the simple coronation, felt the weight of the crown settle on his head, and seated himself in the ridiculous golden chair, trying not to look at the floor for any remaining evidence of what had happened here only a few weeks ago. After today, he planned never to use this room again, so it hardly mattered.

And then he looked out over the assembled crowd and wondered what the devil he was supposed to say next.

The most important of Garimore's nobility had gathered—perhaps more out of curiosity than deference—alongside his most trusted friends and valued allies. Lord Kellan and his father, the Duke of Pergisham, were both present, as were the Earl of Basingreen and Viscount Wynthrop.

An ambassador from Katal had already been en route to meet with Melger when Hanselm was attacked, and he had agreed to remain long enough to witness the coronation. The stern, bearded representative of the desert kingdom had been cool at first, but his suspicions had soon been allayed. He now stood with Princess Caro of Eddris, First Councilor Faraden of Iria, and Queen Evaraine of Farhall, who had all chosen to lend their unflinching support to the legitimacy of Vaniell's reign.

Just behind Queen Evaraine, Vaniell spotted Aunt Pip standing next to Zander—a pairing that had both surprised and delighted him. As much as he wished his aunt could have returned to Garimore, both she and Zander richly deserved the happiness that they had clearly found with one another.

Across the room were Kyrion, Wyvern King of Dunmaren, and Lord Dechlan, standing beside the tall, elegant figure of none other than King Miach of Sion Dairach. It had been a bit of a shock to receive a visit from the king of the elves, but

thankfully, he seemed genuinely interested in peace and cooperation.

At least, he seemed willing to cooperate with everyone but Kyrion. Those two had been glaring at each other for days now, a situation that was a profound mystery to every human present.

But it was the four women in the center of the room, not far from the foot of the dais, who drew Vaniell's gaze like a magnet—Leisa, Senaya, Yvane, and Karreya.

Karreya's golden eyes rested on his face unflinchingly, and the sight of her forced Vaniell to hold himself back with the iron will he'd forged as a self-taught enchanter. He wanted nothing more than to run into the crowd, wrap his arms around her, and beg her to stay, but it had to be her choice.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said, letting a small smile play along his lips as he held Karreya's gaze. “I would like to start by acknowledging that this is a day many of us never thought would come, myself most of all.”

A slightly nervous laugh rippled through the crowd.

“But today ought not be about me, or this crown, or even solely about Garimore. Today is about the fact that this room holds the beginnings of unprecedented friendship—one that I hope all of us will learn to value deeply in the months and years to come.”

There were some nods, and a few shrugs, but Vaniell did not heed them. If it took his entire life to do so, he would ensure that the alliances being built would continue to grow until they could not be torn apart.

“Today is also about setting a foundation for the future, and assuring everyone that the Garimore we now rebuild will be very different from the Garimore of the past.”

It was silent now, as every ear awaited his words.

“First and most importantly, there will be no mercy or leniency for those who demonstrate violence or intolerance towards mages during my reign.” He looked around the room,

holding the gaze of each of his nobles in turn. “Garimore will be a place where all people are free to live in peace.

“We will also remain committed to upholding the alliance between Garimore and the other four Thrones. The truth I believe we have all learned is that we stand together or we fall together, and our future may depend on our willingness to see past our differences and strive for peace.”

His gaze then fell on the center of the room. “This alliance between us is now perhaps more important than ever, due to the threat from across the sea. Where Zulle has attempted to conquer, it will not accept defeat, and I believe we would be fooling ourselves if we ignored the danger that the Empire poses. To that end...”

Karreya stepped away from her cousin and her aunt, approached the dais, and addressed him with stiff formality.

“Your Majesty, the Empire is indeed a threat, but you need not concern yourself or your allies with confronting it.”

The sick certainty of what she was about to say brought Vaniell out of his seat with indecorous haste. He bolted down the stairs to grasp her hands and hold them together tightly between his own, ignoring the eyes and the judgment of the crowd.

Their opinions no longer mattered. No one’s did, except for hers.

“Karreya, no. Don’t do this. Don’t say you’re going to leave.”

She looked up at him—compassion softening her expression—but she did not relent.

“I must,” she said. “I decided this before my battle with Urquadi. We once spoke of sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, and I have realized that this path before me is the right one. I have the chance to save many lives, so how can I not be willing to make the attempt?”

She was utterly committed to her choice, and even as Vaniell felt his heart shatter, he knew he had no right to try to

convince her otherwise. But he would do it anyway, because she deserved to know the truth.

“I persuaded myself that we could make it work,” he said softly. “I planned to come here today and tell you that I love you. That I want nothing more in this world than to marry you. That my people will eventually accept you as the one who single-handedly defeated the enemy general and saved them from the imperial invaders. And that our marriage would serve as an alliance, binding our people together in hope of someday achieving peace. And after I said that, you were going to say that you love me too, and that of course you would marry me and spend the rest of our lives threatening to stab me whenever I annoy you.”

He tried to smile, but it was a crooked, broken thing, and Karreya’s hand rose in answer to cup his face.

“I do love you, Abreian,” she said gently. “And I am honored by your proposal. But because I love you, I know that this is what I must do. My life will be dedicated to preventing the Empire from destroying anything or anyone else. I will fight my grandmother for control, and thereby ensure that Abreia—and you—are safe, for so long as I draw breath.”

Vaniell could hear shocked gasps from the crowd, but paid them no heed. All of them lived because of Karreya’s skill and courage, so it did not matter what they thought of her true identity.

“I understand,” he choked out, holding back the tears that tried to fall. “Before you go...”

“She is not going anywhere.”

Vaniell looked up to see who had spoken, and found Senaya standing only a few paces away, regarding them with a strangely soft gaze.

“What do you mean?” Karreya turned to confront her aunt, lifting her chin in defiance. “I have chosen to go, and there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Nothing except tell you that I have decided to go in your place,” Senaya said coolly.

The two women stared at one another—Karreya with shock and dismay—until Senaya continued.

“Inci was right. I *can* save the Empire from what my mother has made of it. And Yvane was right as well. You deserve to live in peace, and to know what it is to love and be loved. Your mother sacrificed herself to that end, and I choose to honor that sacrifice.”

“But...” Karreya seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

It was Leisa who stepped up beside her, eyes wide with anguish, to ask what Karreya could not.

“Mother, if you go, when will we see you again?”

“I do not know,” Senaya said, and no one could fail to hear how greatly that truth pained her. “But I hope you can believe that I do this out of love. That no force in existence could prevent me from protecting you with every breath in my body. That wherever I am, you are never far from my thoughts or my heart, and that if it is in my power, I will see you again once peace has been won.”

Tears streaming down her face, Leisa embraced her mother, heedless of the eyes locked on their exchange. “I am sorry where I misunderstood. Sorry where I was cruel and unfeeling. I hope you know that I love you too, and will look forward to the day we are able to meet again.”

They broke apart and turned back to Vaniell.

“If it suits Your Majesty,” Senaya announced, “I will assume command of the imperial prisoners and take them as my escort back to Zulle.”

Vaniell could only blink and try to keep up with how quickly the future had changed. “Er, of course,” he said, then glanced at Yvane. “And what of the dragon?”

Only the red dragon had survived the battle, and though she was badly injured, Yvane had been caring for her and felt that she would eventually recover.

“When she can fly, I will return north with her, and encourage her to join the wild dragons in the mountains,”

Yvane said with a slight nod. “But it is her choice, just as it was her sister’s choice to join the fight against the Empire. She will never again be under anyone’s control, or forced to kill at another’s command.”

Vaniell nodded his agreement. “Then we are in accord,” he said. “That is, most of us...”

He looked at Karreya, trying to contain the sudden surge of hope that filled his chest and made his heart pound so loudly he was sure everyone could hear. “I don’t suppose there is any possibility your answer has changed?”

She glared at him, her eyes shimmering brightly, as if filled with unshed tears.

“What question have I been asked, Abreian?”

He reached out to cup her face in his palms, almost laughing, almost crying, almost unable to form words. “Marry me?” he said. “Be my queen? Keep surprising me and threatening to stab me every day for the rest of my life?”

A smile spread swiftly across her face, unfettered and brilliant with joy. “Yes, Niell. I will do all of those things.”

And Vaniell forgot that he was king, that he was surrounded by important people, or that there was any need for dignity. He took Karreya in his arms and kissed her, as all the broken pieces of his heart came together and finally made him whole.

Shocked murmurs rose around them once more, but Vaniell decided he could not possibly care less. He’d already warned that he would not be the king anyone expected. He would not sit back meekly and do as he was told. He was going to take risks. He was probably going to infuriate his nobles on a regular basis. He might even make them wonder whether they had made a mistake handing him the crown.

Starting right now.

He took Karreya’s hand and grinned down at her. “How about today?” he asked. “Fancy being queen before midnight?”

“If you are trying to frighten me, it will not work,” she informed him.

“Good. Because I’m never letting you leave me again.”

“Is that a threat?” Her brows arched at him, and her lips twitched as if she were trying to hide a smile.

“It’s a promise,” he whispered, and bent his head to kiss her once again.



THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading *The Sundered Blade*. I hope you've enjoyed this unfolding journey through the world of Abreia!

If you're not ready to leave Abreia just yet, *Night Elves of Abreia* is a series of standalone stories set in the same world.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I seem to be all out of words, so... thank you.

Thank you to my family, my team, and my amazing readers.

I'm so grateful to all of you who have followed this story to its end.

My hope, as always, is that your heart is full and that your world is a little bit brighter.

SDG

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenley Davidson is a fantasy and science fiction author who loves to write clean romance, complex characters, and surprising plot twists. Her worlds (both real and imagined) are largely fueled by coffee, more coffee, and books (plus the occasional cup of tea). She currently resides in Oklahoma with her husband, two kids, and two dogs, and believes everything is better with dragons.

Kenley is the author of *Legends of Abreia* and *Night Elves of Abreia* (fantasy romance), *The Andari Chronicles* (fairy tale retellings), and *Conclave Worlds* (clean sci-fi romance).

kenleydavidson.com

kenley@kenleydavidson.com

