

KINGS AND KINGDOMS

VICTORS
AND
VANQUISHED



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MERRY FARMER

VICTORS AND
VANQUISHED

KINGS AND KINGDOMS

BOOK FOUR

MERRY FARMER

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

CHAPTER

ONE

I despise making mistakes. Most likely because I have made so very many of them in my long and storied life. It was a mistake to go to Cremona to pursue some silly notion that I could best Rufus, if only I were to learn the man's intricacies inside and out. I was blind to the fact that Rufus was attempting the exact same thing with me, and that I'd invited him right into the heart of my home to do it.

It was a mistake to impulsively give up my crown to Ludvig when and how I did. I'd been giddy with all the new emotions of fatherhood from the moment I'd held Ziggy and Ella in my arms. I'd intended to give up the throne when the babies were born, but I should have thought about the delicate situation the entire frontier was in before taking action.

Then again, it could be argued that it was a mistake for me to agree to be king in the first place, seeing as I never wanted the position.

It was a mistake to tutor Sai in the ways of leadership when I knew full well that he would never make a good king. A good general, yes, but in encouraging him to fill a pair of shoes two sizes too big for him, I feared I had exacerbated the unrest in Kostya at a time when it should have been quelled.

The list of my shortcomings went on and on.

So many mistakes, and I would have to live with them all.

I rose from the bed I shared with my two beloveds, the two halves of my beating heart, in our home in the city I'd named after the other love of my life, and donned a thick, warm robe

that had been draped over the foot of the bed. We'd returned home from Tesladom late the evening before, all three of us out of our minds with exhaustion, particularly knowing that we would set out again for Novoberg, of all places, within a day. We'd kissed and snuggled with the babies, issued a short and inadequate explanation of events to Nadia, Annika, Vera, and the others, and been given the briefest of updates about the mission to rescue the pups, then we'd gone to bed.

None of us had been clever enough to close the curtains, so there was just enough light from the beginning glimmers of dawn as I crossed the bedroom for me to see the face of my other love in the portrait propped against the wall. We'd been too exhausted to close the curtains, but not to remove Rurik's haunting visage from the box he'd been stored in for travel.

Rurik. My first love.

I'd been told before by healers and anatomists that the human heart contained four chambers. As I sidestepped to the portrait to rest my fingertips carefully on Rurik's lips, then glanced back to the two forms huddled under the covers of our bed, I felt as though all of the parts of my heart, of our heart, were, at last, together.

As much as we could be in this lifetime, at least.

"We shall, all four of us, be as one someday, in the life after this one, my love," I whispered to Rurik, then lifted to my toes to kiss his painted mouth.

I closed my eyes, remembering the warmth and taste of him, remembering how his tongue tangled with mine, how his hands felt on my skin. I could feel the fullness of his strong body and the hard heat of his cock against my own as though I'd held him in my arms yesterday instead of more than ten years ago.

It was a mistake to take Rurik to a gathering of wolves farther up the Wolf River before all the snows had melted when he had a cough. Even though he had insisted the cough was nothing, and later, the healers had informed me the illness that took him was a cancer that already had a hold in his body before that trip. I was convinced that his decline and demise

was due to my selfish desire to attend a revel with him so that the two of us could fuck with our friends like mad things.

My penance for the libidinous behavior that had ultimately taken my heart away from me was to deny myself any pleasures of the flesh from the moment of Rurik's death—in my arms, in the middle of a cold night, as I wailed, out of my mind with guilt and grief—for what was supposed to be the rest of my life.

I'd failed in that vow of celibacy, of course, but only a handful of times before my Neil and my Peter came along. If Neil and Peter only knew how few times I'd taken anyone to bed in the dark time between Rurik and them, they would be shocked. I'd told them my abstinence was because my body was no longer hungry for pleasure, but that was, in part a lie. I hadn't thought they would understand the depths of my grief and guilt all those years ago, or if they did, it would make them feel as though I loved them less.

I most certainly did not love them less...just differently.

My vow to Rurik had almost prevented me from purchasing Neil from Karpov the slaver when Peter bade me to, but something about Peter, something about Neil himself, once I laid eyes on him, screamed to me of Rurik. It had been as if the ineffable hand of my beloved had reached down and touched my shoulder, and Rurik had whispered in my ear, saying, "Here they are. They are yours."

I still cherished the memory of the day I met both of my darlings.

It was a mistake to let Sascha Kerensky walk off with Peter that day in Berlova without making more of an effort to claim him. But somehow, I'd known that Peter would find his way back to me, and he had.

I touched Rurik's painted face one last time, scolding myself that I would rub away the paint if I continued with such sentimental gestures, and moved silently to the door that led to the small balcony off our bedroom that overlooked our back garden, Rurik's grave, and the river beyond. The sun was just

barely filling the misty air with light, but it was enough to see a bit of the city Rurik and I had founded.

Rurik would be astounded if he could see everything our haven from the machinations of my uncle's court had become. The frontier I had spent so many years striving for had been his idea and his sincerest wish. I had promised him as he lay dying in my arms that I would not stop until our dreams for the frontier had been achieved. He would be in awe of the kingdom I had created, and the kingdoms of our friends. He would have laughed and pulled me close, kissing and petting me, and telling me that I'd made diamonds out of the base coal the two of us had had shoveled at us since we were mere boys.

He would have understood, though. He would have gotten the joke, seen the higher purpose, and guessed at the story. The *entire* story. Because I'd never held anything back from Rurik. I'd told him everything. I'd told Peter and Neil as well, but they'd assumed I was fabricating things at the time, and then they'd been so horrified by the truth that they'd failed to dig deeper, to ask more questions, and I hadn't wanted to damage the innocence that, despite everything and their belief to the contrary, they still had.

In failing to ask those questions when they'd had a chance, they'd overlooked the entire purpose of everything I'd done in the last thirty-some-odd years. They'd never connected the dots and asked why.

Why? Why abandon an entire kingdom? Why risk my life and the life of the man I loved to flee over the mountains into a wild and untamed frontier? Why wander in the uncharted forest instead of quietly settling in an established city? Why found a whole new settlement instead of blending in with ones that already existed? Why continue after my beloved had died to bring our dream to life?

The answer to that and so much more lay in the first and most life-changing mistake I'd ever made.

It was a mistake to kneel in front of Senator Vitrius when I was but twelve years old, and to offer him a tray of sweets while staring curiously at his half-erect cock at my uncle's

sordid party. But it was an even bigger mistake to glance up into his eyes and to smile with admiration at the handsome, august man when he rested his hand on my downy head.

“See something you like, boy?” Vitrius had asked, a leer turning the drunken shine in his eyes to flame.

I’d gulped and peeked at his cock again. “Why does it do that?” I asked in a small, hushed voice. I wasn’t supposed to speak to any of the noble guests, just serve them. I knew my uncle, the king, was nearby, probably watching me. But curiosity got the better of me, like it always did.

Vitrius knew what I was asking. “Because it likes you,” he said, his voice low and wolfish.

I frowned and looked from his hardening prick to his eyes, then down at my slender body in its diaphanous robe. I’d only just begun to feel the first stirrings of what my body could do, what it could want. My Neil had been right, when I’d related this story to him and Peter, to say that I was just a child.

I was a child, but I wouldn’t be for much longer.

“My cock doesn’t do that,” I’d told Vitrius, looking up at him.

“Show me,” the wily old lecher had said.

I didn’t know it was wrong. It was my uncle’s court, a hedonistic mess. I’d never been shielded from nudity or taught to fear and hide my own body. So I stood, set the tray of sweets aside, and let Vitrius untie my robe to get a look at me.

He inspected my body with his eyes and his hands. He touched where he shouldn’t have, and I shivered.

My uncle, the king, noticed.

“He’s my sister’s child, of course,” he’d said.

“Is that so?” Vitrius asked, his mouth quirked into a lazy grin.

My uncle and Vitrius seemed to share some sort of understanding that was miles beyond me. “For your vote on the matter of the war, I’ll let you have him for a night,” my

uncle went on. “For your sworn loyalty to me and the promise of your vote on every matter I choose, I’ll give him to you for good.”

“What an intriguing concept,” Vitrius said.

It was a mistake for me to gasp when the clever man cupped my balls, and to quicken my breath when he pushed my robe from my shoulders. It was a mistake to sit quietly on his lap for the rest of the afternoon’s entertainments, and to take his hand and willingly leave the room with him just as supper was served.

Later, well after dark, when my throat was sore, my lips chapped, and my hole throbbing, after I’d spent my essence for the first time, and the second, as I lay shivering with conflicted emotion in Virtius’s heavy embrace, the two of us lying in his bed, Vitrius whispered the words into my ear that would define my life.

“There are only two sorts of men in this world, Magnus, my child—victors and vanquished. The former choose their own destiny and answer to no one but themselves. The latter will forever follow behind, dead leaves in the wind of a stronger man’s ambition.

“But it is a mistake to think that the victor is always the one carrying the sword or leading the army. The man who sets out to conquer with violence will always be vanquished with the same weapon he uses to fight. Just you watch. Your uncle will be dead before you know it, his heart pierced by the blade of someone he trusts, someone who wishes to steal what he stole to begin with.”

I twisted to face Vitrius, thinking he knew of some plot to end my uncle’s life.

Vitrius must have seen the alarm in my eyes. “If you want to avoid having your heart pierced by steel, you must shield it with love instead. For love is far and away the most powerful force on this earth. It will save you every time.”

Those words rang loudly in my head, nearly thirty years later, when Edik’s blade was deflected away from my heart by

a simple, embroidered heart that carried my, Peter's, and Neil's initials on a thick piece of cloth sewn into a regal jacket. Who would have guessed that Vitrius's words would have proven literally true?

"Nobody loves me," I whispered to Vitrius, lowering my eyes to the salt and pepper hair on his surprisingly muscular chest. "Not even my mother. They all think I'm soft and queer."

Vitrius slipped his fingers under my chin and lifted it so I looked at him. "What did I just tell you, boy?" he asked, more like a schoolmaster than a senator...or a lover.

I swallowed, tasting the remnants of him on my lips. "That people are victors or vanquished, and just because you're a warrior, that doesn't mean you're a victor," I said.

"Yes, my boy." He kissed my forehead...which was a startlingly tender gesture, considering all the ways he'd just violated me. "Would you rather live in a world of war or a world of love?"

"A world of love, sir," I answered immediately.

"Of course you would. Because love is the only thing worth living or dying for."

I drank that in like sweet nectar. "Do you love anyone, sir?" I asked him. "Do you love me?" I was still young and naïve enough to think that anyone who touched another the way the old man had touched me must have done so out of love.

Vitrius laughed. "I have loved, yes," he said. He smiled curiously at me, stroking the side of my head, and said, "Perhaps if I'd been born decades later or you decades sooner, I might have loved you, too. But I'm old and wicked now, and my heart lies under a slab of marble, taking my ability to love with him."

In fact, Vitrius was no older than I'd been when Peter and Neil came into my life. But like me, the man he'd adored above all else had died before I'd been born, and he'd been forced to carry on alone.

Only when I lost Rurik did I understand that encounter from Vitrius's side. The two of us were very much alike, though when I'd chosen to bed a younger lover, I'd chosen one, or rather two, who were not children and who had the ability to consent to what we did, and I'd grasped onto them with the intention to never let go.

"I don't want to be vanquished," I said, pulling Vitrius out of the gloomy stupor he'd fallen into. "My uncle wants to vanquish me, I think. He doesn't like me. He's mean."

"Because he sees the power in you, boy," Vitrius said. "He sees all that you could be someday."

"I don't think I could be anyone," I said, lowering my head to watch as my fingers played with one of Vitrius's nipples. "I'm small and I'm not strong. I prefer books to wrestling. I like looking at boys instead of girls."

"You're clever," Vitrius said. "Stupid men who have nothing to recommend them but brute force will always fear a clever man."

I glanced doubtfully up at him.

"Clever men can think their way out of any situation they find themselves in," he went on. "The mind is more powerful than the sword, than an entire army."

"I don't know about that," I said.

"It's true," Vitrius nodded, brushing his fingers over my cheek. "Clever men are much more likely to avoid trouble, to avoid the fight."

"But fighting is how people get things they want, isn't it?" I asked. "That's why my uncle wants to go to war with the islanders."

"And what do you suppose will happen once this war begins?" Vitrius asked.

I frowned in thought. "People will go away to fight, whether they want to or not," I said.

Vitrius made a sound of approval, so I went on.

“Money will be spent to make swords and armor instead of plows and scythes. Food will be sent to the soldiers instead of to the people. My uncle will raise taxes and impoverish people so his army can keep fighting.”

“You truly are wise, boy,” Vitrius said approvingly. “Is that any kind of world to live in?”

I shook my head. “If my uncle loses, he’ll be vanquished,” I said. “If he wins, his own people will be vanquished, because their sons will have been sacrificed as soldiers and their crops sent to feed people far away instead of their own families.”

“You are correct. Clever boy.”

The compliment went straight to my head. “Victors don’t win wars,” I said, putting the pieces of the puzzle Vitrius had presented me with together as only a lonely, intelligent, neglected boy could. “Victors win peace. They make everyone happy. They give everyone food and houses and sunshine.” I added that bit, because lying in the sun on a summer’s day with a book was my favorite activity at that time in my life. “They don’t take people away,” I went on, “they give people back. They make love.”

Vitrius laughed loudly. I didn’t understand why or how my words could be taken until I was much older. “They absolutely do, sweet boy,” he said, stroking a hand down my arm and over my round ass.

My ass was still sore, so I flinched a little, but not really out of fear. I knew that what Vitrius had done to me was wrong. It had hurt like nothing else had hurt, but I had no desire to move away from him or leave his bed either. No grown man had ever spoken to me with such frankness and insight as he had. No man had ever stroked my cock until it had erupted with pleasure either. Nobody had ever cared about me until him.

I decided then and there that I liked being liked and pleased immensely.

“Someday, I’m going to be the greatest victor that ever lived,” I said, full of youthful bravado. “Someday, I’m going

to make a kingdom where everyone loves everyone else and where everyone has food and houses and dancing and music and happiness and...and nice things.” I blushed as my attention spread into my body.

“That is the noblest goal anyone has ever shared with me,” Vitrius said. “And how are you going to be victorious, my boy?”

“By—” I stopped and blinked at a spot on the wall past Vitrius’s body. “I don’t know,” I said, looking at him again. “How do you get people to love each other?”

Again, Vitrius laughed. “How do you think, sweet one?”

I frowned hard, throwing all of my powers of thought into the question.

“I think you do it by talking to people and listening to them,” I said. I glanced up at Vitrius and said, “My father and mother never listen to me. No one ever listens to me. But you do.”

“Yes, but I am wicked and lascivious,” he said. “I defile young boys and poison their minds.”

My eyes went wide. “You didn’t poison my mind, you gave me a lot to think about,” I insisted. “You listened to me, and you made me feel important.”

“You are important,” Vitrius insisted. “You’re a victor who is going to teach the world to love, after all.”

I let out a breath of defeat, vanquished before I’d even started. “I don’t think my uncle wants people to love each other,” I said. “He wants wars and swords and harmful things.”

Vitrius shrugged one shoulder. “Then find a place where people want to love,” he said.

“I don’t think there’s any place like that,” I said, more forlorn still. “I’ve never heard of anywhere like it, at least. People always want to fight and hurt each other. They want to force other people to do things their way. No one ever wants to talk or work together or build nice things.”

“If there is no place in the world like that now, dear Magnus, then you must start over in a new place and build it yourself.”

“All by myself?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Vitrius answered with a nod. “Or with someone you love.”

I smiled. “I think it would be easier to build a place filled with love if I had someone I loved and who loved me, too.”

“It would be,” Vitrius nodded.

“Except I don’t have anyone like that.”

“Oh, you will, Magnus,” he said, stroking my body again and sending illicit shivers through me. “Someone like you will always find someone to love.” He paused and cocked his head to the side to think. “Someone special, I think. You might throw yourself around to please your body, but your heart is far ficker than that. I foresee that you will have one, perhaps two, great loves in your life.”

He was wrong, of course. I had three.

“When you find him, give everything you have to him,” he went on. “Risk everything, even your life for him. He will define your victories. He *is* your victory. A man who loves could be the lowest pauper, but he will still be victorious.”

“And a man without love could rule all the kingdoms of the earth and still be vanquished?” I asked, feeling at though I understood.

“Yes, my boy.” Vitrius kissed my sore mouth, then rolled me to my back. “Now,” he said, “put those beautiful hands of yours on my cock and I’ll show you the best way to bring a man to his knees.”

Vitrius was dead within a month. My mother discovered what my uncle had done with me, how Vitrius had defiled me, and even though she didn’t particularly care for me, her disgust was so great that she hired an assassin to slit his balls off and watch while he bled out.

I never forgot his words, though, and I never, not once, lost sight of the desire to be victorious, in the right way, that Vitrius instilled in me.

I drew in a breath and gazed out at the sunrise that bathed the kingdom I'd created in soft, late-autumn hues of gold and coral. Those first dawn rays danced off the ripples in the river and caught on the last remaining leaves that fluttered precariously from graceful tree limbs.

Was this beauty I and my friends had created the dawn that heralded a new day that was just beginning, or were we the brittle, spent leaves that could no longer hold onto the promise they'd been born to in spring?

In the midst of those thoughts, I heard a whisper of movement and the gentle rustle of fabric behind me just before Neil walked up behind me and slid his arms around my waist. He held me close, resting his chin against my shoulder and heaving a sigh as I tilted my head to rest against his and threaded my fingers with his over my stomach.

My Neil. My sweet, earnest, selfless love. He was the anchor who held Peter and I to earth and stopped our egos from getting the best of us. He was so much like Rurik in so many ways, so kind and pure of heart. I was in awe of him, more than he realized.

"You're pensive," he said in his deep, rich voice. His breath against my neck sent shivers of desire through me.

I might have been an old man, nearly forty-six, but my young husbands never failed to make me as randy as a green youth.

"I am thinking of everything that has been and everything that is to come," I told him, resting my weight against him, trusting he would always hold me up.

Neil laughed softly. "That's a lot to think about. No wonder you're so stiff and tense."

I chortled in return. "If I am tense, it is because I feel the weight of responsibility for everything my decisions have created," I said. I twisted so that I could bring Neil around to

my side and embrace him. “If I am stiff, that is a different thing entirely.”

I arched one eyebrow at him before slanting my mouth over his and stealing his breath with a kiss.

Neil laughed low in his throat as he kissed me in return. My darling had come such a long way from the frightened young man who had trembled in terror at the thought of me touching him all those years ago. He was as fiery as Peter and I now, sometimes even more so. His smolder was inextinguishable.

I licked my tongue against his as I pulled back from him and cradled the side of his stubbly face. “You are beautiful in the morning light, my love,” I purred at him.

Neil laughed softly and lowered his head. “I look like a confused squirrel who fell out of a tree and hit every branch on the way down,” he said. The way he peeked up at me through his long, dark lashes said otherwise. “I feel like I’ve barely slept, but I know we’re about to ride off again to put out yet another fire on the frontier.”

I hummed and stroked my thumb across his cheekbone. “We do so now so that we might live in a world where there are no fires, apart from those in our hearths and in our hearts.”

Neil grinned. “You have such a way with words, Magnus.”

His gaze dropped to my lips, as though he would kiss me again. But before he could, his smile melted into a worried frown, and he met my eyes once more.

“Do you think it’s possible?” he asked. “A world with only hearth fires? Where we can all live comfortably and in peace?”

His question echoed the one that had lived in my heart for so long that it felt as though my and his heartstrings vibrated in one, hopeful symphony for a moment.

“Yes,” I told him in a whisper, willing myself to believe it as well. “I do believe that we can create a kingdom of love and peace. I believe we must.”

Neil let out a breath, his shoulders sagging, as if my answer had put him at ease. “I love you, Magnus,” he said, stealing another, quick kiss. “If you say it is so, then I believe it.” Again, his smile faltered, and he said, “We’ll have our work cut out for us, though.”

“That we will,” I sighed, letting go of him and turning to lean on the balcony railing. My heart felt so achingly full as I glanced out at Rurik’s grave and the river once more. “Even with Rufus dead, there are dire threats against everything we have built and wish to build.”

Neil came to stand next to me, frowning out at the river as well. I glanced to him and continued.

“Kostya is already collapsing. I am under no illusion that it will be as easy to conquer as Igor believes, or that it will be simple to govern once collapsed.”

“But like Igor said, the people of Kostya might be willing to accept him, since his father was an old duke,” Neil pointed out.

I huffed a laugh. “Would that we could be so lucky. The old city-dwellers are as stubborn as ever they were. They may accept Igor’s rule at first, but I predict their initial enthusiasm will sour when he fails to return the cities to their old ways. And that is presuming the conquest happens quickly and smoothly.”

“That scout who returned to Teslalom with news of the campaign told Rufus that Klovisgard had already fallen,” Neil pointed out.

I turned to face him and shrugged. “I have no doubt it did fall. But Klovisgard is not Hedeon. If Stepan and Cyril had any sort of inkling that an army was on the way to attack, they would have withdrawn their strongest soldiers to protect their king’s city.”

Neil’s frown deepened. “So you think there will be a battle for Hedeon? That everything will come down to taking that city?”

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. “In that phase of the war to secure the frontier? Yes. I do.”

“But Stepan and Cyril aren’t good leaders,” Neil said, hugging the thick robe he wore tighter around his strong body. “We all saw that for ourselves at Ludvig’s coronation.”

I stepped into him, both to warm his body with my own and to receive warmth from him. Neil smiled and closed his arms around me in return. For a fraction of a moment, I considered abandoning our serious discussion and going back to bed so that the two of us could wake Peter in the manner Peter liked best. I could tell that Neil shared my impulse as well.

But these important matters needed discussing.

“Even a terrible king can barricade his kingdom and sap the strength of a foe attempting to attack it,” I said, pressing my body against my beloved’s. “And Stepan and Cyril are only half of our problem.”

“Yiannis?” Neil asked, his eyebrows lifting in question.

“Precisely. And I fear that rooting the wild wolves from the forest, or at least decapitating that ravening beast, will be a far greater challenge with a much more painful cost.”

Neil looked crestfallen. “Could we figure out a way to push them so deep into the forest that they wouldn’t dare come out and bother the rest of us who are trying to make a new sort of life for ourselves?” he asked.

“We could,” I said with a nod. “But then every time there is a lean year and starvation nips at their heels, every time a new leader rises up and promises the others glory and blood, every time someone from our kingdoms grows angry enough to rush into the forest and join them, the beast will be resurrected and the problem renewed.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever be able to end the problem of the wild wolves, then,” Neil said with a glum look. “Because it doesn’t matter how wonderful the kingdoms we’ve all created are, someone will always think they can do better.”

“Alas, my love, I believe you are correct,” I said, hugging him tighter.

And therein lay the problem. Complete peace and a world in which everyone was happy and content was never possible, because there would always be those who sought to put themselves over others. There would always be people who believed their view of the world was the only right view and that all who failed to share their view should be destroyed.

Some men simply could not leave those who were different from them to live their lives as they saw fit. Any of us who had been born into kingdoms and cities where men who loved other men, or women who loved other women, were vilified for who they loved and where they found pleasure knew that.

“We can only attempt to create the greatest amount of happiness for the largest number of people,” I said, leaning in to kiss Neil quickly. “We will never be able to satisfy everyone, but my deepest wish is that we can and will satisfy most.”

Neil broke into a charmingly randy grin. “I like being satisfied,” he said, his voice a warm hum.

“I know you do,” I purred in return. “And I’d wager that our dearest Peter loves it as well. Shall we go and wake him with pleasure now?”

“Yes, please,” Neil said, his smile growing broader.

I stepped away from him, but took his hand and tip-toed back into the bedroom with him. As soon as we reached the bed, we both shed our robes, Neil walked around to the other side of the bed, and with a silent, wicked glance exchanged between us in the scant dawn light, we slipped into bed and sandwiched Peter between us.

Peter lay on his side, and as I stroked a hand across his thigh and around the curve of his perfect, shapely ass, which faced me, he drew in a breath. Neil brushed his fingertips over Peter’s chest, pinching one of his nipples, which caused Peter to let his breath out on a moan.

Eyes still closed, Peter let a lazy, sensual smile spread across his sleep-bleary face and released a moan of welcome that had my prick twitching restlessly. He shifted to his back and stretched libidiously, wordlessly inviting me and Neil to caress his warm skin in all sorts of places.

“Good morning, Peter,” Neil whispered against Peter’s ear, laughter and joy in his voice, before taking Peter’s earlobe between his teeth.

Peter tensed and gasped, then seemed to ripple with pleasure as he hummed, “Good morning.”

Heat and affection curled through every part of my body as I watched Peter turn his head to the side so that he could kiss Neil’s lips. Whatever morning breath was to be had was ignored as what began as a soft peck quickly deepened into a deep exploration. Every part of me expanded, from my heart to my cock, at the love on display before me.

My Neil and my Peter loved each other passionately. I adored seeing that love on display. It increased my own love for both of them a thousandfold, and it settled my heart in ways no words could express. Long after I was gone, the two of them would still have each other. God willing, neither of them would ever have to endure the pain that wrecked me when Rurik died.

But those thoughts were far too sad for the moment at hand.

I banished them by joining in, dipping to rain a trail of light kisses over Peter’s arm and shoulder to his neck while playing with his balls.

Peter stretched and moaned into Neil’s mouth once more, lifting his hips enough to press his balls into my hand. I squeezed in response and my cock filled at the sound of pleased pain Peter gave me in response.

He turned his head away from Neil to seek out my lips. I obliged his need by taking him ravenously and thrusting my tongue into the warm offering of his mouth. As I plundered him with my kiss, I felt Neil’s hand brush against mine as he

grasped Peter's prick and stroked it to a fuller hardness than it already had.

My Peter was in heaven, and he let both Neil and I know with the hungry, feral sounds of surrender to us that he made. His hips jerked restlessly into our ministrations, and he attempted to open his legs as much as he could with our bodies arranged on either side of him.

"Yes," he sighed, breaking away from my kiss, then gasped as Neil nipped one of his nipples. "Fuck me awake. Use me for your pleasure. I live to serve the two of you."

A grin tightened my mouth as I captured his again, allowing him only a moan of pleasure to express himself. My darling must have still been hazy with sleep. He would not have expressed his dark desire to be possessed quite so openly had he been fully aware.

Perhaps I should have let that stop me from reaching for the jar of ointment on the table beside our bed, then pushing him roughly so that he tumbled onto Neil. Perhaps there was a fine, ethical line when it came to taking pleasure from someone who was not quite in control of all his faculties.

But I knew my Peter as well as I knew my own soul. I knew despite his occasional insistence otherwise that he desired to be objectified and taken. I could tell from the way he buried his face in the crook of Neil's neck and lifted his hips, legs spread wide to expose his needy hole to me, that he wanted whatever I chose to give him.

One would think that, given my horrifically premature introduction into the ways of pleasure, that I would have shied away from the sensual and abhorred sex. In fact, my feelings were exactly the opposite. I loved it. I loved the way pleasure could overwhelm me, dampening my ever-racing thoughts and eclipsing rationality and good judgement. I loved becoming greedy and demanding, loved truly letting myself go.

With my length slicked and only the remnants of ointment that had been left on my fingers to prepare my Peter, I lined my stiff, throbbing cock up and pushed mercilessly into the warmth of my husband's body. The immediate heat and

tightness sent shards of pleasure radiating through my entire body.

I sunk slowly to the hilt, grabbing Peter's hips with bruising force as I did, then held myself there as his body clenched and trembled at my invasion. He muttered something obscene against Neil, grabbing the pillow under Neil's head.

I wallowed in the feel of my beloved's body as a sheath for my prick for a moment before the urge to move and take my pleasure in his body overwhelmed me. As Peter groaned and alternated between wincing and relaxing with the pleasure-pain of it, I pulled back, then pushed in again, over and over, with increasing speed and ferocity.

Peter tensed at first as my thrusts became punishing, then reached the point where his body went lax with acceptance and surrender. The moment was made even sweeter by the way Neil grabbed a handful of Peter's hair at the back of his head and yanked so that he could ravage Peter's mouth while I claimed his hole.

At the same time, I could tell from the way Peter arched into me and the flex of Neil's bicep that Neil was stroking Peter's cock, possibly his own with it, to provide them both with maximum pleasure.

It was not elaborate or fancy. Our bodies merely did what they were designed to do in the most basic of ways to stimulate all three of us to orgasm. And yet, even though the movements and their results were nothing special, the intensity with which the three of us were attuned to each other and the preternatural sense we all had of each other was more than enough to hurl each of us in turn toward that blissful abyss where pleasure exploded like the sunrise.

I wasn't certain which of us came first, only that I felt Peter's body tense and strain rhythmically as my orgasm crashed through me, sending my essence into his body. I could see the way Neil's face contorted as he hit his climax and reveled in the tight cry, followed by a deep sigh, as he found the satisfaction he'd been after.

I loved those blissful moments that happened on the rare occasions when the three of us climaxed together within a short amount of time. We all seemed to lose our bones and collapsed into a messy, spent pile together. Neil and I still cradled Peter between us, and I reached my hand around to slide it through the wetness that now dampened both of their bellies as we all caught our breaths.

“I love it when the two of you wake me up like that,” Peter panted, finding his energy faster than either Neil or I found ours. He reached an arm back to spread his hand across my thigh and surged forward to kiss Neil. “I love you both so much.”

“And we love you,” Neil said. He glanced over Peter to me and said, “I love you.”

I smiled, so wrapped up in love that I could have stayed where I was all day. I could have stayed that way with my loves for my entire life.

That was precisely what I had striven so long for—the right to fuck my husbands in peace, morning, noon, and night, for the rest of my life. With Rurik’s portrait watching us, it felt as though all of us were enmeshed to perfection.

“I wish we could stay like this forever,” Peter sighed, reflecting my thoughts. But of course he did. Peter was a reflection of me, and there was no denying it. “It would be lovely if we could all just stay here like this without—”

His words were cut short by the cry of a babe somewhere down the hall.

Instead of causing me distress or regret, the sound of Ziggy wailing for his fathers invigorated me as nothing else could. I didn’t just love my husbands beyond reason, I loved the children that we had managed, against all odds of nature, to have together as well.

“The babies need us,” I said, throwing back the bedcovers with sudden, deliberate drama and leaping out of bed like a man half my age.

Neil laughed and shook his head at me and my antics as I circled around the bed to fly into our washroom. For as much as I longed to tend to my son and daughter, I had no intention of doing so fresh from fucking.

I felt my age a bit once I was out of Peter and Neil's sight, which manifested as wincing and careful stretching as I bathed with a sponge after pumping cold water into the sink. My knees most certainly were not what they once were, and my back protested my bedroom antics more often than not.

I grinned, telling myself that the day was coming when I would be forced to lie prone while Neil and Peter took turns pleasuring themselves on my cock.

In fact, the idea had more than a little appeal.

"Grinning at yourself as you invent new, wicked ways to fuck us?" Peter asked as he and Neil joined me in the washroom.

"Of course, my love," I said, tossing the sponge back into the sink so that Neil could take it up and bathe himself. I kissed Peter quickly, then went back for a slightly longer kiss. "I live but to invent new ways to possess your ass."

Peter laughed. Neil grinned and giggled as well. Considering the uneasy balance of the situation we all found ourselves in and all the swords that continued to hang over our heads, it was a miracle that the three of us could be so warm and light with each other.

I helped my beloveds to bathe, then moved with them into the bedroom so that we could dress. We would have one day at home before traveling again, which meant it was impractical to don any of my finer clothes. But I still felt as though I were the handsomest man of my years in the entire frontier while dressed in the exquisite garments my Peter had created for me.

Ziggy had quieted by the time the three of us made it to the nursery, only two doors down the hallway from our bedroom, but that didn't stop me from going straight for him as Annika seemed just about to lay him in his crib.

“Has he been fed?” I asked in the, frankly, ridiculous voice I used only when in the presence of my children as I nestled a squirming Ziggy against my shoulder.

“Just now,” Annika said with her shy, respectful smile. “And Ella before him. She was up early in a fit, poor thing.”

“Oh? Is something wrong, my dearest?” Neil asked, fetching a fussy Petronella from her crib.

She was not even two months and could not answer, of course, but she quieted and strained to lift her head as if she not only heard and understood Neil, but would answer him as well.

Peter came to hover between the two of us, glancing first at one baby, then the other, with the look he always tried to wear in their presence to convince us he did not love his children every bit as much as Neil and I did. Peter was a creature of love through and through. He adored the babies with his whole heart, but struggled with showing it and reconciling those feelings with what he believed about himself.

I wasn't worried, either about his feelings or the way he interacted with Ziggy and Ella. I had a feeling that his moment to shine as a father would come when the children were older and in need of guidance rather than nappy changes.

“Annika, my dear,” I said, cradling Ziggy close, “you look done in. Why don't we take the babies downstairs and allow you an hour or two to sleep?”

“I would like that,” Annika said, inching toward her bed.

“Come, my darlings,” I told Neil and Peter, ushering our entire family out of the room. “Our brood has been fed, so why don't we go in search of our breakfasts as well?”

“I'm starving,” Peter said, stepping ahead of me and Neil so that he could push the door wider for us.

“I wonder why that is,” Neil said with a sideways smirk as we all crowded into the hall.

“I have no idea,” Peter teased him in return.

I loved the bubble of light and love that the five of us inhabited together. *This* was what I wanted from my life and my world. *This* was why I had risked everything and taken up the crown, even though I hadn't wanted it. *This* was what I would continue to fight for, until the five of us and hopefully more—and our extended family, I noted to myself as we passed the door to Jace and Gennadi's room, behind which echoed sounds that indicated the two of them were greeting the new day the same way my husbands and I had—could live in peace for good.

But as happened all too often in my whirlwind of a life, it was a mistake to assume that simply because I wanted something, that meant I would have it.

For as soon as we reached the bottom of the stairs, our attentions were snagged by the sound of unexpected guests. And when we headed into the parlor instead of the dining room, we were met by the sight of Jakob and Mikal, along with Ludvig's Renz and Jorgen's Kliment, looking as though they'd run through the forest and were about to collapse from exhaustion.

CHAPTER

TWO

“Jakob!” Peter gasped, stepping ahead of me and Neil to greet his old friends. “Mikal! What are the two of you doing here?”

“Hello.” Neil nodded to the two bedraggled pups. “You look done in. Can we get you anything? Food? Water? Here, sit down.”

I smiled at my beloveds and their predictable reactions to our guests.

“I’d love some water,” Jakob said, accepting Peter’s handshake and thumping him on the back.

“Forget water,” Mikal said, grinning from ear to ear as he accepted Peter’s awkward handshake with his left hand. I still felt a pang of regret at the way Mikal, and so many valiant men like him, had lost limbs or their lives in the battle at my coronation years ago. “I could do with a stiff brandy.”

Jakob snorted. “It’s barely past dawn.”

Mikal sent him a flirty wink in return. “Alright, coffee, then, if you have any.”

“I believe Nadia has just had some delivered from Good Port,” I said, turning to the well-trained servant who had slipped into the room behind us.

Nadia had found the young man, Nile, amidst the refugees that had fled Novoberg after the Dying Winter. He had only just been apprenticed as a page in the palace of Novoberg when the world fell apart, but Nadia had been impressed with

him then and remembered him when she stumbled across him in Gravlock.

I'd had no say in his hiring, just as I no longer had any say in the workings of our home. Nadia had taken over everything, as though she were queen of the realm.

I couldn't have been happier.

"Yes, your majesty," Nile nodded to me, his eyes shining with eagerness to please.

I rolled my eyes a little as he left on his errand. Nile was not the only one I would have to break of the habit of continuing to refer to me as if I were king.

"What are you doing here?" Peter asked our guests as we all shuffled to the array of sofas and chairs in the middle of our parlor. "Where have you been for the past few months? You ran off with Sascha to deliver the invitations to the coronation and never returned."

Jakob and Mikal exchanged a look, and Jakob glanced briefly at me as we all sat.

"Peter," Neil said in an undertone as they sat side by side. He shielded Ella's head, as though my beautiful daughter would hear and reveal all to someone, then said, "Jakob and Mikal are Magnus's spies."

"I believe they are Ludvig's spies now," I said, smiling as I settled into my favorite chair near the fire. Ziggy was well on his way to falling asleep on me, which was wonderful, as far as I was concerned.

Peter flinched, staring from me to his friends. "When did this start?" he asked, then glanced back to me. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"I'm pretty sure we did tell you," Neil said, unable to stop himself from laughing. "You're always so far up your own ass, what with all your pup business, that you never listen when anyone else talks anymore."

"That's not fair," Peter said, a little weakly, crossing his arms.

It was fair, and it was true. I did not fault my Peter for being more concerned about the things he cared about than the rest of the world, though. At least, not at present. When the time came, as it inevitably would, when Peter rose up to become king, he would have to do better at paying attention.

There was still time before then, however. I would make certain he was ready.

“I assume you have something to report,” I said to nudge the conversation forward. I glanced particularly to Renz and Kliment, curious about how they had become involved with Jakob and Mikal.

“There’s a lot to report,” Mikal confirmed. “Starting with the fact that Yiannis’s wild wolves have grown more powerful and cunning instead of less since the debacle of the coronation.”

Jakob huffed a humorless laugh and picked up where his lover had left off. “Yiannis started off by splitting his men into two camps. His was responsible for kidnapping the pups and the contingent led by Lorimer maintained what passes for order in the forest.”

“*Is* there any sort of order in the forest?” Peter asked, sitting a bit straighter and listening more in the way that he should.

Jakob shrugged. “The wild wolves know that they have to do as Yiannis says or suffer the consequences,” he said. “That’s order.”

“And the closer we get to the snows, the more they feel that necessity,” Mikal added. “Last winter was particularly hard for a lot of the wolves. That’s why Yiannis was able to drag so many of them into his control when those same men had tried to stay out of everyone’s way since the Dying Winter.”

“So a lot of the wolves who are with Yiannis are new?” Peter asked.

“Does that make Yiannis more powerful, or does it mean he might have a harder time controlling more people?” Neil

asked.

I smiled at my beloveds. Neil lacked the ambition to rule that Peter had, but if I was being quite honest, they would govern best if they governed together. What Peter lacked, Neil made up for, and vice versa.

“It should have made things harder,” Jakob said with a frown, “but the wolves who joined with Yiannis more recently are hungry and desperate. They are more willing to follow Yiannis if it means their bellies are full and they have shelter from the snows. It also means they’re willing to enforce Yiannis’s dictates more viciously on the wolves that have been with him for a while as a way of securing their places. They haven’t seen as much of the carnage Yiannis’s ego has caused as the others, so they haven’t lost their taste for violence yet.”

“The forest would have been all Yiannis’s and everything would have gone according to Yiannis’s plans, if Sascha and these two brave pups hadn’t come close to decimating Yiannis’s group by burning down Sascha’s house and all the wolves who had taken shelter in it at the time. They diminished the wild wolves’ numbers quite a bit.”

Almost as an afterthought, Mikal glanced to Peter. I was instantly concerned for my beloved as well, and, as it turned out, with good reason.

“Sascha’s house has burned down?” Peter asked, his voice suddenly hoarse. He looked and sounded much younger than he had mere moments before.

“I’m sorry, Peter, but it was,” Jakob said with a sigh. He paused, then added, “We all have a lot of memories of that house.”

“Good memories,” Mikal added, looking at Peter like a brother. “But bad memories, too.”

“So many things happened in that house that changed my life,” Peter said, his words sounding as much like ghost whispers as anything heard at Sascha’s house likely was now.

Neil glanced to me as if asking what we should do to comfort our husband. I wasn’t certain if comfort was what

Peter needed to process his memories. Or perhaps I was still being selfish and jealous of the time my Peter had spent as Sascha's.

I did the best thing I could think to do in the moment. I turned my attention to the two pups and asked, "You had a part in thwarting Yiannis's ambitions?"

Kliment and Renz exchanged looks before starting in on their part of the story.

"We knew we needed to act quickly and decisively as soon as Yiannis and his men brought us to Sascha's house if we were ever going to escape," Kliment said. Despite being a pup, the young man had the strength and determination of a warrior. No wonder Jorgen was so fond of him.

"Yiannis is a bloodthirsty tyrant," Renz continued the story. "I could tell that from the moment I woke up after being stolen."

"So they *did* knock you all out somehow," Peter said with a scowl.

"More than once," Renz said. "They forced us to breathe something that made us unconscious at the coronation, and they drugged us as we traveled through the forest, before we reached Sascha's house."

"They tied the six of us together to stop us from escaping," Kliment added.

"Did they...did they hurt you?" Neil asked, blanching a little as he rubbed Ella's back.

"No," Kliment and Renz answered simultaneously. They looked at each other again...and I thought I detected something more than casual camaraderie between the two of them.

Which was interesting. I wondered how Ludvig and Jorgen would feel about their pups forming some sort of an attachment. It might prove quite useful for the future of relations between the kingdoms of the frontier, as our boys became the men who led, if their pups were sometimes lovers, like the Sons of the Cities were now.

But those were observations for another day.

“Yiannis made some sort of deal with General Rufus that the pups wouldn’t be harmed,” Kliment went on.

“That’s what Igor said,” Peter interrupted, brightening a bit.

My mouth twitched into a smile at my darling’s enthusiasm for his new friend. As jealous as I might have still been over Peter and Sascha, I was more amused by Peter and Igor than anything else. The thought of the two of them fucking made my blood stir and my cock take interest, and the certainty that Peter would ultimately run diplomatic circles around Igor made me want to laugh with delight.

Kliment and Renz, as well as Jakob and Mikal, gaped at Peter.

“You know about Yiannis’s deal with General Rufus for the pups?” Jakob asked.

“We most certainly do.” Peter glanced to me, and when I nodded, giving him leave to tell the story, he launched into an enthusiastic explanation. “General Rufus was behind the whole kidnapping. He wanted to use it, wanted to use Yiannis, as a way of distracting the more powerful kingdoms on the frontier so that he could proceed with his intended conquest of us all.”

“That’s what we thought,” Renz said, turning excitedly to Kliment. He smiled. “We were right.”

Kliment shared his smile for a moment, then frowned. “Is that what General Rufus is still after? Because when we left Novoberg, his general, Commander Kythria, was poised to march on and take Klovisgard.”

“He did take Klovisgard,” Peter confirmed. “We received word of it before Igor killed everyone.”

My darling Peter would not win any accolades for his subtlety, that much was certain. At the mention of killing, Jakob, Mikal, Kliment, and Renz gaped at him.

“Igor killed someone?” Mikal asked.

“He did,” Neil answered, his eyes wide and full of woe. “At a banquet. He poisoned General Rufus, Boris, and Yates, and several other high-ranking men who were loyal to them.”

“He tried to poison Magnus as well, but Neil’s quick thinking saved him,” Peter said, looking at me like he wanted to get up and come sit on my lap, just to reassure himself I was safe.

“Hold on.” Jakob held up a hand and shook his head. “Are you saying General Rufus, Boris, and Yates were all assassinated? They’re dead?” He looked incredulous.

“They were,” I answered, taking over the explanation from my beloveds, “though calling it an assassination is being kind. Igor may have ordered the poison to be hidden in their food, but it was their hubris that killed them in the end.”

“So who does that leave as the ruler of Cremona?” Kliment asked, his gaze unfocused, as though he were trying to muddle through the tangle of the situation on the frontier.

“Igor,” Peter answered quickly, scooting to sit on the edge of his seat. “And Igor is most definitely our ally.”

“He is?” Renz, too, looked baffled and amazed by the situation.

“Peter made absolutely sure of that,” I said, grinning wickedly at my beloved.

Peter pinked under my lascivious praise and shrugged one shoulder in the fey manner he had that drove me wild with lust. “I have a talent for winning kings over to our cause.”

Jakob laughed abruptly, startling both Peter and I out of our increasingly heated exchange of gazes. “I knew all that training I gave you years ago would come in handy.”

That statement was enough to draw my attention. I widened my eyes at Jakob, seeing him in a whole new light.

“You might have given me a taste of it,” Peter laughed in return, “but Magnus is the one who refined all of those skills in me.”

“Either way, it seems you learned your lessons well,” Jakob went on. “Does this mean Cremona is our ally now?” he asked me.

“It would appear that way,” I said with as much of a shrug as I could manage with Ziggy sleeping on my shoulder.

“So that’s it,” Mikal said, smiling. “All of the major kingdoms of the frontier are in accord now. There won’t be a war after all.”

“I wouldn’t go so far to call Kostya our ally anymore,” Neil sighed.

“And Commander Kythria was still on a trail of conquest,” Renz added, pointing out one of the flies in the ointment of peace. “Would Igor stop his advance or let it continue? If he’s already taken Klovisgard, as you said, then he’ll be marching on Hedeon next.”

I was deeply impressed with Ludvig’s pup and understood even more why my old friend loved the boy so.

“Do you think this Commander Kythria will serve the new king of Cremona?” Jakob asked me with a frown. “Or do you think he’ll go rogue and try to carve out part of the frontier for himself?”

“That appears to be the problem,” I said. “We simply do not know at this juncture.”

I desperately hoped Kythria could be reasoned with. The very idea of yet another rogue leader trying to make himself a king of part of the old frontier was maddening.

“Commander Kythria can’t have taken Klovisgard that long ago,” Kliment said, looking twice his age as he puzzled through the whole thing. “We did run into trouble in the forest after leaving Novoberg—Yiannis’s wolves all seem to be heading west for some reason and we had to hide from them more than once. It too longer to get here than we’d intended it to, but we can’t have been wandering for that long.”

“We were wandering long enough for the world to change without us,” Renz said in a thoughtful voice, staring at the

floor. He then looked up at me and said, "I need to get back to my master. I have so much to tell him about what's going on."

"And I need to get back to Novoberg to fetch Nikandr, then we should head north, to go home to Jorgen and Hati," Kliment added.

He and Renz looked briefly at each other, as though they would regret being parted after becoming as close as I guessed they had.

"We're heading to Novoberg tomorrow morning," Peter said, starting to sound like he would make decisions without consulting the rest of us. "You can travel with us."

"Or you could accompany us to New Hope with Renz," Mikal said. "We report to King Ludvig now instead of you, I presume," he added, checking with me.

"You are correct," I said. "The entire spy network should report to him now."

"Or you could continue as Master of Spies, now that you're not king anymore," Peter said cheekily.

I barked a laugh, but I didn't hate the idea. I was the one who had established the network of spies that the Wolf River Kingdom had throughout the frontier. It made perfect sense for me to continue to manage them. Doing so would not take as much of my time as being king.

But whether I did or not, it must be made to look as though I had nothing at all to do with them anymore.

"I want nothing more than to be a husband and father," I said. "Everyone should know this already."

"Is that why we're heading to Novoberg tomorrow?" Peter asked, a wicked glint in his eyes. "Before reporting what we learned in Cremona to Ludvig?"

I grinned right back at my beloved. "The lengthy letter I intend to pen this afternoon will more than suffice to keep Ludvig abreast of the situation," I said, deciding to write one in that moment and to send some of the porters who had been

with us in Teslalom in my stead. “Dear Renz, would you be so kind as to deliver the letter to your master personally?”

Renz sat up so quickly I swore I could hear his back crack. “Me, your majesty?” he asked, evidently forgetting, as everyone else had, that I no longer needed to be addressed in such a way.

“Of course,” I said with a nod. “A man’s pup is his most trustworthy ally. There is no one I would feel safer sending a message to Ludvig with than you.”

Renz’s smile cut through the exhaustion that was causing him to droop. “I will not let you down, your majesty.”

“Just Magnus, please,” I said, waving my free hand. I knew full well that neither Renz nor anyone else would stop treating me as though I were king, but I would continue to insist that they see me as one of their own. “I would be deeply grateful if you would complete this errand for me.”

“Is that our signal to end this conversation and get on with our business?” Mikal asked with a smirk.

“If that is how you wish to see it,” I answered with a nod.

“You don’t have to go anywhere right away, though,” Peter stepped in. “You all look worn out. You’re welcome to stay at our house for as long as you’d like to rest.”

I raised an exasperated eyebrow at my Peter. Not that he noticed. The number of times Peter had decided to take charge of the situations we found ourselves in, despite my careful planning to get the most out of those situations, was yet another sign that he was growing into the sort of man that I couldn’t control.

Not that I wanted to control Peter. Precisely. It would have been futile to try, in any case. I loved him with my whole heart, but it worried me how quickly the two of us could lock horns these days. Peter was fighting to grow up, and I was battling not to become old and irrelevant before my time.

“If we’re going to spend a day or two in Gravlock before heading on to New Hope, I just want to go home,” Jakob said.

“Fineas has been watching our house while we’ve been off in the forest, but I’m sure there’s a lot we need to do.”

“I’m sure,” Mikal echoed. He slapped his one remaining hand on his knee, then stood. “You two are welcome to come with us,” he said to Kliment and Renz.

“Or you could stay here with us,” Peter said. The gentle competition in his offer made me smile.

Renz and Kliment exchanged another of those looks that had me convinced there was something between them.

“I really want to get back to Ludvig as soon as possible,” Renz said, as if apologizing to Kliment. “If there’s a boat headed down the river later today, I might be able to get there before midnight.”

“And if I’m to return to Novoberg with you, I might as well just stay here,” Kliment said.

“It’s settled then,” I said, standing with Ziggy as everyone stood. “As soon as Nile announces our breakfast is ready, we’ll eat, and then those who wish to return to their home may do so while those who need to wait on my letter and our departure to Novoberg may help themselves to the spare room for what I assume is a much-needed nap.”

Our guests agreed to the terms, and since Nile was waiting for our conversation to end before announcing breakfast anyhow, we moved straight across to the dining room.

Jakob and Mikal declined to eat with us in favor of returning to their Gravlock house. Before could get more than a few steps outside the front door, however, I handed Ziggy off to Peter, then stepped outside with them.

“Would you care to make a report before you go?” I asked casually.

The two men exchanged wry grins, then turned to me.

“I thought you said all spies would report to King Ludvig now,” Mikal said, resting his one hand on his hip.

“I told you he wouldn’t give up his crown so easily,” Jakob laughed, crossing his arms.

I appreciated their affable manner for the most part, though I would have preferred a touch more respect.

“It is my understanding that your pledge of loyalty when we took you in five years ago was to the Wolf River Kingdom,” I said, adjusting my posture and my expression to convey the sort of deadliness that I wanted them to believe I had. “Just as my loyalty is,” I added.

I didn’t need to add more. Jakob and Mikal stood straighter and lost their jovial smiles.

“Yiannis has cells throughout the forest,” Mikal said, falling into the role of a good soldier reporting back to his commander right away. “I’m continually surprised by how well he manages to maintain order among them all. By all rights and all traditions of the forest, those cells should have dropped away and become wolf packs again.”

“They might do that, now that General Rufus is dead,” Jakob added his opinion. “What Kliment said earlier is correct. We encountered several bands of Yiannis’s wolves moving west.”

“We didn’t have time to stop and figure out why,” Mikal said. “My money is on them fleeing for the part of the forest where they think Yiannis won’t find them.”

“A lot of the wolves that joined up with Yiannis in the last few years did so because they thought Yiannis had the protection of Cremona behind him,” Jakob continued.

“Is that common knowledge in the forest?” I asked, crossing my arms and rubbing my chin. “Do common wolves know that Yiannis has been working with General Rufus?”

Jakob and Mikal exchanged a glance, then Mikal sighed and said, “In a way. Yiannis has made it seem like he has the upper hand, like General Rufus is...was bowing to him.”

“At least, that’s how he presents himself when he brags about obtaining supplies from Cremona,” Jakob added.

I gave them a questioning look.

Mikal answered it with, “Yiannis tells everyone that he has orchestrated raids to steal all the food and weaponry from Cremona that his wolves need, but in fact, he has...had deal upon deal in place with General Rufus.”

“Deals to avoid harrying his settlements and his troops in exchange for those supplies,” I said, stating what I’d already been told in the past. “And it would appear that one of those deals was that the pups stolen from New Hope were to remain untouched after the abduction?” I made my statement into a question.

“That’s what the boys told us,” Jakob said. “I’m confident that they were honest with us, especially in the last week, as we dodged through the forest, avoiding some of the worst of Yiannis’s cells.”

“That Renz has gone through more than he’s letting on,” Mikal informed me. “He sacrificed himself to Yiannis’s bed in order to buy Sascha the time he needed to cause the distraction that allowed them all to escape.”

My eyes went wide and my heart sank for the boy. I could only imagine what Renz had gone through. Seducing a bloodthirsty and lawless wolf like Yiannis must have been horrific.

It sounded like something my Peter would do.

I set that aside and returned to the business at hand.

“What else do I need to know so that we might make our way to Novoberg and join this latest incarnation of the reshuffling of the frontier as swiftly and easily as possible?” I asked.

Jakob rubbed the back of his neck, and Mikal winced and bit his lip.

“Yiannis is up to something,” Jakob said. “We’ve known that all along, but we didn’t think he’d act as soon as he did at the coronation. He might carry on like he wants a return to the old ways of the wolves, but if you ask me, the man he really wants to emulate is Jorgen Iceblade.”

My brow went up at that. I would have thought it more likely that he would emulate Yuri.

“He wants to be talked about with fear,” Mikal explained. “He wants to be the constant thorn in the side of the cities and anyone who dared to be civilized. But he also likes his wine and meat, and he would rather live in luxury than subsisting.”

I broke into a smile. “Yes, that does rather sound like Jorgen in his younger days.”

Jorgen had grown up, though. He’d met Hati, and the two of them had changed the dreams that they’d each had individually. Even before my two friends had headed north to pick up the pieces after the Dying Winter, they’d talked about forming a settlement for years.

Ultimately, that would be Yiannis’s downfall. He would either attempt to capture one of the abandoned cities or build a new, pseudo-permanent settlement somewhere in the forest. If he lived that long, which was doubtful.

Either way, he would be easy to root out and crush for his crimes. Even more so, since he no longer had the support of Rufus.

“You might have to worry about Lorimer in the future,” Jakob added, just as I thought our little bit of intelligence sharing was through.

“Lorimer?” I asked with a frown and a shrug. “He’s an ambitionless thug.”

Jakob and Mikal exchanged a look. “He *was*, which was why Yiannis let him lead half his men. But actual leadership can change a man’s mind, even when he swears he hates the idea of leadership,” Jakob said.

“Interesting,” I said.

“Lorimer and his closest friend talk a lot about the mountains,” Mikal said, shifting his weight. “They understand that things have changed in the heart of the frontier and that if they want to continue to live on their own terms, they need to look beyond the forest. If I had to guess, I would say that as soon as Yiannis looks like he’s about to lose his grip on the

forest, Lorimer will take the men who like his idea of living better than Yiannis's and head for the mountains."

"Which I, personally, think is ideal," Jakob said. "Way out there, they won't bother anyone."

"Perhaps," I said.

In fact, there was far more going on in the mountains than just about anyone knew. Only Ludvig, myself, Dushka, Feodor, and a tiny handful of others knew what sort of progress was being made on building a southern pass through the mountains and into the Old Realm. It was still years, if not a decade away from being completed, but if Lorimer were to stumble across the work being done there—and the accidental discovery of valuable mineral deposits I'd been receiving more and more reports of—if he had an inkling of what reopening the way to the Old Realm could provide for him or others, then he could be a problem.

"When do you head back to your posts in the forest?" I asked, shifting my stance to indicate the meeting was almost over.

"A day or two?" Mikal asked Jakob with a shrug. "After we make our report to Ludvig, of course."

I nodded. "Take care when you make contact with your friends in the forest again," I said. "I am reasonably certain that we are about to experience another upheaval, and who knows how long it will be until the dust has settled?"

"If General Rufus is dead and Igor has taken control of Cremona, then the upheaval has already started," Mikal said.

"God only knows how Stepan and Cyril will take the news of the change in king," Jakob added. "Or Commander Kythria, for that matter. If he decides he'd rather be king than Igor, you're going to have to take sides in a hurry."

"A possibility I do not relish," I said truthfully.

We shook hands and said goodbyes, then I headed back inside to join my family and our friends. Too many things on the road to achieving my and Rurik's lifelong dream of peace depended on the whims and ambitions of unpredictable men.

I was met by a surprisingly surly look from Peter as I took my seat at the head of the table.

“What did you have to say to Jakob and Mikal that you couldn’t say in front of the rest of us?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

The bittersweet sense of pride for all the ways Peter was growing into the king he would one day be twisted with annoyance in my gut. “Nothing that I would not share with you, my love,” I said as sweetly as I could. I then flattened my tone and said, “If you would but ask me what we spoke about instead of implying I was keeping things from you, I would tell you whatever you want to know.”

“Why not include me from the start so that I don’t have to ask?” Peter fired back.

“Please,” Neil sighed. “We just sat down to breakfast. Magnus, you know you have to include Peter in things or he gets pissy. Peter, Magnus probably had them step outside so that they would feel freer to speak. There were a lot of us in that room and even more of us in here.” He nodded across the table to Jace and Gennadi, who had finished with their morning activities and looked to be in good moods because of it, and Nadia and Vera, who was still our guest, and probably would be for quite some time, given her attachment to Annika.

I didn’t care about any of those others, though. My heart was overflowing with love for my dear Neil, who knew how to manage me and Peter better than anyone.

I glanced at Peter with a cheeky grin, then nodded to Neil to emphasize as much. “He is, as always, the cleverest of the three of us,” I said.

Peter sighed as if irritated, but in actuality, he was likely just annoyed with himself. He then asked in a sing-song voice, “Dear Magnus, would you tell me what Jakob and Mikal had to say?”

“Yes, Dear Peter,” I played right back with him. “Jakob and Mikal were merely confirming that Yiannis still has a grip on the wild wolves, but that it is likely Lorimer will take a

portion of them and head east to the mountains, should anything happen to Yiannis.”

“Oh, something is definitely going to happen to Yiannis,” Jace said in a dark voice. “Especially after what Kliment and Renz just told us while you were saying goodbye to Jakob and Mikal.”

I didn’t really need the two pups to tell me their stories to know that Yiannis and his wolves were mistreating their pups and other, weaker wolves in their pack, though they spent the rest of breakfast regaling us with the story of what they’d seen at Sascha’s house.

It was actually more beneficial to hear the story of what had happened in Novoberg with the arrival of Commander Kythria from Kliment and Renz than it was to have Jakob and Mikal confirm what I already suspected about the wild wolves. Wild wolves I knew. Yiannis might have been vicious and sadistic, but so were a dozen other wolves that had come before him, including Yuri and Bela.

Yiannis would meet the same fate as his predecessors. I had no doubt of that. What had me curious was this Commander Kythria person.

“I do not know the man,” I admitted once Kliment and Renz had shared all they knew. “He must have risen through the ranks after my time in the Old Realm.”

“He was a strange sort of man from what I was able to see of him,” Renz said with a frown. “And by that, I mean that he was serious about being the commander of General Rufus’s armies, but he also seemed amused by everything around him, like he didn’t take things seriously.”

I frowned. Not taking things seriously was the sign of a man who thought victory was a foregone conclusion.

“We know that he moved on from Novoberg and took Klovisgard,” Peter said, clearly wanting to be the center of the discussion once more. I was proud of him for it too and watched him with careful attention to let him know I valued

his thoughts. “Unless the messenger just assumed Klovisgard would fall as the fighting got started.”

“I believe the messenger’s report was accurate,” I said. “Every bit of intelligence we have suggests the only city in Kostya that is even remotely defensible at this point is Hedeon.”

“So do you think this Kythria person has taken General Rufus’s army on to attack Hedeon?” Jace asked, looking anxious for his home city.

“Do you think Igor will or has sent someone to pull Kythria back?” Neil asked. “Now that General Rufus is dead,” he added.

“I do not know the answer to either of those questions,” I said. “The only way we will discover those answers is to go to Novoberg to see for ourselves.”

“Novoberg,” Peter said with a heavy sigh, sinking back in his chair. “Every time I think I’m done with that place forever, I end up going back again.”

“At least it will be interesting to see how our home city has changed since the last time we were there,” Neil said.

“That place changed beyond recognition within months of the last time you were there,” Nadia said in a sober, haunted voice. “I shudder to think what it is like now.”

“Your friend Ox is there,” Kliment said to Peter, as if he was saying something helpful.

Peter jolted to sit straight so fast I thought he might shatter vertebrae. “Ox?” he asked.

Kliment glanced to Renz with a suddenly worried look.

“She’s your friend, right?” Renz asked. “And the mother of Ella?” He nodded to Ella, who had been placed, along with Ziggy, in a bassinet at the end of the table.

“Ox is in Novoberg,” Peter said, hope mingling with fear and regret in his voice. “I’ll be able to see her again, to talk to her.”

“If she’s willing to talk to you,” Neil said quietly.

I had no doubt that Ox would speak with Peter. The friendship between the two of them extended farther than the damage that had been done through her carrying our child.

I was the one Ox would probably never speak to again.

I deeply regretted that, but I accepted it.

“Now we have even more reason to spend the day readying ourselves for another adventure,” I said, serving myself more of the delicious breakfast that was cooling on the table. “And if all goes well, we’ll be able to right more than a few wrongs that have been troubling us.”

We continued with the morning meal in relative peace. Several smaller conversations rose up instead of a single, larger one. Neil asked Kliment more about Nikandr and their plans to be reunited. Gennadi quietly asked Renz if the other pups, his dear friends, were safe. Peter and Jace debated the abstracts of politics and what would be needed to bring the entire frontier into a state of peace.

I watched it all and commented when I was asked to, but my thoughts were too muddled and my heart too unsettled to truly engage with my beloved family. The mission we were about to set out on felt like the culmination of everything. We were racing to the moment where events would decide whether my and Rurik’s vision of a life spent in peace and prosperity would be won, or whether it would be lost forever.

“You turned awfully quiet during breakfast,” Peter said as the two of us took the babies back up to the nursery after everyone went their separate ways to prepare for the next day’s journey. “Are you certain you’re alright, Magnus?”

Peter wore the same look of concern that he’d worn quite a bit in Cremona...whenever he wasn’t smirking over his sensual dalliance with Igor. I adored the way he cared so much for me, even if his ever-increasing maturity made me worry I’d lose what I loved so much about him.

“I am perfectly well, my love,” I said. I could see he didn’t believe me, so I added, “I will concede that we have a

monumental task ahead of us and that I am anxious for the outcome.”

Peter finished tucking Ella away in her crib and straightened, crossing his arms. “You don’t think we’re guaranteed a victory?” he asked.

I lingered over a sleeping Ziggy once I had him settled in the crib beside Ella’s. I smiled at him, willing my beautiful son to feel how much I loved him, even though he was years away from being able to understand that love.

Everything I was building, I was building for him. For Ziggy, for Ella, for Peter and Neil, and for whatever other children we might have. And for the memory of my Rurik.

Once Ziggy was tucked in, I glanced to the bed, where Annika was snoring gently, then motioned for Peter to follow me out into the hall. My plan was to stop there, but I grasped Peter’s hand and pulled him down to our bedroom and inside of that most sacred sanctuary.

As soon as the door was closed behind us, I drew Peter into my arms, clasped his head in my hands, and slanted my mouth over his in a kiss designed to set the world to rights.

Peter melted into me with a heated hum in the back of his throat. He shifted his stance so that he could lean into me and lift one leg over my hip. I dropped a hand to grab his thigh and hold him there, deepening our kiss. The bed was only a few feet away, and even though we’d already exhausted ourselves once that morning, I might have been able to rise to the occasion once more.

But Peter’s hum turned into a laugh, and he leaned away from me, breaking our kiss. Love and desire danced in his eyes as he shook his head.

“You’re either feeling decidedly full of yourself or you’re worried,” he said, calling me out in the way only he could. “My money is on worry, so you’d better just tell me so we can deal with it.”

My breath caught in my throat, and my heart ached. “You have no idea how desirable you are to me,” I purred, letting his

leg drop so that I could comb my fingers through his hair. “I fall more in love with you every day as you change from the boy I fucked in a tent to the man I will swear fealty to one day as my king.”

It was Peter’s turn to catch his breath, his eyes shining with affection.

But, of course, he couldn’t let me sidetrack him with love any more than with lust.

“It was a yurt,” he said, still somewhat breathless. “And you’re avoiding my question.”

I sighed and bowed my head, touching my forehead to his. Peter wouldn’t let me get away with anything. Neil wouldn’t either, but he’d be gentler about it. Peter would hold my balls over the fire until he got what he wanted from me.

I stood straighter and looked him straight in the eye, as one man to another. “This will be our final mission,” I said, addressing him with the seriousness he was due. “One way or another, I feel in my blood and bones that there will be no vacillating after the outcome of the events of the next few weeks. The character of the frontier will be set once and for all based on how we handle the situation before us.”

Peter frowned. “But we know we’re going to win,” he said. “We have Igor on our side now, and I have every intention of doing whatever it takes to make sure he remains an ally. Maybe our closest ally.”

“Close indeed,” I said with a smirk, tugging our bodies together so he could feel the stirring he’d caused in me.

I kissed him briefly, then set him at arm’s length.

“You’ve accomplished a pivotal feat in winning Igor’s loyalty,” I said. “I know you well enough to know you’ll most likely be able to keep that loyalty, too. And I believe Igor has a greater chance of holding onto power in Cremona than Sai did in Kostya.”

“But you’re worried about Commander Kythria and whether he has ambitions to be king instead,” Peter said, filling in my thoughts for me.

I shrugged, irritated by the gesture and the feeling that accompanied it. “I simply do not know enough about the man to know what his intentions are.”

Peter burst into a smile that confused me. “Then our mission to Novoberg will be the same as our mission to Cremona was meant to be,” he said. When I arched a questioning eyebrow at him, he said, “We’re going to assess the strengths and weaknesses of an unknown power to discover whether they’re a friend or an enemy.”

I joined Peter in smiling. “That we are, my love.” I kissed him again quickly, then stepped past him to get started on selecting clothing to pack. “Only this time, I don’t think you’ll be able to resolve everything with your cock.”

Peter laughed and followed me to the wardrobe. “I don’t even know if Kythria likes men. Renz said he couldn’t tell one way or another.”

“True,” I said.

“I just hope this mission doesn’t end with a room full of poisoned people and another attempt on your life,” Peter added.

We both froze in the middle of opening the wardrobe and looked at each other.

“Two attempts to kill me is more than enough for one lifetime,” I said with deadly seriousness. “After this, I intend to never find myself in a situation where someone would want me dead ever again.”

Peter made a doubtful noise and started sorting through the wardrobe. “I’ll believe that you want to stay out of politics and leadership when I see it,” he said.

I laughed. But I knew Peter was only making light of things because my near demise had terrified him—both times—and I was only laughing because it had terrified me, too.

I wanted to live a long life filled with pleasure and love. That was the entire point of everything. And there was nothing quite so motivating as one set out on a mission that would be

written about in the chronicles of history as the desire to live a long and happy life.

CHAPTER

THREE

The rest of the day was spent in increasingly frantic preparation for the mission to Novoberg. Not only did we need to sort through our clothing and belongings to be certain we were taking enough for whatever possible occasion might arise, but without taking so much that it would require a wagon and porters that would slow us down, we needed to arm ourselves and bring writing supplies and other diplomatic trappings so that messages could be sent to Ludvig, and to Jorgen and Hati, and Vikhrov as well, to keep them informed.

I had to write my report for Ludvig on top of that, which took far longer than I anticipated. There were too many things that I was loath to commit to paper, lest someone intercept the message. The best I could do was to hint and suggest, hoping Ludvig would read between the lines and know there were things we needed to discuss face to face, as one king to another.

It was late by the time Peter, Neil, and I fell into bed. We were exhausted, but ready for an early start the next morning. Neil fell straight to sleep. Peter tossed and turned for a bit before nodding off.

I lay awake, staring at the ceiling and listening to the sounds of my home deep into the night.

“This mission feels more dangerous than it should, Rurik, my love,” I spoke in my head, sighing aloud.

“It’s not any more dangerous than anything else you’ve done, Maggy,” Rurik answered in my heart. “It’s certainly not

more dangerous than fleeing the palace in Royersford in the middle of the night, disguised as beggars, and clawing our way over the mountains with winter setting in.”

I arched an eyebrow at the ceiling, remembering the grand escape Rurik and I had made.

“Yes,” I replied silently to him, “but we were young, then, and the only fates in our hands were our own. The world is completely different now. I have more responsibilities and far more cares.”

As if he could hear the conversation of my heart, Neil rolled over in his sleep and flopped against me. I smiled and stroked my hand along his arm, settling it against my chest.

“They are exquisite,” the Rurik of my heart said. “I’ve told you so a hundred times if I’ve told you once.”

“It’s not just them either,” I replied. “Though they are the dearest things in the world to me. We have a family now. We have a future, a different kind of future than either you or I ever thought we’d have. We have so much to fight for now.”

“I have complete faith in your ultimate victory,” Rurik said. I could practically feel his touch against my face. So much so that I closed my eyes and breathed in the feel of it.

“I wish I had as much faith,” I sighed. “But I cannot please everyone.”

“You learned that ages ago,” Rurik said incredulously.

“Yes, but there are more people who want to be pleased now,” I explained. “More people who will vilify me if I do not cater precisely to what they expect.”

“Do you mean Sai?” Rurik asked. “You’re not going to advocate for him becoming King of Kostya again, are you?”

“No,” I laughed. “But yes. Sai, Ox, maybe Jorgen and Hati, possibly even Ludvig. They could all turn against me if they do not like the path we have chosen for the frontier.” I paused. “Perhaps even my own beloved Peter. He grows increasingly impatient with what he sees as me holding him back.”

I reached a hand toward Peter, who slept on his stomach beside me, one leg stretched over my calf, and stroked the back of my fingers against his side.

“He’ll make a glorious king one day,” Rurik said. “And he will owe his wisdom and greatness to you.”

I huffed a laugh. “He won’t see it that way.”

“He will,” Rurik argued. “He’s clever, and he knows that you made him what he is.”

“I didn’t make him,” I said, shaking my head slightly, even though the entire conversation was imaginary. “I merely saw the kernel of greatness already within him and have nurtured it, am nurturing it, until it grows into everything he was destined to be.”

“And that is my point,” Rurik said. “You nurtured him. Imagine what would have become of him if he’d stayed with Sascha all those years ago.”

I snorted softly, causing Neil to stir a bit.

“Nothing,” Rurik went on. “Nothing would have become of him. Peter would be a cantankerous, frustrated, resentful pup stuck with a man who does not have the capacity to appreciate him. Or he would be dead.”

I shivered at the thought and dug my fingertips into Peter’s thigh. He grunted in his sleep, then shifted to snuggle against me.

Despite my thoughts, that made me smile.

“I just want them to be happy,” I said. “And our children. Everything I do is a battle for my beloved ones to be happy.”

“Then you will succeed,” Rurik said. “Because in all the time I have known you, I have never known you to fail at making those you love happy.”

“I failed you,” I said, drawing in a shuddering breath. “I failed to see how ill you were.”

“You couldn’t have done anything about it, Maggy, my love. It was my time. Every healer you brought to see me said

the same thing. You could do nothing to hold back the cancer that took me.”

“I could have done more,” I argued. “I should have done more.”

“You made my life wonderful, my darling.” I could have sworn I felt Rurik’s touch on my cheek again. “Every day with you was a happy one, even the final day.” I imagined I felt his lips softly press my own. “You will be victorious, my darling, because you are fighting for love.”

I let out a shaky breath and let myself relax, wrapped in the warmth of that thought. Hard decisions would need to be made in the next few days and weeks. I could not resolve everything. One might argue that I no longer had the authority to resolve anything, though even Ludvig knew I would always have authority in the Wolf River Kingdom, as long as I lived. But I had a duty of care to make things right as much as I could.

I fell asleep eventually and managed to stay asleep until the first rays of dawn. I was awakened by Peter sitting up suddenly and cursing as he rubbed a hand through his tousled hair.

“Fuck. We were supposed to be up before dawn so that we could head out early,” he said, flinging the bedcovers aside and dashing to the washroom.

I rolled to my side and gathered a half-asleep Neil into my arms to cuddle with him. I didn’t want to wake up. I didn’t want to leave my home and my family. I didn’t want to leave the memory of Rurik, or his image, which I was so grateful to have back in my life again.

I could have stayed there, with Neil waking up enough to grin at me and wrap his body around mine, then pretend to fall back to sleep as Peter came out of the washroom to harass us, forever.

Neil and I did eventually get up. We washed and dressed as quickly as we could, then headed downstairs. Jace and Gennadi were up by then as well, and so were Kliment, Nadia, Annika, Vera, and the babies.

Saying goodbye to my babies yet again was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do. I did it quickly to spare myself and my husbands, especially Neil, a lengthy goodbye. We gave last-minute instructions to Nadia for the care of the house. She frowned at me and reminded me she'd been taking care of the house for years now, and an entire palace before that.

We met the rest of the party that would be traveling with us at the old gate. Aside from me, Peter, Neil, Jace, Gennadi, and Kliment, all of us mounted on our own horses with our belongings tucked into saddlebags, we had managed within one day to arrange for a guard of six, strong Gravlock men to go with us.

"Novoberg isn't that far," Arlas, one of those men, told us as we proceeded from the old gate to the new gate, which would take us out into the forest. "But the length of time it takes to get there can vary widely."

"Why is that?" Kliment asked with the air of impatience of a man eager to return to his lover, and then their masters.

"There's no telling who you'll run into in the forest," Jace answered, sending Peter a wry look. "Or who will drag you off on a different adventure to the one you intended to go on."

"We're not ending up in Hedeon this time," Peter said in a loud, firm voice. He then paused, broke into a half laugh, then said, "Actually, I wouldn't be surprised if we *did* end up in Hedeon."

"Especially since it sounds like Hedeon will be the focal point for the end of this whole thing," Neil said quietly.

I fully believed he was right. The fate of the frontier and the world I hoped to build would be decided in Hedeon. That was almost a foregone conclusion.

"In my opinion," Arlas went on, "Whatever wild wolves might be out there will probably avoid us. Our group is large enough to fend off any sort of raid, which they will see. I believe that will cause them to avoid us instead of confront us."

“And you all mentioned yesterday that the wolves are heading west now,” Neil pointed out, glancing to Kliment.

“One can only hope they stay there,” I said.

“If we don’t encounter any resistance along the way, we should be in Novoberg by tomorrow night,” Peter pointed out as we reached the new gate.

“I pray that we arrive at our destination as quickly and uneventfully as possible,” I said, nodding to the men who were guarding the gate.

We only waited a moment for the gate to be opened, and then we were on our way.

Because of its location on the north side of the river, Gravlock was more tightly guarded and defended than most settlements of the Wolf River Kingdom. Alexei had spent the last few years building up my beloved city’s defenses while I’d been king. He’d quietly recruited for Gravlock’s guards, which, in effect, meant he’d strengthened part of the Wolf River Kingdom’s army.

As complex and civilized as the society we’d built within the heart of the Wolf River Kingdom was, the world outside our domain was just as wild as it had always been. I was pleased to see that the buffer of cleared land and newly cultivated fields on the north side of Gravlock that was meant to separate the land belonging to the Wolf River Kingdom from the land belonging to no one had grown since the last time I’d been out beyond my city in this direction. It was too risky to plant crops in those fields, but someone had come up with the ingenious idea of sowing meadows of wildflowers and creating a vast apiary in the space.

I liked to think that the bees would defend us as much as they would enhance Gravlock’s economy with their honey and the mead made from it. I even had thoughts of incorporating bees into a new sigil for Gravlock.

That didn’t mean we’d claimed much territory, however, or that it was a comfortable barrier protecting us from everything wild and unpredictable about the frontier.

We had passed into the darker, heavier-feeling part of the frontier within an hour, and all the light, teasing conversations that my husbands and our friends engaged in couldn't stop me from feeling that I was leaving the place where I should be to march into a land that was foreign to my heart.

Fortunately for all, that day's journey was as smooth and uneventful as we could have asked for, and by dusk, we'd stopped to erect a small camp for the night. If any of Yiannis's men, or whatever unaffiliated wolves remained in the forest, had noted our expedition, they neither harried us nor even made themselves known.

In no time, I was settled into a large, specially crafted bedroll with Peter and Neil tucked on either side of me.

"Have I mentioned how glad I am that you had this bedroll made?" Neil asked, his voice showing how chilly the night had become once the sun had gone down. He wriggled closer to me, throwing an arm and a leg over my body. "I might actually be warm enough to sleep tonight."

"Who wants to sleep when we're out under a clear, starry, open sky with Magnus between us?" Peter asked impishly, cuddling against my other side.

I barked a laugh, mostly because both of my beloveds, and myself, were fully clothed.

"The rest of us are right here," Jace called into the night in a humorously flat voice. "And I, for one, don't want to listen to that."

Peter lifted his head and called back, "Oh, come on. You like to watch as much as Neil sometimes."

"Watch the other Sons fucking around, yes," Jace said. "But you, Magnus, and Neil? God, no."

Neil stifled a giggle in the fabric of my coat near my shoulder. Even Peter laughed and settled down.

It was the briefest of exchanges and decidedly silly, but it was precisely what we all needed to help the tension of the day and our mission melt away.

Miraculously, I slept better under the stars, with our mission underway, than I had in my own bed the night before. I would be the first to admit that I became someone else when I was out in the world, shouldering the weight of responsibility for my party, and for my kingdom. I could lose myself in the role of king and deport myself so that those around me would be reassured. Even in my sleep.

It was only when I was at home that I allowed myself to feel as a man, to love as one who craved to be loved above all else, and to care for my husbands and family as if they were the only priority I had.

I rather preferred to be that man, if I was honest. I never wanted to be a leader. I only ever wanted to be a lover. But one did what one must in order to create the world they wanted to live in.

The morning dawned with a bit of sun peeking through increasingly thick clouds. It was enough to wake us near dawn, but as we prepared and ate a quick breakfast, then gathered our things to be on our way, the clouds above turned gloomy. I'd never minded traveling in inclement weather, even rain—which began to spit intermittently down on us by midday—but there was something about the grey and heavy air we ended up traveling through that inspired feelings within me as if everything were about to go wrong.

As it transpired, my uncomfortable feelings were not unfounded.

“I think I recognize this part of the forest,” Jace said with a frown halfway through the afternoon.

“It’s a forest,” Neil replied. “Every part looks the same to me.”

“No, but there’s something about this place that’s really familiar,” Jace went on with a frown, glancing around. “It’s the hot springs we keep seeing.”

“I know where we are,” Kliment said, suddenly turning pale.

He wasn’t half as pale as my Peter, however.

Peter had been growing more and more tense as the afternoon wore on. He'd been relatively silent, too, which was unusual for him. He must have been counting the hours and the miles, and he clearly had a sixth sense for where in the forest we were.

"What's that smell?" Arlas asked, sniffing the air and making a face.

His question was all it took for me to catch the scent as well. It was faint at first, but unmistakably vile. The farther we walked, the more distinct it became, like ash and rot and death. I'd smelled that stench before when stumbling across carrion in the forest, but within minutes, this particular scent became overwhelming.

"We should go around," Arlas said, coughing.

"No," Peter said, his voice hoarse, a bit of green making its way into the pale of his face. "I need to see."

I knew at once what he needed. Reports of the destruction of his first lover's house, his first home in the forest, were not enough. My dear, hurt husband needed to see the devastation for himself.

"I'm here with you," I murmured softly to him, nudging my horse to ride closer to Peter's than usual.

"I'm here, too," Neil said, coming with us.

Jace and Gennadi tapped their horses to walk just behind us, but the others stayed well out of the way.

We saw the first rotting corpse long before I caught sight of anything that could have once been a dwelling. It was nearly impossible to tell that the twisted, blackened mass had ever been a human. The scraps of clothing and bones that had been partially picked clean by scavengers were the only way to tell.

I swallowed the bile that crept up my throat and moved on, but there was another half-eaten, disintegrating corpse a few yards beyond, then another. I heard Neil gag on Peter's other side, which tipped me precariously close to vomiting as well.

The only way to combat the increasingly noxious scent was to hold the sleeve of my jacket to my mouth and nose as we rode on. All five of us did the same, though that didn't stop Jace from retching once we came to the edge of the clearing.

It was a scene from hell. All that remained of the house was a tall, crumbling pile of rocks that must have been the main chimney once and charred, blackened rubble strewn across a wide area. I didn't even try to count the number of rotting bodies, and I had to stop myself from looking at them for too long. Wild carrion-eaters had clearly made a feast of what was left after the destruction of Sascha's house, but even they had fled the site now.

It wasn't only the house and the bodies that stole the breath from my lungs. The entire area was blackened, like the fire had spread all the way through the clearing to singe the trees. The whole thing felt like the aftermath of an explosion of evil. It was as if nothing would ever be able to grow in that space ever again.

Which was likely the opposite of what would happen. In time, the rot of the men who had died here would enrich the soil, causing new life to spring up and cover the carnage. There would probably be flowers and an abundance of trees.

But the site would always be cursed. I felt that in my bones.

My observations were shortened by a strangled moan from Peter that turned quickly to retching. My own thoughts and suppositions vanished as I reached across to loop an arm around Peter's back as best I could with us both mounted.

Peter retched again, bile streaming from his mouth as he began to tremble. He made the most ungodly sound, one that had the hair on the back of my neck standing up, as he clutched at me in any way he could.

"Take his horse," I said in a rough voice, closing my arms around him so that I could pull Peter over onto my saddle.

Peter heaved and gagged once more before I was able to settle him across my front, then he buried his face into my

chest.

“We need to leave this place,” I said, close to choking myself.

The others didn't hesitate. They didn't even nod their assent. Jace came forward to take Peter's horse, and we all turned around and left as quickly as we dared, fleeing what was surely sacred ground, but not in a good sense.

Peter probably had the best of it with his face pressed close to my armpit as he slumped and slouched against me. My odor was a far cry better than the stench of that part of the forest.

I wasn't certain I would ever get the memory of that scent out of my nose, and we'd only stood there looking at the site for a moment.

“Is he alright?” Neil asked in a worried voice that made him sound years younger once we were well away. “He looked like he had one of his seizures.”

My brow flew up. I'd completely forgotten about Peter's seizures, since it had been so long since he'd had one. But Neil was right. Peter's reaction to the obliteration and desecration of his one-time home had been very much like his seizures of old. He still hadn't recovered either.

“Peter, my love,” I spoke softly to him, trying to muscle him up a bit and stroke his face. “You're safe now. What's done is done, and you were no part of it. Your memories have been preserved, even if the scene of them is gone.”

Jace and Gennadi came near as well, but not so near as to crowd us. They and Neil watched anxiously as I cradled Peter and stroked his face until the vacant, terrified look he wore faded and his awareness returned.

When it did, Peter grimaced and burst into tears. He grabbed my jacket and struggled to sit straighter, but that ended with him sitting astride the saddle in front of me, facing me awkwardly, and wrapping as much of himself around me as he could.

I nodded to the others as I gripped my beloved tightly. “Let's return to the others as fast as we can.”

“And get as far away from here as possible,” Neil added in a dire voice.

It was a good half hour before we made it back to where we’d left the others. They’d made a sort of pseudo camp for the duration of their wait, but when they saw all of our grim expressions and Peter plastered against me, they left what they’d been doing and came to greet us.

“What happened?” Arlas asked. “Were you...were you attacked?” His questions sounded confused more than convinced.

“Is it as bad as I remember it?” Kliment asked in a haunted voice.

Neil swallowed thickly, then answered, “Worse.”

“No one but wild animals have come by to clean up,” Jace said in short, tight clips. “None of the bodies have been buried, just....” He shook his head and looked away.

“I was afraid of that,” Kliment breathed out, then pushed a shaking hand through his hair.

I hadn’t thought to ask in Gravlock, but clearly Kliment and Renz had at least walked by the site of Sascha’s house on their way back from Novoberg. Kliment’s expression was one of horrified remembrance, and if he’d been fleeing during the fire itself, he wouldn’t have seen what was there in such a way as to provoke that expression.

“Neil, take our Peter from me,” I said once Neil had dismounted. “We’ll rest here for the rest of the day and night and continue to Novoberg tomorrow.”

I attempted to shuffle Peter in my hold, but he suddenly seemed to come alive again and clung to me, gasping, “No!”

I stopped trying to maneuver him into Neil’s waiting arms, and Peter stopped struggling, then let out a sigh. “You need rest, my darling,” I said in my softest voice. “You’ve had a blow as sharp as any physical one. You need a moment of peace to recover.”

Still, Peter shook his head. “There is no peace here,” he said in a hoarse voice. “There will never be any peace in the forest. We have to get as far away from here as possible. Please, Magnus.”

I felt helpless, which was not something I liked to feel. I glanced pleadingly to Neil, asking my other beloved what should be done.

Neil winced. “Peter does have a point,” he said, his gaze fixed on our husband, then turning up to me. “It’s dangerous in the forest. Yiannis and his men are out here somewhere. Maybe not immediately nearby, but I, for one, would feel safer if we continued to Novoberg.”

Peter let out a shuddering breath and clung tighter to me. His back shook, and even though I couldn’t see because his face was buried against my shoulder, I thought he was weeping.

I could not blame him. Seeing destruction and devastation on that level, at a sight which was the scene of so many important memories in his life, good and bad, must have raised long-dead emotions and brought his journey into the forest full-circle.

Like seeing Rurik’s visage after so, so long had brought me to my knees.

I nodded, making a decision. “We’ll continue on until we get as close to Novoberg as we can without being spotted by any of its sentinels, if they have any,” I said. “We’ll make camp for the night and rest so that we enter the city in the morning, with the greatest amount of strength.”

Jace hummed somewhere behind me, then stepped into my sight. “He’s right,” he told the others. “You’re both right. We can’t stay here and leave ourselves vulnerable, but we can’t enter Novoberg looking weak.”

“Alright,” Peter sighed against me, trying to push himself to sit up. He managed it enough to look into my eyes. The misery I saw there was heartbreaking. “But I want to ride with you or Neil.”

“Ride with me, love,” Neil said, holding his hand up to Peter. “Let’s give Magnus a chance to rest.” I was secretly grateful for his consideration of my taxed strength. “Besides, I need to hold you for a while.”

It was decided. Moving as if he were as limp as a rag doll, Peter slid from my embrace into Neil’s arms. I stretched my back and neck, then hopped down from my horse to help Neil and Peter onto Neil’s. No one else in our party said a word as we all mounted again, then set out for Novoberg once more.

“I’ve never seen him like that,” Jace said twenty minutes or so into our new, more somber trek, riding up beside me.

I noted that Gennadi was now riding with him, his cheek rested against Jace’s back and his eyes closed in an expression of sympathetic misery.

“I have,” I told Jace discreetly. “Peter’s time with Sascha formed him more than he likes to let on. He saw great joy and great violation in that house. I fear seeing it as he did just now ripped open an old wound.”

Jace nodded once. I could tell he had more to say.

He took another five minutes to say it, however.

“Peter is one of our strongest weapons,” he said in a near whisper. “I believe we are going to need him in the coming days or weeks to work his magic. Definitely with Igor, but maybe with others as well.”

I smiled in a way that would have been sly, had I not been so thoroughly exhausted. “We will need Peter to show that he is a future king, you mean,” I said.

Jace blinked, as if he hadn’t thought of it that way, then said, “Yes. All eyes will be on us as we navigate this war that isn’t quite a war. What Peter and I, and Neil, and any of the younger men do will be remembered.”

I nodded and gave Jace an approving smile. “Now you’re speaking like a future leader,” I said. “And to think, it only took three years in my household for you to learn how.”

Jace scowled thunderously for a moment, then relented into a lopsided grin. "Watch yourself, old man," he said. "We're the future, not you."

"I am well aware of it," I said.

We rode on in relative silence until the sun was low on the horizon and we could smell smoke of a different sort. Civilization had a certain homey scent to it, and as day turned into dusk, I caught the scent of home fires, animals, and the slightest touch of cooking on the air. We were almost there.

I turned to seek out my husbands and found Peter looking as though he were asleep with his arms around Neil's middle. Their positions were such a close mirror to the way Jace and Gennadi rode that I nearly laughed. I wouldn't dare point out the similarity to my Peter, however. He would resent the pointing out of his pup-like tendencies bitterly.

That didn't stop me from dismounting quickly, then rushing over to help him down from Neil's horse.

"I'm alright, I'm alright," he insisted in a stronger voice as I pulled him into my arms.

"You are not alright, my love," I told him gently, waiting until his feet were solidly on the ground to loosen my grip on him.

Peter sent me a look that was a tiny bit sour...which did more to convince me he was recovering than any words could. "I had a seizure," he said, far more frankness and challenge in his voice than had been there earlier. "Seeing the house destroyed was just...." He shook his head.

"I know, my love," I said, hugging him tightly again. "Let's make camp and talk about it."

Peter made a gruff sound. "What if I don't want to talk about it?" he asked, taking Neil's hand once Neil had dismounted, and walking toward the small, cleared area where Arlas and the others were setting up a camp.

I laughed aloud. "You? My Peter? Not wanting to talk? Then I will know you are truly scarred for life."

Peter managed a half-laugh, relenting from the resentment he was likely using to mask his embarrassment at falling apart.

We fussed and fiddled around the camp, claiming spaces that would give each group or couple enough space for whispered intimacies while still staying to a safe camp. A single fire was lit, but its size was closely regulated to keep it a secret from the city, whose faint glow could be seen above the line of the trees in the northeast, and whatever wolves might have followed us through the forest.

“Tell me truthfully, my love,” I murmured to Peter after we had eaten a small meal and tucked ourselves into our bedroll for the night. “Are you well?”

Neil and I had taken up positions on either side of Peter that night through an unspoken agreement we’d felt in our souls. Peter sighed, like he thought it was all unnecessary, but clasped our hands as he did.

“I will be well,” he admitted in a subdued voice. “It was just a terrible shock is all.”

“I can imagine,” Neil said, stroking the hair off Peter’s forehead as he lay on his side, gazing down at our beloved. “No one should ever see anything like what we saw.”

“It wasn’t just that,” Peter said in a thick voice. I pushed to my side to mirror Neil and rested a hand on his heart as he went on, staring up at the cloudy night sky. “It’s all gone. Everything. All the good memories and all the horror. It’s like an entire part of me has been wiped out. It’s nothing but ghosts and memories now.”

“Oh, Peter,” Neil sighed. “I’m so sorry.”

“And it made me think,” Peter went on, almost as if he hadn’t heard Neil. “It made me realize some things.” He shifted to glance at Neil, then at me, then said, “There’s no going back, is there. I’m never going to be that innocent, randy, excited young man just waiting to discover the secrets of the world. I can no longer merely comment from the sidelines, trusting that men who are older and more experienced with the world will solve everything.”

He raised a hand and pressed it to my cheek.

“No, my love,” I said with a sad, proud smile for him, cupping my hand over his. “You are perfectly right in interpreting everything you saw today. Your childhood is no more. You are a man now.” I looked at Neil as well, because everything I had to say was as much for him as it was for Peter. “You have inherited the pain and the responsibility along with the sweetness and promise.”

Peter’s lower lip wobbled, and his eyes turned glassy as he said, “But I liked being a young man. I liked putting my faith in you and not having to worry about anything.”

I could see right past his words to the heart of what they meant. I dipped down, touching my lips softly to his and tasting his sorrow and his fears.

“I still love you, in twine with Neil, more than anything or anyone on this earth, my beautiful darling,” I told him, peeking at Neil as well. “My love for you will not change if you change.” I smiled a bit more and went on with, “Hasn’t that been the core of what we’ve been fighting about for months now?”

Peter let out a burst of breathy laughter, then sucked it all in again with a twist of fear in his expression. “I’m supposed to be a man now, Magnus. Stop making me want to cry.”

I smiled warmly and cradled the side of his face, brushing my thumb over his parted lips. “Men cry, my love. Believe me, we do. More so than ever, as becoming a man makes us see everything we have lost and have to lose. But we have so much to gain as well.” I looked at Neil again as well, then said, “Welcome to the next and greatest part of your lives.”

“I feel like I can face anything as long as I have the two of you with me,” Neil said, gripping my arm.

“Me too,” Peter added, gulping and looking like he was trying to pull himself together and be strong.

My heart felt warm and alive within me. “I fully believe that together, the three of us can face any challenge that comes our way, whether from without or within. We three are one

now.” I pulled Peter’s hand up onto his chest then grabbed Neil’s. When our three hands were joined together, I went on with, “Whether it’s raising our children or bringing order to the entire frontier, we three will be victorious as long as we are one.”

And Rurik, though his presence in our union was more like a notable absence.

“I love you, Magnus,” Neil said with a great rush of sentiment. “And you, Peter,” he added.

“And I love you both,” Peter said, his tears flowing freely for a different reason.

Neil hurried to kiss Peter, then I did as well, then Neil and I kissed.

From that ineffable place beyond all of us, I felt Rurik’s approval and involvement as well. I could practically see his hand joined with ours, as it would be someday, hopefully a long, long time from now, when all four of us were united in whatever life came after this one.

I was absolutely certain that if we had been at home in our own bed, the rest of the night would have been spent in tender lovemaking, and rigorous fucking, that would have rendered all three of us completely useless by dawn.

As it was, when the new day dawned, the three of us dragged ourselves out of our fitful slumbers, muscles aching and bodies bruised from sleeping on the cold ground. Our entire camp had a feeling of expectation to it, like musicians tuning in preparation to play. Arlas and our guards were already up preparing breakfast, and Jace and Gennadi had moved to the farthest edges of the camp, as if they’d gone to relieve themselves, but were standing close and talking now.

Peter rose from our bedroll with a particularly stoic look. He had dark circles under his eyes and was slightly more wan than usual. Beyond that, he looked years older than he had in my and Neil’s arms the night before.

He’d taken everything he’d seen and thought, and everything Neil and I had discussed with him, to heart. He’d

gone to bed a boy, but I could feel that he'd awakened as a man to a greater degree than he ever had before.

And I loved him for it. Peter thrilled me. He made my heart sing. He was a reflection of me in so many ways, but he was a new and growing man of his own as well. I wanted to explore and devour him. I wanted to stand back and watch him and Neil take over the world together.

“Do you think he’s going to be alright?” Neil asked me in a whisper as Peter walked off to relieve himself against a tree.

I smiled at Neil, then hooked an arm around his waist and drew him close. “Yes, my darling love,” I said, then kissed him. We both watched our beloved husband, buzzing with feelings for him, and I continued to say, “Isn’t he magnificent?”

“He is,” Neil said, but his sigh was too wistful for my liking.

I turned away from Peter so that I could face Neil fully and cupped the side of his face. “You are magnificent as well, my darling,” I told him. “If you harbor any doubts about that, dismiss them at once.”

“It’s just that—” Neil began, then cut himself off, lowering his head with a sigh. He gathered himself similarly to how Peter had when he rose from bed—though I could tell Neil didn’t realize that was what he was doing—and looked me in the eyes, as if daring himself to say what was in his heart. “I know you don’t love him more than me, but sometimes—”

He cut himself off again and shook his head.

He tried to look away, back to Peter, but I held his face firmly. I then slanted my mouth over his in a kiss that I sincerely hoped would wipe every doubt from his mind and dispel any lingering idea that he was not loved deeply and passionately.

“You are my heart, my darling,” I told him, meeting his eyes and holding them so firmly that there was no way he would mistake me. “And Peter is my lungs. Both are desperately needed in equal measure for me to live.”

Neil grinned at me with a combination of bashful adoration and equal ardor that had my blood running hot.

But again, we stood no chance of being able to consummate those feelings, or indeed, even to kiss again. Before we could, a call of, “Hello?” rang through the mist rising through the forest around us along with the dawn.

I snapped straight and turned in the direction of Novoberg, the direction the voice had come from. In an instant, I wished I’d thought to arm myself when I stood. Neil gasped and fumbled with his belt, as if looking for a weapon as well, and Peter dashed to us from where he’d gone off.

Everyone was instantly on high alert, but it turned out we didn’t need to be.

A moment later, Sebald and his faithful Avenel emerged from the mist, mounted, along with Nikandr and two men who I vaguely recognized as soldiers who had gone with Sai on his rescue mission.

“It’s you!” Sebald exclaimed, climbing down from his horse and dashing to us. “Thank God, it’s you!”

CHAPTER

FOUR

“Nikki!”

Before I could so much as take my next breath, Kliment broke away from where he'd been helping Arlas and the others around the fire and dashed across the misted ground to throw himself at his fellow pup and, I assumed, lover. Nikandr all but fell off his horse in his own haste to reach Kliment. Their reunion was blissful and sweet, filled with tears and kisses and an outpouring of emotion that was so powerful the two of them collapsed to the ground in a laughing, sobbing heap.

It reminded me so much of my reunion with Peter and Neil years ago, after their ill-fated journey to Hedeon, that my throat squeezed with sentiment. I remembered too well the anguish of worrying I'd never see my beloveds again, the months of torture as I imagined every horrific thing that could have happened to them, and the ultimate joy at seeing them again after so long.

I was not the only one aware of the similarity. Neil inched closer to me, leaning against my side and glancing at me, eyes shining with emotion.

Sebald, meanwhile, had run at Jace and Gennadi, hugging them together with almost as much enthusiasm as Kliment had met Nikandr.

“One of the scouts said a party was approaching from the south, but that they didn't look like Yiannis's men,” Sebald

said, breaking away from Jace and Gennadi to come clap hands and exchange a one-armed hug with Peter.

As he did, Gennadi and Avenel hugged like long-lost brothers.

“I knew it had to be someone from the Wolf River Kingdom, but I never would have guessed it would be you lot,” Sebald continued, moving to greet Neil as he had Peter, then me with the respect that was due a king.

“My apologies for not sending advanced warning of our arrival,” I said, treating Sebald like the future ambassador he was destined to be.

No, not future. Perhaps more than even Peter and Neil, Sebald had already stepped into the role of representative of our kingdom.

“I can’t imagine why you, of all people, King Magnus—”

“Just Magnus,” I interrupted Sebald.

He missed only a beat before continuing, “Why you, of all people, would come to Novoberg. But I have to say, I’m glad you’ve come.”

He was serious enough as he spoke that a thrill of excitement shot through me. Already, I could tell that we’d come to the right place if we wanted to be in the center of everything that was about to transpire on the frontier.

“We have so much to tell you,” Peter said, his expression and tone as serious as I’d ever seen him. “General Rufus is dead. Boris and Yates as well. Igor has risen to take his place as king of Cremona.”

“We know,” Sebald said, his expression as mature and dire as Peter’s. “A messenger arrived just yesterday with word of the plague that hit Tesladom, killing half the people in the palace.”

I caught Peter and Neil exchanging a look, but when Peter opened his mouth, likely to explain the truth, I shook my head. He’d already shared the truth when he shouldn’t have once.

The fewer people who knew what had really transpired in Teslalom the better.

“We all have much to share, it would seem,” I said. “I, for one, would very much like to know how Sai’s mission unfolded, and to know more about this man, Commander Kythria, who has, perhaps, taken Klovisgard?”

I phrased my demand as a question, even though I already knew the answer, and I got precisely the reaction I’d hoped for.

Sebald laughed humorlessly and shoved a hand through his hair. “Kythria did indeed take Klovisgard,” he said. “His army is there as we speak, mopping up, no doubt, and preparing to march on to Hedeon.”

It was as I suspected.

“And what is the state of Novoberg?” I asked.

Sebald stood a little straighter, squared his shoulders, and nodded. “If you’re ready to pack up your camp and come with me, I can show you.”

That was all I needed, and all the others needed as well. We set to work cleaning up the area of our camp and packing up our things as swiftly as we could. I gave Arlas orders to make certain it looked as if no one had rested on that spot before we left.

“I’ve been more terrified for you all than I can say,” I caught Gennadi whispering to Nikandr as we mounted our horses and started through the lifting mist, following Sebald and Avenel’s lead. “I...I know what it’s like to be captured by an evil man.”

“None of them touched us,” Nikandr whispered back to him. “But I could tell they all wanted to. If it wasn’t for some deal Yiannis had made with General Rufus, or for Renz and Sascha’s quick thinking, I don’t even want to think about what would have happened to us.”

I exchanged a look with Peter as we maneuvered our horses into place near the front of the line. We’d both already been told the circumstances of the pups’ kidnapping and

rescue, but it was reassuring to have another confirmation of everything that had happened from someone who didn't know we already knew.

“What is the situation with the city of Novoberg?” I asked as our party rode into the edge of the forest, where the trees were thinner. “The last intelligence we had was that the place was mostly abandoned and that only a handful of squatters lived there.” I revealed as little as possible of what we actually knew in the hopes of getting as full a report as possible.

Sebald's face pinched, and he nodded. “I suppose that's true. Novoberg isn't uninhabited, but the people who live there are few and...unique.”

“What does that mean?” Peter asked, sitting tall in his saddle as he rode beside me. I could tell he was working hard to embrace the newfound maturity he believed he'd found within himself.

The look Sebald gave Peter was particularly grave. “They're fiercely independent, for one,” he said, his glance traveling on to me and to Neil, who had ridden up by my other side. “They've established their own form of governance and living. They don't use money, for another. Everything is traded in kind, food for labor and goods for other goods.”

I nodded. “I've heard of experimental colonies which have operated on these principles,” I said. “They can work sometimes.”

And sometimes they worked until a single, clever individual came along and declared himself king. Those individuals generally had no problem taking control as the people who felt most comfortable in those sorts of living arrangements were rarely strong enough to stop them.

“I honestly don't know whether things will continue like that in Novoberg or not,” Sebald said. “The situation has already changed since we arrived two weeks ago.”

“It has?” Neil asked.

“How so?” Peter asked as well.

Sebald's expression grew worried again. "Well, for one, they sort of have a leader now."

"Did Sai take over as king when he showed up?" Jace asked. He and Gennadi rode close enough behind us to be able to hear the conversation. "We heard from Kliment that he's in Novoberg, along with his little army," he added when Sebald twisted in his saddle to look at him.

"No, it's not Sai who's decided they're the leader of Novoberg." Sebald swallowed, then twisted the other way in his saddle to look at Peter. "It's Ox."

I gaped, no idea how to react to that information. Half of me was incredulous. The other half wanted to laugh out loud.

"I knew Ox was in Novoberg," Peter said in a rough, exhausted voice. "But she's declared herself...queen?"

Sebald laughed ironically. "Don't you dare suggest that title to her," he said. "She's already slapped Orel hard for referring to her as a queen. She prefers not to have a title, well, other than calling herself the leader."

I could absolutely imagine how Ox would be as a leader. She would be a chaotic force for good.

She would be utterly and completely in over her head.

"Did she really slap Orel?" Neil asked with a badly concealed laugh.

Sebald sent him a wry smirk. "She really did. It was hilarious."

Jace laughed loudly. That seemed to burst the tension that had fallen over our group. The rest of the ride to Novoberg was spent with Sebald regaling us with his version of the same tale Kliment had told—about how Novoberg fancied itself neutral in all struggles on the frontier, how its people were kind but naïve, and how Sai and his army had arrived within hours of when Commander Kythria and his men had departed the city.

By the time we reached the gates of the city—which were open in a way that no frontier city gates ever had been before

—we'd reached the point in our discourse where discussion turned to speculation about Kythria and his activities.

“He had to have conquered Klovisgard early in his campaign,” Peter said after he'd been handed all the pieces of the puzzle. “We were in Teslalom when a rider came to tell Rufus that the city had fallen.”

“It must have just fallen when the rider was sent, and that rider must have traveled fast,” Jace said, frowning as he worked out the timeline.

“Or taken the river instead of going on foot,” Peter pointed out.

“I don't think Klovisgard put up much of a fight, to be honest,” Sebald said. “The reports that have trickled back to us all say that Kythria had the city under his thumb within hours.”

“How are you getting reports of the attack on Kostya?” Peter asked precisely the question I would have asked, making me smile. “Surely, Commander Kythria isn't sending back reports of his activity to Novoberg.”

“He's not,” Sebald said. “We have a group of volunteers observing the situation who travel between Novoberg and Klovisgard on a rotating basis who've been giving us information.”

“A rotating basis?” Neil asked as we walked through the eerily unguarded gate and into the city. “And does Commander Kythria know these men are watching them?”

“Men and women,” Sebald corrected him as we turned a small corner to make our way to one of the main boulevards that, I assumed, ran from the gate to the palace at the center of the city. “Ox made a point of including any women who wanted to be involved in the efforts.”

“That sounds like Ox,” Jace said with a half laugh.

“There are a dozen messengers total,” Sebald continued his explanation. They ride in pairs. Two are always in Klovisgard, two on the road, and two in Novoberg with the others at

various points along the way. That way we get reports of what's been going on every day."

It was an ingenious method of keeping abreast of things, if I did say so myself.

But rather than saying as much I was engaged in glancing around me at the city where my beloved husbands had been born and raised. I'd never been there before, but I immediately recognized many of the things my darlings had told me about over the years.

The houses and businesses in that part of the city, near the gate, all had the distinct, timber and stucco construction that Neil had once described to me, with gardens in the front in a style that was unique to the city. Once we were halfway up the main boulevard, I caught a glimpse of one of the many fountains Novoberg was famous for as well. And in the distance, I could clearly see the palace and what I assumed was the palace school where my Peter and my Neil had secretly pined for each other, long before they'd been able to declare themselves.

But more importantly, the closer to the center of the city we got, the more evidence of abandonment and decay I saw. Foot traffic on the streets of the city was sparse enough nearer to the walls, but it trickled to almost nothing the closer we rode to the palace. Curiously, in what felt like a reverse of how things usually were in cities, the smaller, more modest homes and buildings were in the best repair, while the great mansions and palaces that had once belonged to the nobility were decrepit and overgrown.

"The citizens of Novoberg think the noble part of town is cursed," Sebald explained when he noticed us all glancing around in wonder. "They call these Death Houses."

"I don't blame them," Peter said, looking chilled, despite his warm coat. "I remember how frantic things were here at the beginning of the Dying Winter."

Neil sucked in a breath. "I bet they call this place cursed because of the way so many nobles were slaughtered in the Dying Winter."

“That’s it exactly,” Sebald said grimly. “Sai and his men have been systematically going through the houses in this part of the city since we arrived, and some of the things they’ve found are grim.”

As if speaking of him had somehow summoned the man, Sai stepped out of one of the once-great houses to our left. He wore a grimace as he spoke to the two men with him, but as soon as he glanced our direction and saw me, his expression lit with amazement.

“Magnus?” he called, stepping quickly away from the soldiers and rushing down the lane to greet us in the street. “What in heaven’s name are you doing here? I thought you were in Tesladom.”

“We were in Tesladom,” I said, then paused to dismount. I detested speaking to others from above them. It reminded me too much of how my uncle had ordered his court. “I trust you’ve heard of the events that have recently transpired in Cremona?”

Sai glanced all of us over as we dismounted. His gaze lingered on Jace for a bit longer than the rest of us, then he focused on me. “We heard there was a plague and many men, including General Rufus, Boris, and Yates, succumbed to it.”

Peter cleared his throat and shuffled by my side. I turned my head to him, met his eyes briefly to silently warn him not to reveal the truth yet, then faced Sai again with a smile.

“We have much to discuss about what has come to pass in the weeks since we parted company,” I said, moving closer to thump Sai’s shoulder. “For I do believe that a great many things on the frontier have changed quite a bit in a short span of time, and all parties involved need to be made aware of what has been going on with the others.”

Surprisingly, Sai wasn’t fooled. “Something else has happened, hasn’t it,” he said with a puzzled frown. “There’s more to General Rufus’s death than meets the eye.”

“Did King Magnus kill him?” I just barely heard Nikandr ask Kliment.

I shifted towards Nikandr, letting him know I'd heard him, and laughed. "No. I could barely hurt a fly, even if I wanted to."

It was a bald lie, of course. The way Jace snorted and Peter arched one eyebrow belied as much. I'd killed plenty of men in my time, but never without acute reason and absolute certainty that they deserved it.

"Rufus, Boris, and Yates were killed alright," Peter said, taking matters into his own hands, unable to contain himself any longer. "But it wasn't us, and it wasn't a plague."

"I knew the plague was just a story," Sebald said, reaching for Avenel's hand. The way Avenel nodded once told me they'd discussed the matter.

"I would be more than happy to reveal all," I said, adopting the demeanor of a weary traveler in need of a rest, "but perhaps we could do so where stray ears will not overhear."

Sai huffed a laugh as he gestured for us all to walk on towards, I assumed from our trajectory, the palace. "There aren't many stray ears in this part of the city," he said. "Novobergers don't like to come past the hedge at the end of the noble neighborhoods. More or less everyone we might come across is one of us."

"You can't know that for sure," Jace said, striding up to walk by his brother's side. "There could be spies everywhere. There are certainly enough places for them to hide."

"You'd think," Sai said. "But the people of Novoberg don't think like that."

"They think about whose turn it is to venture into the forest to fell trees for the communal wood pile," Sebald picked up the explanation. "They think about how many loaves of bread need to be baked every day so that everyone can have one. They think about whether they've all done their share of harvesting and hoeing in the community gardens."

"Lately, they've been thinking about whether there will be enough food to make it through the winter, especially if

foreigners keep showing up,” Avenel said in a timid voice.

“Is that what they think about?” I asked, my brow lifting. “Making it through the winter?”

I immediately decided to find a way for the Wolf River Kingdom to supply the people of Novoberg with food for the winter, whether or not the general population was aware of the origin of that food, so that the strange city could continue on in peace and prosperity. Ensuring their continued survival might also ensure the sustenance of a future ally.

Sai surprised me again by saying, “I can see what you’re thinking, Magnus, but I’m not certain the people of Novoberg will accept your charity.”

“I would never suggest something like *charity*,” I lied, pretending the idea was new.

Sai sent me an uncharacteristically sly look. “You can try, but these people are proud. They’ve only been here for a few years, but they’ve already established a unique cultural outlook. They pride themselves on self-sustenance.”

He finished that brief and baffling explanation as we reached the courtyard of Novoberg’s palace. I was more curious about that particular building than nearly anything else in the city. It had been my Peter’s home and the scene of too many miserable memories for him.

I expected to find Peter hunched in on himself, perhaps with his arms crossed, and a defeated look on his face. Instead, Peter stood tall and stiff, his shoulders back and his chin high, glancing around with a frown of puzzlement.

“Is something wrong?” Neil asked him before I could.

“Everything has changed,” Peter said. “The walls are the same, but this doesn’t feel like the palace I grew up in.”

Neil joined him in glancing around. So did I, but I had nothing to compare the sparsely furnished, rather cold palace as we entered. The structure of the building was solid, and it had been swept and cleared of whatever cobwebs I assumed it had held at some point, but it was as barren and lifeless as a mausoleum.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Sai said to Peter. “My men and I have made the palace our headquarters. Kythria had a contingent of his men clean the place during the day they were here, so I figured it would be easier to take advantage of the work they’d done than to tidy one of the other noble houses to stay in.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Peter muttered distractedly, looking around even more intently as we made our way through the once ornate front hall and down a side passage.

“We’re actually staying in the servants’ quarters,” Sai continued as he stepped ahead to hold open a small door for us. “I’ve always found that servants’ quarters are tidier and contain more of the things people actually need for day-to-day life than the main part of palaces.”

“And fewer people were probably murdered in this part of the palace,” Jace muttered under his breath.

I shot him a quelling look, but he was probably right.

“I spent more time in this part of the palace than the main part myself,” Peter said, his voice and expression now filled with memories as we descended a flight of stairs.

We stepped out into a wide hallway, then immediately across to a high-ceilinged room with a long table down the center. The room was warm from two fires crackling in the large fireplaces at either end of the room, and more people occupied the room than even roamed the city streets, most of them soldiers. I recognized some of them from their service to me in the last few years.

One of the men who had served as my guard a time or two, Brutus, noticed me, then leapt to his feet.

“King Magnus,” he said, visibly shocked, then dropped into a respectful bow.

The sound of chairs scraping and breakfasts being forgotten as plates and cutlery were dropped followed as the rest of the men in the room shot to their feet as well.

“My liege,” one of the soldiers who I recognized, but whose name I couldn’t remember, said, bowing like Brutus

bowed. The rest followed suit.

It was exactly the sort of show of fealty that I despised and one of the reasons I was very much done with being king.

“I am not your king anymore,” I told them in a cheerful tone, feeling a little sour. Try as I might, I couldn’t break people of the habit of deference. “But I appreciate your respect,” I added. “Please, return to your breakfasts. I wouldn’t mind a bit of something to eat myself.”

It was, perhaps, the wrong thing to say. Avenel—and half the rest of the men in the room, or so it seemed—shot into action. Avenel marched away from Sebald’s side and left the long room through a wide door at the end that I could see led into a kitchen.

“Please, sit, your majesty,” Brutus said, offering me his own place at the table.

A grand reshuffling followed, in which Peter, Neil, and I were given seats of honor at the head of the table, Jace and Gennadi with us, and then presented with a surprising array of delicious breakfast foods. Everything was simple, but prepared so well that they rivaled everything Rufus’s Old Realm cooks had served us in his bid to impress us in Teslalom.

“I’m still trying to figure out what to make of Novoberg,” Sai said once he and Sebald were seated at the table with us, though they only picked at a few small bits of the feast, as if they’d already eaten. “Everyone here is kind and helpful, but the moment I try to discuss alliances or treaties, they shut down and refuse to speak about it.”

“They don’t want any part in the wars of the frontier,” Sebald explained, his tone just a touch exasperated. “And they’re just as willing to help Kythria as they are to help us.”

“Is it necessary to have them as our ally?” Peter asked, his mouth half full of eggs.

I was a bit more enthusiastic about eating the things I’d been given myself, seeing as we’d been more concerned with packing up our camp and making it to Novoberg that morning than cooking breakfast.

“It would be nice,” Sai said. “Believe it or not, Novoberg has become a strategically important city. It now lies on the border between Cremona and Kostya, and depending on how far you end up pushing the boundaries of the Wolf River Kingdom, it could be positioned as a gateway to us as well.”

My ears perked at the way Sai referred to the Wolf River Kingdom as “us” so easily. I’d wondered if he’d grasped that he was one of us yet. Honestly, the only thing he lacked to make him a full member of our circle was a pup in his bed.

Almost as soon as I had that thought, and as Sebald went on to say, “Novoberg might not be on anyone’s border if Kythria succeeds in conquering Kostya,” a young man who couldn’t have been more than twenty followed Avenel into the room, carrying a tray with a steaming kettle and several cups on it.

Sai’s concerned gaze went right to the young man, and he followed him with his eyes as he and Avenel brought their additions to our feast to the table. I didn’t detect lust in Sai’s eyes, but he couldn’t take those eyes off the thin young man.

As soon as the object of Sai’s attention set his load on the table and stepped back, I studied him. There was something decidedly off about the boy, something dark and haunted. He had to have been one of the wolf pups that Kliment had told us about, one of the young men who had been abused and damaged beyond what any soul could tolerate.

I glanced back to Sai, who was still watching the boy, whether he was aware of it or not.

Interesting.

“What did the last report from Klovisgard say?” Jace asked in response to Sebald’s observation. “Conquering a city is one thing, but how well is Commander Kythria holding it?”

“Fairly well,” Sai said, snapping himself out of his observations of the ruined boy. “It turns out that Stepan, or Cyril, more likely, knew Kythria was coming, and he called for the evacuation of Klovisgard.”

“Not everyone obeyed that order, apparently,” Brutus added. “That includes Arseny Rozynov, who is acting as governor of the city.”

Jace sat up straighter, his eyes going wide, then glanced to Sai.

“I appointed him years ago,” Sai said, frowning and distracted.

“Whether Arseny and the others stayed because they didn’t want to leave their homes or because they would have preferred to be General Rufus’s subjects is up for debate,” Sai said.

“That would explain why Kythria was able to take Klovisgard so quickly,” Peter said, spearing a bit of sausage with a fork and popping it into his mouth the moment he finished speaking.

I did so love the sight of my Peter eating a sausage.

Trying not to grin and make a fool of myself, I joined the conversation with, “I find it an interesting speculation that some of those who remained in Klovisgard would have preferred Rufus over Stepan as their king. Particularly Arseny.”

“Are you really surprised?” Jace huffed a laugh. “My brother is a terrible king.”

He shot a brief, perhaps involuntary glance across the table to Sai.

Sai cleared his throat and fiddled with the handle of the teacup the ruined boy had just handed him. Jace’s veiled insult wasn’t lost on him.

“Either way, all it really means is that the defenses in Hedeon are likely stronger than they’ve ever been,” Peter said, chewing his sausage. He swallowed, then went on with, “Considering the situation in Hedeon last time we had a report of it,” he glanced across to Sebald, “I’d wager Hedeon is stronger and more protected than it was last time any of us were there.”

“Does Kythria have enough men to attack and take it?” Neil asked, looking worried.

“Possibly,” Sai said with a frown. “But if the army in Hedeon has anything close to the strength that it had when I was still king, it’ll be a hell of a fight.”

Sai had been king in Hedeon less than three months before. I couldn’t imagine the situation of Kostya’s army had changed all that much.

“It’s a fight Kythria won’t be expecting,” Jace pointed out with a bit of pride. “I’m willing to bet that Kythria has underestimated Hedeon. Especially if all he has to go on is the example of the other cities he’s come across.”

“Just like Rufus underestimated us,” Neil said.

“What exactly happened in Teslalom,” Sai asked, shifting away from Jace to frown at me. “You said the plague didn’t kill Rufus, Boris, and Yates, but what did?”

My guard went up in an instant, and with it the awareness that we were in the presence of a great many people.

“Did we say the plague didn’t kill him?” I asked, glancing quickly across my entourage of loved ones. “The official word out of Cremona is that many people in Teslalom succumbed to the plague.”

I looked particularly hard at Peter, who had come close to letting the truth slip out.

Blessedly, all of my loved ones, Jace and Gennadi included, grasped the importance of sticking to the official story at once.

“We’re lucky that we made it out of Teslalom without anyone other than Magnus falling ill,” Peter said, sounding a bit cagey.

“We’re lucky that Magnus recovered so quickly,” Neil added.

A tight silence fell over the table. I suspected that most of the people had caught on that the story out of Teslalom wasn’t what most people had been led to believe. None of the rank-

and-file soldiers looked as though they would openly question the report.

Sai frowned, and I could tell he understood there was, in fact, more, but it was not to become public knowledge. “I’m sorry you were ill,” Sai said stiffly. “Thank God you’ve recovered.”

“Recovered in time to risk my life diving into the heart of the battle for the frontier,” I went on with apparent cheer. “Whether that is an actual battle or a series of diplomatic negotiations.”

“Magnus, you are not planning *another* summit,” Jace said, eyes narrowed, as if he had the power to scold me.

I laughed. “My dear Jace, you know that’s how kingdoms are actually formed and matters of peace are truly decided.”

“They’re all just a bunch of arrogant bastards showing off to other arrogant bastards,” Jace said, rolling his eyes, then looking across the table at Sai.

“In my experience,” Sai said, clearing his throat. “Both fighting and talking are needed to end conflicts and decide the parameters of peace.”

It was the closest I’d ever heard Sai come to sounding like a real leader.

I still wouldn’t ever hand him a crown again, though.

“Before any sort of diplomatic meeting or political negotiation can happen,” I said, “we need to be made fully aware of the positions of the pieces on the board.”

“I can tell you what I know,” Sai said with a shrug. “I wish I knew more, though.”

“We shall pool our knowledge to paint the clearest picture of the situation on the frontier as it is now,” I said. I took one last bite of my breakfast, set my fork down, then planted my hands on the table. “But the first thing we need to decide upon, of course, is where my husbands and I and our attendants should be billeted whilst we are on this mission.”

“You’re welcome to stay in the palace,” Sai said with a shrug.

“I don’t want to stay here,” Peter blurted, his gaze haunted.

He didn’t need to say more. My Peter had been through enough already on this mission, and it had barely begun.

“Perhaps one of the noble houses?” I suggested gently.

“The only other house that’s been cleaned and repaired enough to be fit for a king is the Beiste house,” Sebald said, glancing warily to Neil. “It’s where Avenel and I are staying, and once they get back from the Infirmary in New Hope, it’ll be home to the wolf pups who were rescued from Yiannis’s camp.”

I brightened at the idea, but glanced to Neil, since the decision of whether he cared to stay in his old home was his alone.

“Oscar gifted your family’s house to those poor pups for as long as they wanted to live there,” Sai said, a bit nervously. “They’ll return to it once they are treated. They were ill and agreed to return to New Hope for treatment for now. Well, except Cid.” He turned to the ruined boy.

The ruined boy, Cid, stood with his back against the wall, staring blankly at the table. It hurt my heart to look at him. The damage that had been done to him was clear.

“I tried to tell Cid he needed to leave so that a doctor could tend to him,” Avenel said. “But he refused to go.”

Another interesting bit of information where my suspicions about Sai’s interest in the boy were concerned. Cid didn’t appear to have emotions, but he had attended to Sai carefully since entering the room and stood close to him now.

“I’m sure the wolf pups wouldn’t mind having a king and his consorts stay at their house while they’re away,” Sebald said. “It really would be the most convenient lodging for you.”

“I don’t mind,” Neil said slowly, glancing to me and Peter. “I don’t have the same sort of bad memories about my family’s house that Peter has of the palace.”

“It’s decided then,” I said, standing. Neil and Peter stood as well, followed shortly by Jace and Gennadi. “We’ll stay at the Beiste house. Sai, would you be so kind as to escort us there?” I wanted to fill him in on all the things that had been left unspoken, and escorting us seemed like the best option for discretion. “You as well, Sebald, since you appear to know so much about the house.” I wanted to keep Sebald in the inner circle as well.

“Certainly,” Sai said, standing and nodding.

It took a bit more shuffling and maneuvering before we were on our way. It was decided that Arlas and the other men who had come with us as guards would stay at the palace with the rest of Sai’s small army, and that they would join their ranks, should the need arise for defense. Sai assured me that we were perfectly safe from the people of Novoberg, but they were not the ones I was worried about. We’d been able to walk right through the gates, which meant anyone else would be able to as well.

Once we made certain our horses were being cared for, our small group left the palace and walked the short distance to the noble neighborhood and along a wide boulevard that had clearly once been beautifully landscaped.

“Are you going to tell me what’s really going on now?” Sai asked walking close to me as we went. Sebald walked on Sai’s other side.

“Rufus’s death was no accident,” I said quickly, before Peter could swoop in and botch the revelation with his enthusiasm for politics. Sai needed to be told the truth in as controlled a manner as possible. “We witnessed a coup while in Tesladom,” I went on. “It was a quiet one and very well thought out and executed. Truly, it was one of the smoothest and most successful coups I’ve ever seen.”

“Rather like the one that ousted me,” Sai commented bitterly.

I sensed a dangerous turn to his mood and clapped a hand on his shoulder to reassure him. “You survived your coup, my

friend, and it landed you in a position far more suited to your skills.”

It was the closest I’d come to telling Sai outright that he was a bad king.

He didn’t seem to take it personally.

At first.

“So I assume Igor was the one who did away with his rivals to take the throne,” Sai said as we turned onto a street that looked tidier than the others.

“He was,” I said, giving away as little as possible.

We reached a large and stately house close to the end of the street, and Neil stepped ahead of us, Peter keeping up at his side. Sebald stepped ahead to join them.

“There wasn’t any plague in Teslalom, was there,” Sai said, beginning to catch on to how things had unfolded.

“There was not,” I said, again offering as little as possible.

Neil and Peter reached the front door, hesitated for a moment, and then Neil opened it and walked through with a stoic look, as though he wasn’t certain what he might find.

“I’m glad you weren’t in any danger of succumbing to the plague at least,” Sai said as we followed my husbands and Sebald into the house.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said.

My attention was immediately distracted as our small group stood in the foyer, glancing around at the former Beiste home. It was pleasant, all things considered. A parlor off to the left looked a bit disused, but the matching parlor on the right had a fire crackling cheerily in its grate. Its furnishings appeared cozy and clean as well.

“It really hasn’t changed all that much,” Neil said in a surprised voice. He turned a full circle staring at everything.

“It really hasn’t,” Peter said, just as awed. “Not that I was here all that often before.”

I blinked at that, then smirked. It was hard for me to remember sometimes that my beloveds had grown up so close to each other, but that they had not connected and declared themselves until both were with me.

Actually, I rather liked that.

“Mother will be happy that her paintings are still here,” Neil said, stepping into the cheery parlor and examining a rather lovely landscape. He then turned to Sebald with a frown and asked, “Why are they still here? I would have expected that all the noble houses would have been looted ages ago.”

Sebald shrugged and followed him into the parlor. We all went.

“From what I’ve been told, people didn’t need luxury items, like paintings or furniture, during the Dying Winter. They needed food, and you can’t eat a painting.”

“You can burn a painting for fuel,” Jace suggested, helping himself to a seat on one of the sofas closest to the fire. He pulled Gennadi down into his lap, which seemed to suit Gennadi just fine.

“There’s no need to burn paintings when there’s an entire forest of wood for fuel right on the other side of the city walls,” Sebald said with a shrug, taking a seat as well. “And few of the current citizens of Novoberg dare to come into this part of the city.”

“They don’t need anything in this neighborhood or the palace,” Sai explained, waiting for me, Peter, and Neil to sit on one of the other sofas before taking a seat himself. “The city was designed for a population ten times what it is now. Even a pauper can have everything his heart desires without leaving the neighborhood out there where he’s chosen to settle.”

I nodded, curious to learn more about how Novoberg had organized itself and whether they were an entity we needed to concern ourselves with in any way.

But Sai rushed on with, “I’m still unclear on what exactly happened in Tesladom. Igor overthrew Rufus and killed Boris and Yates and...and what? Did he try to kill you as well?”

I laughed wryly. Peter and Neil exchanged wary looks.

“Neil’s quick thinking saved Magnus,” Peter said.

I knew he was only trying to praise his husband, but again, we would need to work on discretion.

“So Igor did try to eliminate you, too,” Sai said, his eyes going wide with indignation.

“Only because he thought I didn’t want to be with Magnus,” Peter tried to explain. “He thought that if Magnus was gone, the two of us might rule Cremona together.”

That only baffled Sai more. He gaped at Peter like he wasn’t quite certain what to make of him.

I cleared my throat. “Perhaps, my love, you should go back to the beginning of the story and explain your reasons for befriending Igor so that we can avoid any misunderstandings.” I reached for Peter’s hand as I spoke.

For a second, I thought he would yank his hand away, such was the intensity of his frown.

A moment later, he seemed to understand the necessity of telling the story in the correct order.

“We figured out fairly quickly that Rufus had drawn us to Tesladom as a way to neutralize us,” he said with a sigh, starting at the beginning.

He then followed with a surprisingly detailed and concise telling of everything that had transpired in Tesladom and what we had all come to think it meant, with a few additions by Neil and Jace.

I sat back and let Peter tell the tale entirely on his own. My Peter was in his element. He understood the political implications of everything that had happened and even speculated about things that would need to be done going forward to keep Igor in line and focused on the betterment of the frontier as a whole.

He was beautiful, my Peter. Not more than a day ago, he’d come face to face with a sort of mortality of his soul, and he’d come out shining. He hadn’t hidden from his pain or sought to

deny it or belittle it. He embraced all parts of who he was, and while many of those parts conflicted with each other—his desire to lead and to be dominated chief amongst those conflicts—he had learned to deal with everything with aplomb.

It wasn't until Sai barked a surprisingly harsh, "Unbelievable," whilst frowning at me, as if I'd committed an error, that I pulled my attention away from admiring my husband.

I was embarrassed to admit that infatuation had caused me to lose the thread of the conversation, so I asked, "Which part of the tale do you find unbelievable?"

Sai's expression darkened. "You," he said, sitting straighter. "I find you unbelievable."

I was not the only one who stiffened and flashed from casual to defensive in an instant. My beloveds and our friends looked ready to tear Sai limb from limb if he so much as sneezed in my direction. Even Sebald looked confused.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, pretending nothing at all were amiss.

"I've spent the last nearly three months trying to get you to undo the results of the coup in Hedeon that overthrew me, and you've done nothing but put me off and relegate me to a minor role in your court."

I caught my breath and reached for Neil's hand, as he sat beside me on the sofa, with Peter on his other side. I desperately hoped I hadn't misjudged Sai's contentment in his new position.

"But then Igor goes and stages a coup and actually kills men, attempts to kill you," Sai continued, "and you speak of him as if he's the best thing that ever happened to the frontier."

I drew in a calming breath and stopped myself from sourly pointing out that I had not said anything. Sai knew well enough to know that anything Peter said, or Neil, was as good as something that came from my own lips.

Before I could attempt an appeasing answer, Jace jumped in with, “That’s because Igor is a competent king who the people of the old cities might actually respect.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but Jace’s stab at his brother’s abilities served to deflect Sai’s anger from me as well as any shield might deflect a flaming arrow.

“I was a good king,” Sai snapped at him. “I cared about my people. I learned how to rule at our father’s side.”

“Father got himself killed,” Jace argued, raising his voice. “He bought into Gomez’s lies and handed over Hedeon, and then the rest of the cities, to him. You learned how to be a bad king from him.” Sai started to protest, but Jace cut him off with, “A good king can’t care what his people think of him. He needs to make the difficult decisions that will benefit the greatest number of people, whether they like it or not.”

I almost laughed at Jace’s idea of kingship. It seemed as though my protégé had a great deal to learn before his time as king came.

Peter glanced at me with a look that said pretty much the same thing.

“My friend,” I addressed Sai carefully, “whatever your skill or experience as a king was, even you must admit that you only ruled with difficulty. The people of Kostya accepted Stepan and Cyril as leaders in your stead. There is no returning from that sentence, even for the most talented of leaders.”

Sai’s indignation was directed at me again in a moment. “You think I was a failure as well, don’t you. You thought I was a failure from the start.”

The moment had come.

“As a king, yes,” I admitted with a sigh, a headache forming behind my eyes. “But as a leader of men, as the general of an army, you are more than competent. You are a natural soldier.”

“Why not a soldier king?” Sai argued. “And what does Igor have that I do not? He’s the son of a ruling duke, just as I am. He’s several years younger than me as well. He never

served in an army, and he took the coward's way out by fleeing into the forest with his lover and beginning the collapse of the frontier."

Ah. So that was what really stuck in Sai's throat. But, of course, a soldier would see prioritizing love as a failing.

Which only proved that Sai's vision for the frontier was so far from my own that it was best to keep him as far to the sidelines of whatever was coming as possible.

We were interrupted before I could say as much, however. And what a stellar interruption it was. Before I could make any sort of reply, Ox marched into the room, Viki right behind her, looking like the most delightful parody of a forest wolf that I'd ever seen and said, "Well then. Isn't this an argument I'd love to have a piece of?"

CHAPTER

FIVE

“Ox!” Peter jumped to his feet and wheeled around the end of the sofa like he would fling himself into his friend’s arms for a joyful reunion. “You’re here.”

“I am,” Ox said.

Her stance and the ice in her voice were designed to put Peter off, but my darling husband ignored Ox’s petulance and threw his arms around her nonetheless.

I was desperately proud of my love for his bravery. Even more so when Ox let out a sigh and relented. She hugged Peter back, closing her eyes momentarily and tilting her face towards him.

Any relief I felt knowing Peter and Ox’s friendship had not been permanently damaged withered as Ox opened her eyes and glared straight at me.

It seemed I was not to be forgiven for the wrongs, real or imagined, that Ox believed I was guilty of. I nodded to her in acknowledgement of that fact. It was fair enough. I had been educated to see the issue of women in the Wolf River Kingdom being compelled to bear children for we men from her point of view, and I could respect it.

Children were necessary for our kingdom, though, and I would not back down on the issue of encouraging the women that could to have them.

“What are you lot doing in my city?” Ox asked as she let of go of Peter. She promptly ignored me and addressed her

question to Neil and Jace instead.

“We came with news of everything that’s just happened in Cremona,” Peter said, as excited as a boy. “But what’s this I hear about you declaring yourself Queen of Novoberg?”

He asked the question with a cheeky smirk.

That forced me to hide my grin as I waited to see whether, as had apparently happened to Orel, Ox would deck my Peter as well.

Ox slumped, sending an annihilative look to Sebald. “You told them what happened to Orel, didn’t you?”

“Where is Orel anyhow?” Neil asked, cleverly steering away from a sensitive topic.

“He and Leremy are down in Baker Lane, taking a turn in the kitchens,” Viki said, moving forward to join our group along with Ox. She seemed a bit nervous and glanced around at the walls as though they would start leaking blood.

“What’s going on in Cremona that’s so important you needed to come here and disturb our peace?” Ox asked Peter, still defensive. “I mean, other than a plague and General Rufus dying,” she added with a casual shrug, walking over to one of the sofas and sitting in a graceless sprawl.

I smiled carefully and resumed my seat, keeping my mouth shut. Ox still wasn’t looking at me, and I had no expectation that she would acknowledge me again any time soon.

Surprisingly, Sai stood, still frowning over our earlier confrontation, and headed towards the doorway. “I’ll make us all some tea,” he said as he left.

My brow shot up. A king preparing tea for his guests? The world truly had been turned on its head.

Peter and Neil moved to sit on either side of me, which felt a bit deliberate on Peter’s part. I could tell from the glance he shot me that he realized Ox was attempting to ignore me and slice me from the conversation. I patted his leg briefly to let him know I did not mind, then sat back and let the young ones take over.

“I’ll tell you what I know about Rufus if you tell me what you know about Kythria,” Peter said to open the conversation.

It took all my effort not to laugh, or hook my hand around Peter’s neck to pull him close for a kiss.

Ox snorted. “Kythria is a soldier like any other soldier,” she said, then paused. “No.” She blinked, staring at the ceiling for a moment as she reconsidered. “He’s more like one of the old noblemen who decided to play soldier on a lark. When he was here before he marched on Klovisgard, he hosted a feast at the palace and invited a few dozen people from the city to attend.”

I exchanged a glance with Neil over that. He seemed just as intrigued as I was.

“Was he attempting to curry favor with the Novobergers?” Peter asked.

“I’m sure he was,” Ox said with a smile. “But we showed him. The second he left, we welcomed Sai in with open arms. I’ve discussed it with the other city leaders, and we’ve decided to be welcoming to whatever leader decides to show up at our gates. Whether we like them or not.”

She looked at me at last, acknowledging my presence in the room once more.

I nodded, accepting her spite, but not bothering to counter it. I had no ill feelings towards her, except, perhaps, for the way she abandoned Ella. One day, Ella might need her birth mother.

“Isn’t that stupid and dangerous?” Jace asked, getting straight to the point as only Jace could. “Are you going to let Yiannis and his wolves in as well?”

Ox’s back snapped straight in an instant, and she glared at Jace. “What do you know about running a settlement?” she asked. “And of course we’re not going to let Yiannis and his wolves walk in here. The rules are that anyone with *peaceful* intentions is allowed within the city walls. Yiannis and his wolves definitely don’t have peaceful intentions.”

“How do you intend to keep them out?” Jace pressed on. “And who do you have in place to check everyone’s intentions when they come through the gates? We walked right through this morning and no one so much as looked at us.”

Ox deflated a little. “Vern and Lorus were supposed to be on gate duty this morning,” she muttered. “I swear, if I told them once, I told them a thousand times....” She let her sentence trail off with a frown.

That simple reaction caused me to draw in a breath and rethink everything I’d assumed about Ox.

“Leadership is a challenge,” I said quietly. “It is a beast that keeps growing heads, and it takes committing one’s entire life to others to succeed at it.”

“I know,” Ox snapped, leaning forward in her seat a bit. “Do you think I don’t know that?”

Viki, who was sitting beside Ox, touched her arm gently.

“I like the way we live here,” Ox went on, as if I’d insulted her. “I like living in a place where everyone plays an integral part in how things work. I like everyone looking out for each other and not inviting enemies.”

I nodded slowly. “It is an admirable goal.”

“You don’t think we can do it, do you,” Ox countered, growing more upset by the moment. “You don’t think a city of peace, one of neutrality, is possible, do you.”

I shrugged. “I’ve seen it done before,” I said, spreading my hands wide to show her I had no ill will. “If anyone can succeed at this sort of endeavor, I believe it would be you.”

Ox opened her mouth to fight again, but pulled back, closing her lips and clenching her jaw. She studied me as though she wasn’t sure whether I was being forthright or whether I was mocking her.

My instinct, as always, was to offer advice and caution. I knew what sort of world I wanted to see, but I believed fully that a city of the sort Ox wanted to live in was compatible with the world I wanted. To be victorious, as Vitrius had taught me

long ago, did not mean others could not be victorious in tandem. As Rurik and I had once discussed, there was no need for one, ultimate ruler. In fact, we were all far more likely to create the world we wanted if we allowed each other the latitude to rule in cohesion.

“How does my brother feel about you ruling a city when he wasn’t able to hold onto his?” Jace asked with a smirk, sitting back and cradling Gennadi closer.

I expected Ox to make some sort of snide comment about the inability of men to rule effectively. Instead, she made a strange pinched face and said, “He’s been helpful with organizing people. And with systematically going through the abandoned houses of the noble neighborhoods with his men to see if they contain anything we could use.” She peeked at me for the briefest of moments before saying, “I was actually considering asking if he wanted to stay and make Novoberg his home.”

I fought not to let my gut reaction to that statement show. I was surprised at the jealousy that appeared within me at the thought of losing Sai to another kingdom. I hadn’t realized how deeply I cared about him being on our side until that moment.

“What sort of things have Sai and his men been finding in the noble houses?” Neil asked, rubbing his palms anxiously along his trousers.

Ox sent him a sympathetic look. “You don’t really want to know. It appears as though the angry citizens of Novoberg who took justice into their own hands in the Dying Winter weren’t particularly concerned about cleaning up the evidence of their slaughter.”

I pinched my face in distaste before resuming my neutral expression.

“That’s...oh,” Neil said, then slumped a little.

“Most of it is easy to take care of,” Ox went on. “We’ve had one bonfire already to destroy furniture and things that we

can't get the bloodstains out of. I'm sure there will be another."

The way she spoke of what were likely gruesome sights as though they were nothing out of the ordinary had my opinion of her ability to rule shifting yet again. Although I shouldn't have been surprised that she had the stomach for difficult things.

"I'm actually feeling good about the possibility of rehabilitating the Death Houses and making them livable," she went on, talking mostly to Peter. "We don't really need this part of the city right now, not for living in, at least, but if our numbers keep growing, we will need to expand."

"Do you plan to recruit more people to live in Novoberg?" Peter asked, shifting forward slightly. "Or do you intend to expand through reproduction?"

The icy look briefly returned to Ox's face, but she appeared to force it away before saying, "We don't want to recruit, but between you and me, I think a fair number of people will choose to join us from the existing kingdoms, once they find out what we're all about. Especially if General Rufus's conquest of Kostya is successful." She paused, then corrected herself with, "I mean Commander Kythria's conquest." She paused again, then said, "Igor's conquest? Who exactly is in charge of this conquest anyhow?"

"Igor," Peter answered, becoming more animated as he spoke, his fear of whether Ox would accept him or not apparently waning. "We had an entire conversation with him about it. He intends to continue the work Rufus started and to rule Kostya and Cremona as one kingdom, the United Cities of the Frontier, once it's done."

A sudden thought exploded like a sunburst in my head. If Ox and Peter renewed their tight friendship, and if Igor and Peter continued their dalliance, along with the rest of the Sons of the Cities who no longer lived in the Wolf River Kingdom, we would have enough ties binding the frontier together that we could have peace for at least another generation.

Ox laughed humorlessly at Peter's statement. "Well, good luck to him. Everything I've seen and heard says that Hedeon can't be governed. I already know a few people who have tried and failed." She shot Jace a teasing look.

"If my father were still alive, he would be ruling Hedeon perfectly," Jace grumbled.

"But your father got himself killed, didn't he," Ox said.

Jace frowned sullenly. Gennadi rested a hand on his chest, and as if a silent command had been given, Jace looked at him. Gennadi shook his head, and Jace let out a breath, but said nothing.

"It feels like we're all just waiting for the conquest of Hedeon specifically so that we can get on with the business of sorting out the frontier," Peter said, his brow knit in thought. "At this point, I think everyone else, from Teslalom to Good Port and from New Hope to Inverhaus, are allies."

"You're our ally, aren't you, Ox?" Neil asked.

I slipped a hand to take one of his and squeeze it in congratulations for his well-timed question.

Ox saw the gesture and glared at me. "We are everyone's ally, and we are no one's ally," she said fiercely.

"You say that now," Peter said, maintaining his easy tone, "but you'll see that it's better to have friends than to keep to yourself."

"Is it?" Ox asked, managing to make the two syllables sting like nettles. "I'm not certain I like how you treat your friends."

Peter jerked as if she'd slapped him. "You didn't stick around long enough for me to make amends," he said, his voice choked. "You know I would have. You know I never dreamed that we were hurting you."

My hopes of a frontier united by the bonds of unique friendships began to crack as Ox shifted forward, the hurt Peter spoke of in her eyes. "I trusted you, and you let your husband use me for his own selfish ends," she fired off, poking

a finger toward me without looking at me. “You never asked me how I felt about the whole thing, you just made a lot of noise about how every woman had a duty to donate her body to your whims.”

None of that was remotely true, but memories often changed and bent to fit more closely with what we wished were the truth when we regretted a past action.

“I’m sorry, Ox,” Peter said, more emotion in his voice. “We’ve already changed the policy on what sort of service is required of women in our kingdom. No one will ever be forced to bear a child like you were again.”

“It isn’t enough,” Ox pushed on, even though Viki took her hand and looked like she would give everything she had to soothe her lover and keep her calm. “No apology you could ever give me will be enough.”

“What about your daughter?” Peter asked, his sorrow beginning to shift to anger. “Ella is the most wonderful, sweet thing. Don’t you care anything about her at all?”

“No!” Ox shouted. “I wouldn’t have had her if I’d known.”

Neil began to writhe in his seat next to me. Gennadi had lifted his head from Jace’s shoulder, and both of them looked uncomfortable. Even Sebald—who had remained silent and wide-eyed throughout the conversation, as if he were watching a particularly fierce kickball match—looked like he might leap in and intervene.

I was moments away from putting an end to the fruitless argument myself. Ox did not want the child of her body and did not see Ella as her daughter. She had that right.

I couldn’t decide if I was as indignant about her indifference as Peter was or perhaps offended on Ella’s behalf, or if Ox disowning Ella only made my beautiful little girl more mine.

“Let’s all just take a second to breathe,” Neil said, shifting so that he could hold a hand out to both Peter and Ox. “Remember, we’re friends here. Ox, you said you wanted to be an ally to everyone. Can we all just let the water flow under

the bridge and move on to more important things, like what might happen if Kythria takes Hedeon?"

My pride in Neil knew no bounds. The future was right there, sitting in that parlor, already deciding on the sort of world they wanted to see. I was almost superfluous now.

"Stepan and Cyril aren't going to let Hedeon go without a fight," Jace said, adding to the effort to cool Peter and Ox down. "Instead of sniping at each other for things that have already happened, we should be figuring out ways to ensure that as few people as possible die in whatever is about to happen in Hedeon."

"Yes, that's what we should be doing," Sebald said, practically crying in relief as he joined the conversation.

"I suppose the outcome of what I presume will be a siege of Hedeon depends very much on Commander Kythria's intentions, his interpretation of the orders he's been given, and whether he continues to be loyal to Igor," I said, speaking quietly. "Ox, you would know better than any of us here what Kythria's intentions are."

Sebald probably knew a great deal more than her, but Ox needed to be appeased by being made to feel important.

"Kythria doesn't take any of us seriously," she replied, shifting gears with surprising speed. "Any of us. He thinks frontier people are all just a bunch of children. But I also think he'll continue to follow whatever orders come out of Cremona. He sees this as a game."

"We're not really sure what he wants out of, well, life," Sebald added. "I haven't gotten the impression that he wants to be a king himself."

"Every other person on the frontier wants to be a king these days," Jace complained. "From my brothers to Yiannis to even you, Peter."

"Not yet," Peter said, frowning and reaching a hand to my leg. "I still have much to learn."

"Yes, you do," Ox said forcefully.

I sighed inwardly, certain their argument was about to start up again. But before it could, we heard the front door open and shut, and moments later, Orel and Leremy appeared in the parlor doorway, pink and energized, as if they'd run up to the house.

I expected another joyful reunion, but as Peter and Neil rose to greet their friend, Orel said, "Ox, you're needed at the north gate. A large group is coming down, presumably from the river."

That burst of news had the rest of us rising to our feet as well.

"The river?" Ox asked, looking surprisingly like a leader. "From which direction, Good Port or Cremona?"

"There's no way to tell, really," Orel said, then blinked and smiled. "Peter, Neil, Jace. King Magnus. When did you get here?"

"Just this morning," Peter said, flowing into motion as Ox and Viki moved toward the door.

Neil was immediately on his heels, Sebald hurrying to stay near them. Jace and Gennadi were a bit slower to stand, as they'd been tangled together on the sofa, but they followed as well.

I went with them, but hung back, deeply curious to see how the next generation would deal with whatever surprise awaited us all at the north gate.

"Last we heard, you were on your way to Cremona to spy on General Rufus," Orel said as everyone clomped and rushed their way into the front hall of the Beiste house. "And then we heard there was a plague and General Rufus died."

"A lot of things happened in Tesladom," Peter said.

Before he could explain, Ox snapped, "Later," as she reached the door. "I want to know more about what's going on in Cremona, but I can only deal with one thing at a time."

It just so happened that Sai was heading up the hall with a large tray of tea things as Ox spoke. I caught sight of him at

the same time as I smirked over Ox's foolish comment.

Sai frowned as if I'd deliberately shared my opinion about Ox's abilities with him.

"What's going on?" he asked. He set his tray on a small table in the foyer, then followed us out of the house to the street.

I deeply regretted the loss of that tea.

"Someone's at the north gate," Jace told him as Sai fell into step with me at the back of our group. "Apparently, they've come down from the river."

"That could be anyone," Sai said, looking anxious.

I bit my tongue rather than making a sly remark about how obvious his comment was. Perhaps it was the bubbling energy of the young people, but as we made our way out of the noble neighborhood and along tidy but mostly deserted streets to the northern quadrant of Novoberg, I felt rather like I was a schoolmaster taking his class on a fieldtrip.

As we strode to the gate, we passed a few inhabited houses and working businesses. I found them fascinating in the extreme. To look at the people who toiled to maintain their houses or who were taking their turns in everything from candle making to blacksmithing, it struck me that Novoberg was a rather happy place. The citizens who glanced up from their work to puzzle at our passing seemed well-fed and clean.

I knew what strained and overburdened people looked like. I'd lived cheek-to-jowl with them in the Old Realm. The hedonistic world of my uncle's court might have been decadent and filled with luxury, but the common people of the great cities, like Royersford and Carpathia, had been hungry and desperate. They had been living examples of Vitrius's wisdom. Just because my uncle had been militarily victorious, he had vanquished his own people.

That was his downfall in the end. He never would have been overthrown if his people had loved and respected him.

Unfortunately, Sai had learned the same lesson, though from an entirely different sort of teacher.

I was rather proud of myself for peacefully ceasing to be king. If I had my way, I would use that victory to live a long and productive life with my husbands and my family.

My rambling thoughts had me in a surprisingly cheery mood, despite the chaos of our mission, as we neared the city's north gate. The gate itself was open, but Ox and Viki, along with Peter, Jace, and Gennadi, peeled off to the side and scurried up a narrow staircase to look out into the cleared area on the other side of the gate.

I stayed where I was, just inside of the open gate. Neil, Sai, and Sebald stayed with me. The four of us could see the approaching party every bit as clearly as those who had felt it necessary to expend their energy racing up to the top of the wall.

What we saw had me caught between gasping in shock and laughing at the sheer absurdity of the way the drama of the frontier was unfolding. It didn't take much squinting or staring to figure out who it was that rode at the front of the party on a white horse, dressed in a rich, ermine-trimmed, golden cloak that shone in the midday sunlight.

"Igor!" Peter's shout sounded from somewhere above me and to the side.

I grinned at Neil, imagining the way Peter must have been waving his arms and jumping to catch his new lover's attention. Neil smirked right back.

Sure enough, Igor stood in his saddle and waved back to Peter.

"What the devil?" Sai muttered, crossing his arms and frowning.

I turned to him with a smile. "It would seem we are to have some sort of gathering of frontier leaders here in Novoberg, whether planned or not," I said.

Sai studied me with a sullen look. He was still irritated with me for what he saw as favoring Igor.

"Igor has no business being here," he grouched. "He's just become king. He should be at home in Teslalom, trying to sort

through the problems of his kingdom.”

I felt sorry for Sai. If I was the king of creation, and Igor was the dawning king, Sai was the eclipsed king, and likely always would be.

“Think of it this way, my friend,” I said, clapping a hand on Sai’s shoulder. “You are about to be at the center of what will, surely, be a moment that scribes and storytellers write about for centuries to come.”

Sai pulled his frown away from Igor and scowled at me.

“Be mindful of how you wish history to remember you,” I told him. “It is far better to be the heroic accessory to greatness than to be the fool who attempted greatness and—”

“Failed?” Sai finished for me, a definite bite to his voice.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Do you believe you succeeded?”

Sai let out a breath, slumped his shoulders, and turned back to watch Igor and his party’s approach.

I did the same, observing closely and taking note of what I saw.

Igor had around two dozen men with him, all outfitted in impressively opulent, but still functional dress. Most of the men rode horses, but a few drove carts filled with what I assumed were either supplies or gifts or both. They were imposing enough to dissuade someone like Yiannis from attacking them, but not so much as to intimidate a city like Novoberg.

“Peter!” Igor’s voice rang in the distance as he stood in his stirrups and waved.

“That answers that question,” Neil said with a laugh.

“Don’t tell me Peter bagged another king,” Sebald said, laughing. “How many does that make now?”

Neil cocked his head comically to the side and said, “Three or four, I’ve lost count.”

Sebald shook his head then turned to Sai. “Careful,” he said. “I know you still haven’t decided how you feel about a man in your bed, but since Peter is in the habit of collecting kings....”

Sai sent him a quelling look.

I had a difficult time keeping my amusement in check. “What’s this?” I asked Sai, hoping a little mild teasing would restore our friendship. “Have you been a part of our kingdom for long enough to have adopted our wicked ways?”

“I like women,” Sai said, rolling his shoulders a bit, his face pinking.

“You can like both,” I told him, my heart far more delighted than it should be. “You should speak with Feodor about the subject. I’m certain the conversation would be enlightening.”

Sai glanced to me with an incredulous look, but the matter had to be dropped for the moment. Igor had kicked his horse into a trot, and his entire party moved toward the gate at a much faster pace than before.

It was no coincidence that Peter came charging down from atop the wall at the same time.

“Magnus, Igor is here,” he said, as eager as a vixen.

I grinned and reached for him, pulling him close once he took my hand. “Yes, I know, my love,” I said, then kissed him soundly. “It seems as though you will be given another chance to charm and seduce your new friend sooner than we’d thought.”

“I’m not sure it will be necessary for me to fuck Igor while we’re all here,” Peter said, sending me a bright-eyed look that hinted he wouldn’t mind if it was.

“Why do you suppose he’s here anyhow?” Neil asked, completely unbothered by Peter’s eagerness for Igor.

“We’re about to find out,” I said.

Sure enough, Igor and his party rode to a stop just under the wide-open gate, and Igor quickly dismounted and strode

toward us.

“Peter,” Igor repeated, then nodded awkwardly to me and Neil. “King Magnus, Neil.” He glanced back to Peter with all the enthusiasm of a new lover reunited with his beloved. “What are you lot doing here? I thought you were returning home to New Hope.”

I made note of the fact that Igor apparently believed we lived in New Hope year-round.

Peter glanced to me as he said, “We came to see what was going on with Commander Kythria and with the rescued pups ourselves.” He glanced back to Igor with an inviting smile and continued with, “What are you doing here? Don’t you have a kingdom to rule?”

Again, I nearly laughed at the similarity Peter’s question had to Sai’s earlier one.

Sai stood a bit straighter, and I thought fast enough to step in and make an introduction.

“King Igor of Cremona, might I formally introduce you to Sai Rozynov of Hedeon,” I said, just barely stopping myself from referring to Sai as a king as well. I would likely catch hell from Sai for that later.

Sai did, indeed, scowl, but Igor turned his surprised smile on Sai and extended a hand. “We’ve met before, I believe,” he said, shaking Sai’s hand vigorously once Sai reluctantly took his. “At some sort of meeting between our fathers, I believe. Lord, it must have been ten years ago if it were a day. And I saw you at King Ludvig’s coronation. I regret we didn’t have time to speak personally.”

It was all I could do not to snort. The meeting was one of the most entertaining things I’d seen in a long time. Igor was all regal grace and warm politeness, while Sai was fighting not to be sullen and jealous. Arguably, he had every right to be jealous. Less than a minute had passed, and Igor was already demonstrating why he would make a much better king than Sai ever could be.

“It was a Solstice celebration,” Sai said, starting out gruff but working to temper his frustration as he went on. “In Klovisgard. Duke Averness hosted all of the dukes and their families that year.”

“And Duke Cavinall of Mayskova and his wife got into an almighty row right in the middle of the banquet,” Igor said with a laugh.

“She dumped her soup in his lap,” Sai said, cracking into a smile.

I glanced to Peter and Neil, who stood with their shoulders together beside me, and raised one eyebrow as if to say, “See? That is how allies are won.”

Both of my beloveds glanced back at me as if to say they’d noted the exchange.

That was the only communication between us to be had for the moment. Ox and the others had come down from the wall as well, and in true Ox form, she made her presence and her position known.

“King Igor,” she said as if she’d been born to diplomacy. But, of course, with Gerzia and Lobe blood in her veins, she more or less *had* been born to it. I’d completely forgotten that little fact. “Welcome to Novoberg. On behalf of the citizens of this city, I invite you to make yourself at home. Just be advised that this is a neutral city and a place of peace. We may look undefended, but we will fiercely guard our chosen way of life against anyone who would seek to undermine it.”

I winced slightly and exchanged another look with my husbands. Ox’s presentation was admirable, but she’d given away far too much about Novoberg’s weaknesses upfront without earning anything in return.

But if I had to choose a leader between Ox and Sai, I would choose Ox.

“Igor, may I introduce you to Lady Oksana Lobe, originally of Good Port, lately elected ruler of Novoberg,” I said, gesturing between the two. At least, I assumed Ox had been elected.

As expected, Ox looked at me as though she wanted to eviscerate me. “Are you trying to get yourself killed, Magnus?” she asked. “Because if you ever refer to me like that again, I will finish the job Edik started and run you through.”

She wasn’t joking, so I lost my teasing grin.

“It’s Ox Gerzia of Novoberg,” she said stepping closer to Igor and thrusting out her hand. “And if you’re not willing to abide by the rules and laws of this city, you might as well just leave now.”

Igor gaped a little, glanced to Peter in question, then took Ox’s hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Ox Gerzia of Novoberg,” he said, deliberately addressing her correctly.

“Ox is one of my oldest and dearest friends,” Peter said, still amused by the entire exchange.

Neil looked shaken by Ox’s threat against me, but neither Ox nor Peter seemed to notice.

Ox turned to frown at Peter. “I’m still undecided on whether we’re still friends,” she said.

That felt like a lie to me, but I had no intention on calling her out on it.

Ox cleared her throat and faced Igor once more. “Not that I don’t appreciate visits by the leaders of neighboring kingdoms,” she said, sending me and Sai quick looks as well, “But can I ask why you’re here?”

Igor sobered in a hurry. “I’ve recently received a report from the commander of my armies, Commander Kythria, with progress in his conquest of Kostya.” He glanced uneasily at Sai, then continued. “He bade me meet him here for a personal report and so that we might discuss the changes in Cremona in the wake of General Rufus’s death.”

I caught my breath, glancing quickly from Igor to Sai, and then to Peter and Neil.

“Commander Kythria is coming back here?” Ox asked, worry painting her face.

“He plans to,” Igor said with a nod.

“Why was I not informed of this?” Ox demanded of Sai.

Sai immediately went on the defensive. “If my intelligence reports had said anything about Kythria returning to Novoberg, I would have told you.”

I wanted to pinch the bridge of my nose and shake my head at these young people and their tendencies to speak without thinking first. Neither Ox nor Sai had the first clue about discretion and holding back more than they revealed.

“It’s a good thing Commander Kythria took the time to clean up my father’s palace a little when he was here,” Peter said, his voice and manner far more in line with how an initial meeting of this sort should unfold. “Igor, I may not have much claim to the palace here in Novoberg these days, but I believe Ox wouldn’t mind if you and your men wanted to stay there. I believe Sai and his men have taken up residence there as well.”

“Staying under the same roof might give everyone a chance to get to know each other better,” Neil said, as if halfway within his own thoughts.

“An excellent idea, my love,” I said, reaching for his hand. “The palace is not ours to rent for entertainments, but if Ox is willing, it might provide the perfect setting for an informal summit of sorts.”

“Are you trying to override my leadership?” Ox asked, narrowing her eyes at me.

“My dear Ox, you know I would never do that,” I said with exaggerated deference.

Ox narrowed her eyes even more fiercely at me, then ignored me entirely and turned back to Igor. “You and your men are welcome to stay in the palace or wherever you want in the noble neighborhood. You should know that all of those places were the sites of slaughter when the people of Novoberg rose up to kill the nobles who attempted to undermine and starve them during the Dying Winter. I’m sure the current population of the city wouldn’t have any trouble repeating history if anyone tries to undermine them now.”

I pretended to cough to keep myself from laughing. Ox was so well-meaning, and she had the strength and influence to carry out every promise she made. But she was so unrefined and clumsy when it came to diplomacy that she did herself more harm than good.

“Shall we escort our new friends to the palace, then?” I suggested when no one seemed to know what to do next.

“I would be grateful if we could settle ourselves and prepare for Kythria’s arrival,” Igor said, nodding uncertainly at me. It seemed his guilt over nearly murdering me was still in place.

“When is Kythria coming?” Sai asked as we all started to move.

Igor took a moment to gesture to his men, most of whom were still mounted and waiting for orders. When he turned back to walk with the rest of us, he fell easily into step by Sai’s side.

“He didn’t give precise timing in his message,” he said, glancing past me to where Peter walked on the other side of me and Neil, as if he would rather be walking by Peter’s side. “He said he had a few minor matters to settle in Klovisgard, and that he would join me here as soon as he could.”

Sai made a gruff sound and nodded.

I rolled Igor’s words over in my head, trying to discern whether Kythria’s message and actions were dismissive of his new king or if they were genuine. It would be impossible to tell without seeing a written message or hearing the original word from the messenger, if it had been delivered verbally.

I was certain we all made quite a sight as we strode back through the semi-inhabited streets of Novoberg to the palace. More Novobergers had come out to see what was happening, leading me to believe gossip traveled as fast as the wind in the city.

“When did you arrive here?” Igor asked as we turned a corner and walked past several abandoned shops on our way to

the hedge that marked the northern part of the noble neighborhood and palace grounds.

“Just this morning,” Peter answered for me, stepping around behind me so that he could walk between me and Igor. “We spent a day at home after returning from Tesladom, then came straight here.”

“If I’d known Kythria was going to summon me to meet with him here, we could have all come together, straight from Tesladom,” Igor said, ignoring everyone else but Peter.

I sent a glance past the two of them to Sai to see if he’d recognized the slip Igor had just made that weakened him.

Unsurprisingly, Sai didn’t even appear to be paying attention to the conversation. He was whispering something with Sebald instead.

I glanced the other direction and found Neil wincing and looking terribly unimpressed. That made me smile and take my beloved’s hand. He understood where Igor had gone wrong. A king was not summoned by his general, generals were summoned by kings.

“We had to go home to see our babies first,” Peter continued his conversation with Igor as we walked on.

“Does Igor not realize he just made it sound like he, a king, is jumping when Kythria calls?” Neil murmured, swaying closer to me.

I raised our joined hands and kissed the back of his. “I am gladder now than ever that we came here when we did,” I replied quietly. “We need to assess the strengths of Commander Kythria.”

“And whether Igor has what it takes to stand up to him,” Neil added. “Remember, Igor has already killed an entire room of leaders we once thought were strong. He’s not as ignorant and love-struck as he seems.”

My adoration for Neil reached new heights. He really was the cleverest of the three of us, whether he saw it enough or not.

“Jace,” I gestured for Jace to come nearer, then slowed my steps so that Peter and Igor—who were still talking animatedly and, miraculously, drawing Ox into their conversation as well—couldn’t hear the order I was about to give.

“Does all of this feel as off to you as it does to me?” Jace asked, frowning.

I shook my head. “It is not off. It is the stirring of the future.”

Jace smirked. “Care to stop speaking in poetry and to actually make sense for a change?”

I grinned at him. “How is this for plain speaking? I need you to find Arlas and the others who escorted us here. Tell them to form three parties. Send one to New Hope, one to Good Port, and one to Inverhaus, telling Ludvig, Vikhrov, and Jorgen and Hati to get to Novoberg as quickly as possible.”

Jace gaped in surprise for a moment, then stood straighter and grew serious. “You think this is it, don’t you. Once Kythria gets here, everything will be decided.”

I nodded, but said, “Not quite. Hedeon and the wild wolves need to be dealt with first, but I believe we will be able to manage those final situations with more ease and expediency if all the major players of the frontier are together to make important decisions as swiftly as possible.”

Jace nodded. “I agree.”

“So do I,” Neil said.

“Go, then,” I told Jace. “I’ve no doubt that the rest of today will be spent in social pursuits and, I dearly hope, a nap at some point. I am exhausted after sleeping on the forest floor for the past two nights and wish nothing more than to lay my head in a luxuriously soft bed.”

“With me and Peter, no doubt,” Neil teased me.

“No doubt at all,” I replied, winking at him.

Jace knew better and saw through my and Neil’s banter. “I’ll slip away and find our men now,” he said, then held back as the rest of us continued on, Gennadi with him.

Neil and I picked up our pace, joining the others in the middle of their conversation about the strain of travel and the sort of hospitality that Novoberg was likely to offer. Peter glanced back at the two of us, managing to communicate his curiosity about Jace with only the arch of an eyebrow.

We'd just reached the outskirts of the noble neighborhood and the grounds of the palace were within sight, so I spoke over the ongoing conversation with, "Perhaps King Igor will forgive me for denying him the company of my husband for luncheon. We've been traveling for two days now, we'd only just begun to settle in our lodgings when word of your arrival reached us, and I should very much like to rest and restore myself before what I am certain will be excellent welcoming entertainments provided by Ox and the people of Novoberg tonight."

"Oh, so now you're telling me you expect us to entertain you?" Ox asked, planting her hands on her hips and trying to look stern.

I blinked innocently. "Were you not planning to entertain your royal guests?"

Ox looked fierce for a moment, as if I'd trapped her between doing what she wanted and what she knew full well she was expected to do.

She gave up glaring at me and let out a breath. "King Igor, once you and your men are settled in the palace, I would be honored to have the people of Novoberg provide you with a welcome feast and entertainment tonight." She pause, smirked a bit, then went on with, "As long as you are all willing to repay us in the style of our city by volunteering your labor in the coming days."

I smiled, surprised and pleased by that condition. It was actually a clever idea to involve Igor and his men in what the Novobergers used as currency in exchange for offering them room and board. Ox had offered something, but she'd asked for something in return. There was hope for her as a leader yet.

"I would be perfectly willing to do whatever is required of me as thanks for your hospitality," Igor said. He then had the

cheek to turn to Peter as we paused at a crossroads and ask, “Peter, are you sure you cannot come with me to the palace?”

I shifted my weight towards Neil, still holding his hand, deeply curious to see what Peter would decide. It was, after all, his decision whether to confer with Neil and I about the wheels I’d just sent in motion with Jace’s errand or to set his own wheels in motion with Igor.

Peter glanced between me and Igor, then shifted to return to my side. “Honestly, I could do with a nap, too,” he said. “But we’ll catch up tonight at whatever entertainment Ox organizes.”

I tried very hard not to gloat as I offered Peter my hand and he took it, but I probably failed.

Igor looked equal parts jealous and resigned as he nodded to Peter, then met my eyes. “Tonight then,” he told Peter with a smile, then shifted his attention to Ox. “I am interested to see the condition of the palace here in Novoberg. I visited my father’s palace in Neander two summers ago, and found it has been turned into an orphanage and home for the displaced.”

My brow shot up at that. That wasn’t half bad for a disused palace.

“Come, my loves,” I said, heading off down the side street with Peter and Neil. “We have yet to choose a bedroom from the many I am sure your family’s house contains,” I said to Neil. “And I am desperate for the three of us to strip off our travel-stained clothing, bathe in whatever sort of bath might be available to us, then to snuggle away the afternoon, restoring ourselves.”

“You mean you can’t wait to tell us what errand you sent Jace on and what kind of trouble you’re brewing for everyone on the frontier,” Peter said with a loving smirk.

“Peter!” I gasped in mock offense. “What sort of man do you take me for?”

“A conniving puller of strings,” Peter laughed. His smile grew heated, and he added, “And a man after my heart.”

CHAPTER

SIX

It turned out that quite a bit had been done at the Beiste house in our absence. I was ashamed to say that I hadn't noticed Orel and Leremy hadn't come with us to the gate. Instead, they'd stayed behind in the house, expertly organizing things for our stay. They'd even taken it upon themselves to select one of the larger bedrooms on the second floor for us, and Leremy was already in the process of preparing our bath when we returned to the house, and Orel showed us to our room.

"I wasn't certain if you would want to stay in the room that was yours growing up," Orel explained as he walked us down the hall, glancing over his shoulder to Neil. "Oscar showed us which one was yours before he and Sascha left to return to New Hope, but it didn't seem large enough for the three of you."

"It really wasn't," Neil said. "These guest rooms are much more suited to our needs."

The hallway we walked down and the room we stepped into at the end of that hall must have been reserved for guests of Lord Beiste.

"So that's where Sascha went," Peter said quietly once Orel and Leremy left us in the room with our privacy. "Straight home to New Hope."

"Does that bother you?" Neil asked as the three of us began to strip out of our travel clothes.

Peter shrugged as he removed his coat, then shook his head. “More like it just proves to me that I never would have been happy with him. You know I need to be in the center of whatever is happening on the frontier.” He winked at me as he spoke.

“Which is why the two of us are decidedly suited for each other,” I said, stepping over to kiss him quickly before I returned to undressing.

“And why the two of you are going to make me go grey before my time,” Neil laughed.

A moment later, his expression shifted to something much more serious, and he asked, “So where did you send Jace and Gennadi off to?”

I nodded in acknowledgement of the true purpose for wanting to be alone with my husbands. “I sent them to find Arlas and the rest of our escort to give them new tasks,” I said, leaving my clothing draped over a chair near one of the room’s windows, then going to the large, brass tub by the fireplace. The water was lukewarm at best, but I only needed to scrub off the dirt of travel, not soak in it.

“And those new tasks are?” Peter prompted me, joining me at the tub just as I sat.

He stepped forcefully into the tub and stood between my legs—which was saying something, since there was hardly any room to begin with—planting his hands on his hips.

The sight he presented me with was far too alluring for me to keep hold of my thoughts about politics and intrigue. I couldn’t do anything but smile wickedly up at him, his mostly soft cock within inches of my face.

I couldn’t have Peter standing around limp, so I drew my hands up the back of his smooth legs, to cup his delicious ass, and leaned into him.

“Magnus!” Peter gasped and laughed as I licked his cock, then deftly caught the tip in my mouth. “You will not get distracted. You will tell me what mischief you’re up to, or I’ll—”

“You’ll what, my love?” I asked him cheekily, pulling back a little.

His cock wasn’t as soft as it had been moments before. It never was when I decided to tease my beloved.

“We both know you’re bluffing,” Peter said, arching one eyebrow, then awkwardly sinking as he tried to fit into the tub with me.

“My love, you know full well this tub isn’t large enough for the both of us,” I pretended to scold, having a hard time not laughing as Peter put his body through every manner of contortion in an attempt to squeeze into the tub with me.

He ended up fitting, but just barely. His legs were spread and his knees were bent over the sides of the tub, and his back was bowed awkwardly. There was no way he could have been comfortable, but he was in high spirits after seeing Igor. Or possibly because he knew everything on the frontier was about to come to a head. Probably both. His insistence in squeezing into the tub with me was almost poetically metaphorical of his need to assert himself politically.

“The two of you are impossible,” Neil said, dragging a short stool over to the tub and grabbing a ball of soap as he sat. He dunked the soap into the water, then proceeded to rub it over whatever parts of me and Peter he could reach. “I assume you sent Arlas and the others off to New Hope to fetch Ludvig,” he went on as he attempted to wash our tangled bodies. “Who else are you sending them to fetch? Jorgen and Hati?”

“And Vikhrov,” I admitted, deeply proud of Neil’s cleverness.

“Magnus!” Peter exclaimed again, his eyes dancing with excitement. “You’re calling a summit of all the frontier leaders.”

“Not a summit, my love. Just a gathering,” I corrected him with a grin, shifting so Neil could scrub more of me.

Peter shook his head and smirked. “It’s exactly what I would do.”

“Really?” Neil asked, pausing and arching one eyebrow at Peter in challenge. “You really would have thought of pushing to surprise everyone by gathering the kings of the frontier together in one place?”

“Not all of them, my love,” I said.

“Do you think Stepan and Cyril will show up if they know everyone else is here?” Peter asked.

I held still for a moment. I had to admit that I hadn’t considered that.

“Perhaps they will,” I said, resuming my shifting movements so Neil could wash my other side. “Although they may see leaving Hedeon as abandoning their people in the hour of their greatest need.”

“Stepan and Cyril don’t strike me as particularly concerned for the welfare of their people,” Peter said, his tone unimpressed.

“And why do you say that, my love?” I asked, gesturing for Neil to move on to scrubbing Peter as I rubbed my arms to rinse off as much of the soap as I could.

Peter shrugged, which caused him to slip in the tub a little. Neil caught him. “If it was the people of Kostya that they cared about, they wouldn’t have overthrown Sai as king.”

“Are you certain about that?” I questioned him, curious about the path of his logic. “Perhaps they knew that Sai was a poor king and they sought to overthrow him for the sake of their people.”

Peter’s brow furrowed, like he was thinking about it. “Sai said that his mother and his wife were instrumental in the overthrow, and he hinted that something was going on between his mother and Cyril.”

“And Stepan and Yulia,” Neil added. “Don’t forget about that.”

I had forgotten about that. I’d forgotten all about the romantic dramas of the Rozynov family. They did more to explain why Cyril was in such a high position of power than

anything else, but I simply did not know how much sway the women of the Rozynov family had politically. Vera was as strong a woman as I'd ever met, but she didn't seem the least bit interested in taking up any sort of reins of power, even though she might have been good at leading.

"Perhaps we should issue an invitation to Lady Rozynov to meet with the rest of us here in Novoberg," I half joked. "Ox would certainly appreciate having a powerful woman around."

Peter barked a laugh. "Ox would hate it," he said. "Everything Jace has always told me about his mother and everything I saw for myself during the Meeting of Four Kingdoms points toward Lady Rozynov being haughty and petulant. Ox can't stand nobles who think they're better than the rest of us because of how they were born."

"I've always found that ironic," Neil said, handing the soap over to Peter so he could finish washing himself. "Especially considering Ox is your cousin or something," he said to me.

I pushed myself to stand, sloshing the water around as I gestured for Neil to replace me in the tub. "Ox has all of the tools of leadership but no idea how to put those tools to use."

"I'm not getting in the tub until Peter gets out," Neil said, half laughing. "I'm not a fool, like the two of you."

"I'm just about done anyhow," Peter said, handing the soap over to Neil and quickly scooping handfuls of water over his head so he could scrub it through his hair.

Our conversation paused for a moment as Peter and Neil switched places. Peter and I dried off, and I fully intended to return to the tub and paw my Neil shamelessly in the name of washing him, but Neil was quicker and more efficient than Peter and I ever would be, and had stood and stepped out of the tub before I had a chance.

"So what do we do with Igor?" Peter asked once the three of us had burrowed under the covers of the deliciously comfortable bed.

As merrily as the fire in the room snapped and flickered, it couldn't have been lit for long before we'd occupied the room. It had yet to take the briskness from the air, and since the bath water hadn't been warm, it took an intense amount of cuddling for the three of us to feel truly warm again.

"I'm sure I know what you want to do with Igor," Neil teased Peter as the two of them snuggled on either side of me.

"I'm always up for a fuck," Peter said with a brazen look.

"Yes, you are, my love," I said, reaching for his semi-hard cock under the covers.

Peter laughed and wriggled against my hand. It still wasn't the right time to let ourselves get distracted, so he rolled to his side and propped himself up on one arm.

"To be honest, it doesn't feel like the right time to seduce Igor," he said. "We've already won him over to our side. I don't need to offer him a carrot, as it were,"

"Just a juicy peach?" Neil asked, then burst into giggles.

I laughed along with him, not because the joke was particularly funny, but because I adored my beloveds, and nothing made me happier than the three of us cocooned intimately together, enjoying each other's bodies and minds.

"You know what I mean," Peter laughed with us.

"I do, and I believe you are right," I said. "One incentive is needed to win an ally over. An entirely different one is necessary to keep him by your side and to recreate the world together."

"So that's what we're doing here in Novoberg?" Neil asked. "Recreating the world?"

"How?" Peter asked, not with confusion, but with absolute eagerness to get started.

In that moment, I was struck so profoundly by the similarities of the moment to that one a lifetime ago, when Vitrius had lit the flame that had burned through my life, giving me purpose. I was the guiding force now and my beautiful husbands were my pupils, but we were also one unit,

dedicated to becoming victorious in the only way that mattered to us.

“We must do whatever necessary to enhance Igor’s power as the King of Cremona,” I said in an unusual moment of straightforwardness. “If Kythria shows any signs of wanting that crown for himself, he must be eliminated.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Neil said in a quiet voice.

“What about Kostya?” Peter asked. “I assume that needs to go to Igor as well.”

“It does,” I nodded. “And I fear it is likely already too late for Stepan and Cyril to concede their territory to Igor willingly.”

“So we have to make sure they’re...eliminated?” Neil asked, looking as though the words tasted sour to him.

I wished with everything in me that victory on the frontier, the right kind of victory, didn’t have to end with Stepan and Cyril being vanquished, but I doubted that would be possible.

“I believe that is very much up to them,” I sighed after thinking about it for a moment.

“Well, Yiannis and his wolves definitely need to be eliminated,” Peter said. He cocked his head to the side and went on with, “It would be nice if we could get Stepan and Cyril to take care of Yiannis and that lot for us somehow.”

I barked a laugh. “That would be convenient, yes,” I said. “It would be more likely that Kythria could be given the task of clearing the forest.”

Peter sucked in a breath and brightened as if I’d inspired him. “I can suggest that to Igor,” he said. “I bet he’d be all for it.”

“If Kythria ends up swearing fealty to Igor,” Neil pointed out.

Peter huffed out the same breath he’d sucked in and sagged a bit. “So really, it all comes down to convincing Kythria to accept Igor as his king. The entire future of the frontier rests

on the whims of a man who thinks we're all children playing king of the castle.”

“Sometimes that is simply the way of things,” I said, snuggling against the pillow and yawning. “Kythria doesn't have to take us seriously, he just has to do what we want him to.”

“If he does that, the rest will be easy,” Neil said.

I laughed wryly and wriggled, pulling my husbands closer. “Nothing like *that* is ever easy,” I said.

That brought an end to our machinations for the moment. The three of us were genuinely exhausted, the bed truly was comfortable, and the quiet of the house was as much of a lure into sleep as lying, naked and entangled, with my beloveds. We were all deep in slumber in no time.

There truly were no words for how much I loved my Neil and my Peter. It didn't matter how many times I told them how their arrival in my life changed everything, how it saved me. Words could not express the depth of the despair and loneliness I'd felt after losing Rurik, and they couldn't capture the euphoric joy of falling in love again, when I'd thought it would be impossible.

Rurik had been my savior at a time when I'd become jaded with the role my uncle had set for me in his kingdom. Like Peter, so very much like Peter, I felt I had been born to greatness of some sort. Perhaps my uncle knew that. Perhaps that was why he'd used me as a means of entertainment in his court, invalidating my ambitions.

I'd thought being intimate with so many men of power would give me the ear of the people in our kingdom who mattered. I'd learned differently. Yes, the lovers of powerful men had more influence and control than half the elected senators or military leaders in any given kingdom. But that influence could only be exerted if the men in power truly cared for their lovers.

Nobody had cared for me until Rurik came along. It seemed silly to think of it now, so many decades later, when I

was loved so passionately, but that lonely bitterness had almost destroyed me. Then Rurik sailed into my life, and I knew what things were truly worth fighting for. We accomplished so much together. I grew so much with him, and I nearly died when he did, in my soul if not my body.

I would never admit it to another person as long as I lived, perhaps not even Neil or Peter, but as ashamed as I was to say it, my motivation for everything I did had been sprouted in the soil of neglect and indifference. I knew what it was to be ignored, and for good or for evil, I would move mountains never to be ignored again. I craved love like I craved Peter's and Neil's kisses.

I would move mountains and topple kingdoms for my husbands, because they were the same as me. They, too, knew the heartache of loneliness. Their childhoods were not so very much different from mine. Their youths might have been more celibate than mine, but the hollowness had been the same. That was why I knew immediately, after the first night the three of us had spent together, that everything was about to change.

We would make a better world for our children, for everyone's children. Ziggy and Ella and whatever children were added to our family would never feel the loneliness and loss that their fathers had felt.

Dreaming of my family as the morning shifted into afternoon made for a lovely sleep. We managed about two hours of it before sounds from the rest of the house shook me awake.

"What's going on down there?" Peter asked groggily, rolling out of bed, then dashing over to the fireplace to poke the logs, add a few more, and bring it back to life.

"It doesn't sound like anything bad," Neil said, snuggling closer to me.

"It sounds like ordinary household noises," I said, yawning. "But we should get up and join the rest of the world whether there is a crisis or not. I'm certain there will be plenty for us to do."

I was correct, of course. As soon as we dressed and made our way downstairs, we were swept up in the chaos of preparations for the festive dance Ox had decided would be the ideal way to entertain her sudden slew of noble and royal guests.

“A dance?” Jace pouted as he joined Peter, Neil, and I on our way from the Beiste house to the palace, our arms filled with baskets and trays of baked goods Avenel had prepared in the Beiste kitchen, since the palace kitchens were already being used to their fullest. “Ox thinks it’s appropriate to host a dance with everything we’ve got going on?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said with a grin, purposely bumping into Jace as we made it to the palace’s kitchen courtyard. “I love a good dance. They’re a perfect way for people to let their guard down and be close. And if you ask nicely, I’ll dance with you.”

Jace barked a laugh. “Then you’d better hope that Ox invited a few healers, because you’ll need them to fix your broken toes.”

“Are you admitting to being a poor dancer?” I asked Jace, surprised that he would admit any shortcoming.

“Dancing is for imbeciles,” he said with a huff.

“Then I shall dance circles around you this evening,” I teased him, enjoying the feel of being one of the younger men, as I always did.

“Like I said,” Jace glanced my way with a wry look as we handed our baskets and trays off to the palace kitchen staff just inside the doorway. “It’s for imbeciles.”

I laughed freely, despite the fact that Neil shook his head and sent Jace a disapproving look. I didn’t care about his apparent disrespect one bit. In fact, I enjoyed it immensely. Jace never would have shown blatant disrespect of that sort to my face if he hadn’t grown to be completely comfortable with me and if he didn’t count me a friend. His tenure as my servant still had two years until completion, but I already knew

that he and Gennadi would be a part of our household for the rest of our lives.

“Where is Gennadi?” Neil asked Jace once we’d completed our errand and headed up to the more formal part of the castle to see what the other important players were up to, as if his thoughts had traveled the same paths as mine.

“He’s somewhere here in the palace, talking to Kliment and Nikandr,” Jace said.

That answer satisfied Neil. “I love the fact that the pups of the Sons have forged such strong bonds,” he said. “It helps me to feel secure about the future of the frontier.”

“Don’t you always say, Magnus, that the bonds that truly hold any kingdom, or the entire frontier together, aren’t treaties written in ink or blood, but are those forged with spit and cum?”

“I do indeed,” I said, laughing at the cheeky way Peter repeated my advice from long ago.

We followed the sound of furniture being pushed around and musicians practicing to a grand ballroom near the back of the palace. I had to give one thing to Ox. When she made up her mind to do something, she threw herself at it heartily. She stood in the center of the room, giving orders and directing the activity like a general.

“Peter! Neil! Jace! Get your asses over here and help move these daises to the far end of the room!” she called out as soon as she saw us.

“You’d better go,” I laughed, hooking first Peter, then Neil around their waists, then pulling them in for quick kisses. “She’ll decide she hates you again if you don’t jump to do as she says.”

“She doesn’t hate us,” Neil said, half amused, half sympathetic.

“She hates Magnus,” Peter said. He peeled away from me, grabbing Neil’s hand and walking backwards for a few steps as he said, “I’ll change her mind about that.”

He then turned around, and the two of them hurried off to help.

I started to glance around, wondering what sort of work I could do that would position me best when Jace cleared his throat beside me. He hadn't rushed to help along with Peter and Neil.

"I need a word with you," he said quietly.

I nodded once, then walked as calmly as I could out of the ballroom, pretending as though nothing were out of the ordinary when I was certain whatever Jace had to say was important.

Sure enough, once we were in the hall, Jace gestured for me to follow him to the side and found us a discreet corner to converse in. The dust and cobwebs that covered it told me few people ever traveled in that direction.

"How did Arlas and the others accept their missions?" I asked, assuming that was what he wanted to talk about.

I was correct. "They were eager to be on their way," Jace said. "Arlas and Timothy headed north to Inverhaus. Timothy was from that area, and he said he knows a shortcut that will get them straight to Jorgen and Hati quickly."

I nodded, pleased with that. Of all our allies, I believed Jorgen and Hati would be most useful when the time came to hunt down Yiannis and his wild wolves and to mete out the justice they deserved. Yiannis had stolen their beloved pups, so justice would be swift and severe. Unless Jorgen decided to make Yiannis suffer.

"Milar and Kesh volunteered to ride to New Hope," Jace went on. "They're the best horsemen that came with us, and they vowed not to stop until they reached the river."

I hummed at that and nodded. "I wish I could have told them not to push themselves too hard, but the sooner we have Ludvig here with us the better."

Jace nodded in agreement. "Heinz and Walter headed north to the Kostya River." He grinned, then added, "I told them to find whatever fast boat brought Igor from Teslalom and to tell

the captain Igor gave orders for them to take that boat to Good Port to fetch Vikhrov.”

I had to smile at Jace’s cunning. “And do you think your ploy will work?”

“Of course,” Jace said crossing his arms smugly. “I told them the best way to lie convincingly.”

I laughed. “Wherever did you learn such dubious talents?”

“I think we both know I learned them from you, old man,” Jace said.

If I were to have told myself five years before that I would count Edik’s arrogant pup as one of my closest friends, indeed, as family, I never would have believed myself. But despite the fact that I had no interest whatsoever in fucking him—or, knowing Jace, being fucked by him—I considered the ambitious young man to be one of my own.

Which was why he had my complete attention as his smug expression and his arms dropped.

“I did a little investigating into other things while you, Peter, and Neil were napping this afternoon,” he went on.

“I would have expected nothing less,” I said, clasping my hands in front of me and waiting for his report.

“Miraculously enough, Ox really has taken over as leader of Novoberg, even though she’s new here,” he said. “But the people of Novoberg are nervous about more than just the ghosts they think haunt this part of the city. And by the way, they actually do think the noble neighborhoods and the palace are haunted. They think we’re all mad for staying here, but at the same time, they’re relieved that they can keep us all contained.”

I heard the darker implications of Jace’s words and read them in his expression. “Do you think we’re in danger here?”

Jace blew out a breath and rubbed the back of his neck. “Not from overt attack or assassination. Not like during the Dying Winter. But they don’t like us inhabiting their city. They want us gone as soon as possible.”

“Do you think they will act to get rid of us sooner rather than later?” I asked.

“I think the answer to that will unfold in the next few days. Some people are at least curious about this harvest dance Ox is hosting, though my guess is that it’ll be sparsely attended.”

I nodded in agreement.

“After that, pay close attention to how much food is delivered to the palace and how willing people are to pitch in and keep the place running,” Jace went on.

I understood perfectly. “We need to make a point to give back to the people of Novoberg as much as possible while we’re here,” I said. “You and I, Peter and Neil and Gennadi, cannot be exceptions to the rule of hospitality. The harder and more menial the labors we partake in, the more I believe the people of Novoberg will accept our presence here.”

Jace didn’t look entirely happy with that, but he agreed with a heavy sigh. “I noticed there aren’t quite enough men to bring in the last of the harvest,” he said. “It’s in danger of rotting in the fields if it rains in the next few days.”

I could see where he was going and said, “Take Peter, Neil, and Gennadi out tomorrow to help them. I’ll see if I can find some sort of labor that will be meaningful without breaking my back.”

Jace barked a laugh. “You mean you’ll find something to do that will allow you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the town and ingratiate yourself to whomever, aside from Ox, is in a position of authority here,” he said.

I grinned and slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Why, Jace. You’ve come to know me so well.”

He slapped my arm and laughed in return, then the two of us headed back towards the ballroom.

I should not have been at all surprised to be waylaid again as Jace continued on to help with the evening’s preparations.

“Magnus, could I have a word?” Sebald asked, approaching me with a long, fast stride from the hallway

outside the ballroom.

“But of course,” I said, smiling and changing direction to meet him. I assumed that, like Jace, Sebald would wish to speak with me in private.

I was correct. “Would you mind walking with me out to the garden?” He nodded down the hall, then started walking that way.

“I would not mind at all,” I said. “I’ve heard much about the palace gardens in Novoberg. Perhaps you could show me which window belongs to my dear Peter’s former bedroom.”

Sebald flinched and glanced questioningly at me, but understood my subterfuge when I nodded at one of Sai’s soldiers, who passed us going into the ballroom.

We walked on, but it wasn’t until we were outside in the overgrown garden that Sebald said, “That’s who I wanted to talk to you about, actually.”

I couldn’t have imagined anything else that Sebald would have wanted to speak to me about.

“How is our formerly regal friend taking the arrival of a more successful king?” I asked.

Sebald blinked, as if surprised I would guess the purpose for our conversation. It was simple, though. What else would he feel the need to speak to me specifically about?

“Sai is in a delicate place,” Sebald began, his voice and manner filled with concern for his friend. For he and Sai had become fast friends. “He knows his tenure as king of Kostya was a failure, but he is the eldest son of the Duke of Hedeon, who was the eldest son of the former duke, who was the eldest son of the duke before that.”

I nodded. “He is trapped between the duty he was raised to believe would be his to shoulder and the reality of his place in the new frontier.”

“Yes,” Sebald said. “And now Igor has come along, fulfilling everything he thought was supposed to be his.”

I hummed and nodded. We'd all experienced the jealousy that Sai was holding coiled within him earlier. That conversation had been cut short, but I feared it could not be avoided for long.

"On top of that," Sebald went on, "whether he agrees with the man or not, Commander Kythria is intent on attacking Sai's brother. All of his family who are left in Hedeon, in fact. He may end up killing them."

That thought hadn't coalesced fully for me yet. It bore thinking about.

"And you feel as if Sai's loyalties will be divided even further because of it?" I asked.

Sebald pinched his face and shifted his stance. "It's more that Sai doesn't know where he stands in the midst of this whole conflict," Sebald said. "He confided in me that he doesn't know what side he's on. If Kythria's conquest of the rest of Kostya succeeds, that could mean his brother, not to mention his wife and mother, could be killed. But if he fails, then Stepan and Cyril continue to be a problem. He wants the issue of Kostya resolved, but he believes that it's your intention to have Cremona absorb Kostya and for Igor to be king of it all."

"He's right, of course," I said. Sebald seemed surprised at my admission, but I saw no point in pretending the truth was anything other than what it was. "Sai is a part of the Wolf River Kingdom now. Kostya is lost to him. The sooner he understands that, the easier things will be for him."

"I don't think he's going to let go of his past easily," Sebald said.

"No," I agreed.

I stroked my chin for a moment, letting my thoughts roll over each other as I sought a solution. Even though he was neither the most urgent nor the most important problem facing me at the moment, Sai was one of the thorniest.

A tiny spark of inspiration struck me.

“Have you observed any curious behavior on Sai’s part toward that unfortunate pup? Cid, I believe his name is?” I asked.

The way Sebald’s face pinked and an amused grin flickered across his lips, I knew he had. “Sai thinks he feels pity for the lad, and he does,” he said. “But he’s been surrounded by men who openly and unashamedly love other men and who don’t hold back with their affection, or their lust, for a long time now. I think it’s gotten under his skin.”

“But of course it has,” I said with a shrug. “People are people and pleasure is pleasure, no matter how it is given or received. It is only our conditioning that fools us into thinking it is morally favorable to find pleasure or comfort with one sex or the other.”

Sebald huffed a laugh. “Tell that to my father.”

“Your father is dead, is he not?” I asked, one eyebrow raised.

Sebald continued to smile at me. “Are you saying he wouldn’t be if he’d had a male lover?”

I met his smile with one of my own. “I’m saying that being adaptable keeps us alive in times of great change.”

“And Sai needs to learn to be *adaptable*,” Sebald said with admirable understanding. The Sons truly were our future.

“Sai needs something to obsess about other than what he’s lost,” I continued, thinking and forming my plan as I spoke, as usual. “He needs a different goal to attain and a different life to aspire to.”

I paused, tilting my head to one side as my plan came together a bit more. Sebald waited eagerly.

“Assign Cid to tend to Sai’s bedchamber,” I said. “If Sai’s chamber isn’t already in a secluded, private part of the castle, where he might be tempted to experiment with different forms of pleasure, then make up an excuse as to why he needs to be moved there.”

“Magnus, if you’re thinking to throw Cid straight into Sai’s bed, it’s not going to be that easy,” Sebald said. “Cid’s mind is barely there. He’s made progress since he was rescued from Yiannis, but as near as anyone can figure, he was a slave to those savage wolves for nearly two years, and most of the time, he was treated as viciously as Gennadi was when he was with Yuri.”

That was a sad truth that would definitely need to be taken into consideration.

“They do not need to become pup and master, or even fuck, immediately,” I said, taking my plan a bit further, “Sai simply needs to become preoccupied with the young man.”

“What if,” Sebald said, then stopped. His expression made me think that perhaps he was shocked by whatever he was thinking. “What if we put them in close proximity for a few days, in some way that might mean they had to sleep in the same bed, for warmth, and then, in a few days, we quietly send Cid off on some errand without telling Sai so that he worries about the lad.”

I grinned proudly. “I do believe you will challenge Jace and my Peter for the crown of the Wolf River Kingdom someday,” I said. When Sebald looked abashed, I went on with, “That is an excellent plan. More so since it accomplishes what we need it to where Sai is concerned while enabling us to use the lightest touch in our manipulations.”

“It’s not really manipulating Sai, is it?” Sebald asked, looking worried.

“Of course it is, my friend,” I said, planting a hand on his shoulder. “But kings must be ready to manipulate a few of their troublesome subjects in order to ensure the best possible outcome for the rest.”

“And Sai is troublesome,” Sebald sighed. “He’ll be even more trouble once Kythria arrives here in Novoberg to confer with Igor about how to conquer Hedeon. The last thing you need is for him to interrupt those negotiations.”

“Indeed,” I said.

Sebald scratched the back of his neck, lost in his thoughts for a moment, then shrugged and said, "I'd better go find him, or maybe Cid first, and get the ball rolling. I know Avenel will be able to help with the Cid side of things. The two of them have become friends."

"And a better friend for the young man I couldn't imagine," I said, thumping Sebald's arm once more before we turned to head back inside.

I had every confidence that Sebald would ensure things unfolded with Sai precisely the way they needed to. And it both comforted and amused me to think about Sai's opening to the delights of having a sweet young man in his bed. He certainly needed someone who would worship and adore him as their savior. Nearly as much as Sascha Kerensky had before he met Oscar. And if I remembered correctly, Neil had suggested pairing those two years ago to subdue Sascha in the same manner that Sai needed subduing.

It was pleasing and amusing to think about how much joy Sai might find with Cid. I'm certain I would have contemplated it for a great deal longer if my path hadn't crossed with Igor's once I said goodbye to Sebald and attempted to return to the ballroom.

"King Magnus, might you have a moment to consult with me?" Igor asked, gesturing towards the parlor nearby.

It took a great deal of control not to laugh aloud. It seemed as though half the castle wished to consult with me that afternoon.

"I have several moments," I said, hoping Igor interpreted my smile as friendliness and not smug amusement as I walked with him into the parlor.

Igor walked proudly, his back straight and his chin up, darting glances up and down the hall to check whether we were observed on our way into the small, chilly parlor. Once we were secluded in the parlor, though, his posture faltered and his looks became furtive and anxious.

“What can I do for you, my friend?” I asked him with nothing but openness, already guessing, in part, why he, a newly minted king, would wish to speak with me, an experienced ruler.

“I was hoping you might advise me,” Igor said, just as I’d suspected.

“I would be honored to,” I said, gesturing for him to walk with me to a pair of chairs set near the fireplace.

The fire had nearly burned out, but as there were logs and tools available, I set to work building it up again as Igor sat. It was clear from the stiffness of his pose and the way he made it look as though he wore some sort of plug in his ass that he was uncomfortable speaking to me alone. The fact that he’d pushed past that discomfort to seek my council regardless raised him in my esteem.

“I feel awkward asking for your advice when, not two weeks ago, I—” he gulped, then went on in a whisper, “—tried to kill you.”

I turned toward the newly crackling fire to hide my amused grin. Young men were such a treat when they clung to their mistakes. Surely, Igor had to know that I understood and had forgiven him, otherwise, I would not have let him dally with my Peter.

“It was an unfortunate misunderstanding,” I said once I had my amusement under control. I gave the fire one more poke, then set the iron aside and shifted to sit in the chair opposite Igor. “You believed that I stood in the way of your pursuit of my husband. You were prepared to do what was necessary to the point of eliminating those who stood in your way. That is the mark of a strong ruler.”

Igor squirmed as if I’d chastised him. “That’s just the point, you see,” he said, glancing uncertainly at me. “It’s one thing to poison a man in order to end an unjust reign and prevent future trouble, but it’s another entirely to manage the one man who might still stand in the way of a relatively peaceful transition of power.”

I nodded sagely, resting my elbows on the arms of the chair and folding my hands in front of me. “You need advice on how to win Kythria over as your subject instead of having him wrest the crown off your head.”

“Yes,” Igor said, letting out a heavy breath, as if he was relieved he wouldn’t have to spell it out to me. He straightened a little, as if my understanding of his needs had given him confidence. “My father raised and educated me to be a leader, but he died long before I had a chance to put anything he’d taught me into practice. It’s all theoretical knowledge trapped in my head, under years of experiences that were nothing like the life I thought I would live. I need to unlock the facts I was taught and marry them to the experience I still need to gain.”

I smiled genuinely, more pleased with Igor than I’d thought I would be.

“I can tell you now, my friend. You have every foundation necessary to make a good leader.” I studied him and his eagerness to learn for a moment, then said, “Ruling as a king over people who have been through the sort of trauma that very few experience in their life is not as easy as some would think it is.”

“Yes, I am well aware that King Sai’s tenure as ruler of Kostya was...fraught,” Igor said, leaning slightly towards me with a serious look. “I’ve watched what happened to him these last few years from afar, and I have no wish to make those same mistakes. I think I can see what he did wrong, and I hope I will be able to avoid those same mistakes, but I’ve had very little experience with leading a kingdom the right way.”

“You sat at Rufus’s feet for three years now,” I pointed out. “One could make the argument that his way was the right way.”

I’d had those same feelings in my moments of weakness in Tesladom. Even though I didn’t feel weak now, I still maintained that the things that had made me question whether Rufus’s way to peace was the right way were valid.

“Rufus kept order and maintained loyalty through coercion and by pandering to the frustrations of people who the former

dukes overlooked and undervalued,” Igor said. “It worked, but everything he did made me feel dirty and wicked. I don’t want to be that kind of ruler.”

I smiled, tempted to tell him that this was why I allowed him to carry on with Peter, and why Peter found him so appealing.

“What sort of ruler do you wish to be?” I asked him, adjusting how I sat in order to maintain a casual appearance.

“I want to be the sort of ruler you are,” Igor said in a rush, leaning forward. “I want to be like you.”

My ego blossomed to the point where I wanted to laugh out loud. I wanted to drag Igor to wherever my Peter was and tell him to repeat that for his ears, and then I wanted to spend the rest of my life gloating and teasing my darling about who his sometimes-lover admired the most.

“I am not a king,” I told him, playing with him just a little. “I have only ever wanted to be a husband and a father. What do you think you can learn from me?”

Igor frowned in thought, his gaze becoming unfocused.

A few seconds later, he glanced up at me again.

“You care about your people,” he said. “I saw it in every part of the Wolf River Kingdom when we were there for King Ludvig’s coronation. I’ve lived in cities that were held together by tradition, those that still survive because of manipulation, and I’ve even been to places like Good Port and wolf settlements in the forest. I’ve seen every way that a king can govern his people, but the Wolf River Kingdom had the greatest feeling of peace and prosperity of any of them.”

Now I was the one who could have dropped to my knees and sucked him off in gratitude. Igor had no idea how great of a compliment he paid me with those words. He’d seen everything I’d worked for and everything I’d accomplished. He’d noted it and appreciated it, but beyond that, he wished to emulate it.

That made everything worth it. Every stress and strain to my friendships, long held and new, every moment of fear and

uncertainty for my beloved husbands, and every sacrifice I'd had to make so that the people I felt responsible for could thrive. I hadn't been shouting into the abyss or building my dreams on clouds after all.

Knowing that sobered me. Any traces of amusement I had melted, and I sat straighter. I sat like a king whose crown still weighed heavily on his brow.

"The only way to secure peace and prosperity for the citizens of a kingdom is to put their needs before your own," I said. "Rufus was able to maintain a version of peace by making his wants and desires paramount to any other. That is one way to rule, but as you well know, it is not the way to rule for long."

"I am prepared to sacrifice whatever I need to in order to create peace," Igor said with as much seriousness as I had.

"Sacrificing for your people could include giving up your power to a stronger leader or for the sake of creating a tradition of the peaceful transfer of power," I went on.

"Like what you did with King Ludvig," Igor said. "You didn't just give up the crown because it was what you wanted or because King Ludvig is a stronger leader, you gave it up so that your people could see that their kingdom will not be ruled by tyrants and their whims."

Heavens above, Igor was so much cleverer than I'd supposed him to be. He was worlds cleverer than Sai, which broke my heart a little. Igor would do well as King of Cremona, whereas the best Sai could ever hope for would be a position as a general for the Wolf River Kingdom.

Which was a perfectly wonderful consolation prize, if I did say so myself.

"People must be led by example," I told Igor. "If they see that their king is just and fair, that he values happiness and peace, and that he will hear all of his subjects with equal consideration and answer their needs to the best of his abilities, they will willingly overlook other traits that they might not find as savory."

“Such as the fact that I’d rather bed a man than a woman,” Igor said with a knowing grin.

“Precisely,” I said. “You have the added advantage of being a duke’s son. Do not underestimate the power of your birth. The people of the old cities are hungry for continuity. They wish to believe that as little has changed as possible.”

“So even if Kythria does try to usurp me, they would rather have me as their king than him,” Igor said, brightening considerably.

That idea had only just occurred to me as well, but I said, “Precisely,” as though I had known it all along. I would have guessed that point eventually anyhow.

I realized what else Igor had working in his favor in that moment as well, the area where Sai had made his greatest errors.

“Once you’ve gained Kostya and established yourself as king of the new, combined kingdoms of Kostya and Cremona, you must usher in change gradually,” I said. “Sai’s great failing was that he pushed for everyone in the cities to change their ways too quickly. He was correct in everything he sought to do, but he attempted to force change without consulting with the people first.”

“But if things need to change, and you and I both know they desperately do, then how do I make certain they do change without forcing things?” he asked.

Again, unlike Sai, I felt as though Igor was hungry for a real answer, a strategy he could learn and apply, instead of merely asking the question rhetorically and growing frustrated because he didn’t like the answer.

“You have the advantage of not having to start with a clean slate,” I told him. “Both Sai—and Stepan and Cyril—and Rufus preceded you and broke the old order. Rather than sweeping their reigns aside and beginning completely anew, I would advise you to introduce yourself to your new citizens with the promise of relief from years of change.”

“So I should promise them that everything will go back to the way it was?” Igor asked, confused.

“Things can never go back to the way they were,” I told him. Thoughts of Rurik and the life we’d lived together came to mind. I could never go back to the lovesick young man I’d been, nor could I recapture the unique sort of courage it had taken me not only to begin this endeavor that the two of us had planned together, but to carry on after losing him. “We can only ever move forward.”

“But that means change,” Igor said. “And you’ve just told me not to change things.”

“I told you to promise your people that they will not have to endure any further change,” I said.

Igor frowned. “But I can’t keep that promise.”

“Of course you can’t,” I said. “But making it will, paradoxically, leave your people open to changing. That change must feel as though it comes from them, not as if you’ve dictated it from on high. The reason you saw such peace and prosperity in the Wolf River Kingdom was because, from the very start, my friends and I vowed to let the men who wished to live within our boundaries to determine their lives for themselves. They could be whomever they wanted to be, love whomever they loved, and take up whatever profession they wanted.”

“Rufus’s limitations on merchants and craftsmen need to go, then,” Igor said, introspective once again. “If some men succeed and others struggle, it should be because of their merits and talents, not because of some outward structure imposed on them.”

“Precisely,” I said, smiling. We’d only scratched the topmost surface, but I could already tell Igor would ultimately win the hearts and minds of everyone from the old cities. He understood people, and I believed he would listen to them.

I thought we were nearly done with our chat, and I was desperate to get back to my beloveds, but Igor shook his head and continued with, “What do I do about Kythria, then?”

I did not feel as though I had the time to draw his true concerns out with questions, so I cut straight to it and asked, “Are you certain he will wish to take the crown from you and rule as Rufus’s replacement?”

“No,” Igor answered. “I’m not sure of that at all. But I don’t know what else he might want instead.”

“There’s your answer,” I said, smiling. “The very first thing you must do is discover what Kythria wants more than anything else.”

“And if it is the crown he desires?” Igor asked.

I shrugged with false innocence. “Serve him olives for breakfast.”

Igor blanched. “I...I don’t know if I could do that again,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I wasn’t prepared for...any of it. I’ve struggled to come to terms....” He shook his head and swallowed hard.

“What you did was not for your own amusement or gain, not really,” I told him, scooting forward and resting a hand on his knee. “What you did was for your kingdom, for your people. If they were being directly threatened, as your younger brother was when Yiannis stole him, would you stand by, weighing the moral implications of your actions?”

I’d had to throw Leremy into Igor’s considerations. It was the most poignant way to make the point. And perhaps it would also serve to remind Igor who his real enemy was.

Igor drew in a breath, looking regal once again. “No,” he said. “I wouldn’t hesitate. And I was against that entire plot from the start. I saw how happy my brother was, is, with his... master. I had no wish at all to destroy that for him.”

“You are fortunate that the pups were rescued before any harm came to them,” I told him, pushing myself to stand. Igor stood as well. “Peter never would have forgiven you if you’d allowed any pup to be savaged that way.”

Igor blushed and glanced down. “You...you truly don’t mind that...that Peter and I...”

I laughed and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “My beloved Peter likes to fuck. He’s extraordinarily good at it, too. And as long as the two of you continue on the very best of terms, sharing pleasure whenever you can, then I can rest easy, knowing the Wolf River Kingdom and the combined kingdoms of Kostya and Cremona will always be friends.”

Igor blinked and looked at me in shock. That told me he still had much to learn about the practicalities of leadership and some of the more unique sacrifices that sometimes needed to be made to hold onto power.

I didn’t want him dwelling on it, though, so I directed his thoughts to another place entirely by asking, “Have you seen your brother yet?”

“Leremy?” Igor blinked.

“You do know that he’s here, in Novoberg, do you not?”

I could tell immediately from Igor’s expression that he hadn’t known. “Where is he?” he asked. “Is he close by? Can I see him?”

“You’d have to ask his master about that,” I said. “The last time I saw them, they were at the Beiste house, where I believe they are living at the moment.”

“I need to speak with him,” Igor said, starting for the doorway. “I need to apologize and explain.”

I followed Igor out to the hall, my heart warmed to see that Igor put more emotion into thoughts of his brother than into political machinations. As long as he continued to care for people, he would find a way to make his kingdom work.

I, on the other hand, needed to figure out how to make other things work. I was now certain that everything would come to a head soon. By the sound of things, Kythria would arrive in Novoberg imminently. Ludvig would likely be here in two or three days, Vikhrov another two or three days after that, and depending on how they chose to travel, Jorgen and Hati not much later.

By the end of a week, we would have nearly every major player on the frontier in one place, and that was when I needed

to be at the very top of my game if I wanted to win the world that I wanted.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

It should not have surprised me at all that Ox was able to create a wildly entertaining and surprisingly well-attended event. Despite the fact that her mate, Viki, had spent the afternoon wandering the palace, muttering about ghosts and warning me at least three times that no one would want to risk sudden death for anything as trivial as a dance at the palace, the curious citizens of Novoberg began to arrive just after the sun set.

“They’re staring at us,” Neil said, leaning into my side and glancing out at the filling ballroom nervously.

“Of course they’re staring at us,” Peter said from my other side, adding a careless shrug. “We’re the most beautiful things in the room.”

I laughed aloud at that.

Although he did have a point. Ox had rallied her people quickly to adorn the palace ballroom with boughs of rich, bright, autumn leaves. She’d commandeered every lantern that she could to bring brightness and warmth to the room. She’d even managed to find large amounts of ribbons and even gold cloth that caught the light and would have made the nobles of the past drool with avarice.

But Neil, Peter, and I wore fine, embroidered coats that Peter had made, and after a more thorough scrub than the one we’d enjoyed to wash the dust of travel away, we were, in my humble opinion, far and away the most handsome men in the frontier.

“They’re staring at you because they’ve never seen such a big collection of peacocks in their lives,” Jace laughed from the side, sipping wine from a crystal cup, Gennadi tight by his side.

Peter made a snorting, scoffing noise. “Who’s the peacock again?” he asked, making a show of looking Jace up and down.

Jace and Gennadi also wore coats that Peter had made. Even though Peter had a dozen responsibilities and very little free time, he still amused himself and decompressed by sewing for his loved ones.

“This all just feels wrong,” Sai said, walking over to join our group. Instead of standing proud and showing off for the gawping citizens of Novoberg, he tugged awkwardly at the sleeves of his coat and rolled his shoulders, as if his coat didn’t fit. “We shouldn’t be dancing and eating and reveling when Hedeon is about to be besieged and Yiannis is roaming free in the forest.”

I turned a sympathetic smile to Sai. “What else would you have us do?” I asked. “We do not know the strength or capability of Commander Kythria’s forces, but even if we did, Kythria himself is on his way here. Not a soul knows where Yiannis and his men have disappeared to either, other than rumors that some of them headed west,” I added, though that little fact continued to vex me. The most dangerous sort of enemy was one whose whereabouts were unknown.

“We could be looking for him,” Sai said, crossing his arms and standing on Neil’s other side, staring out at the festive ballroom.

Well, that could be one way to distract Sai while the rest of us did the important work of diplomacy.

“Would you like to take a contingent of men into the forest to search for him?” I asked genuinely.

Sai’s face pinched. “Not when King Igor is about to meet with the commander of his army right here in Novoberg.”

That settled that, at least. And it helped me understand where Sai stood on Igor, and Kythria, even more.

Not that I didn't already know the depth of his wariness and resentment.

"Enjoy yourself while you can, my friend," I told Sai with a smile. "Even the thistle turns its flowers to the sun now and again to soak in the warmth it needs to grow another day."

Sai glanced sideways at me, raising an eyebrow dubiously.

Only a few seconds later, Igor strode over to our group, Orel and Leremy with him.

"Isn't this spectacular?" he asked, addressing his question to me for a moment before turning to Peter. "It's just the sort of diversion the people of Novoberg need to form good opinions of us."

I peeked subtly at Sai to see what he thought of that.

Sai didn't notice. He seemed fixed on something at the other side of the room. A quick check proved that young Cid had entered the ballroom, following Avenel and several other men who were acting as palace servants, carrying a tray of tasty morsels.

"I didn't expect to see so many Novobergers here," Orel said, clasping Leremy's hand and smiling around at the festivities. "Ox has certainly won them all over. She even got the games and entertainment right."

"I beg your pardon?" I asked.

Orel turned and pointed off to one of the far corners, near a line of doors that led out to the garden beyond. I'd noticed the large, brass tub that had been set up there earlier and filled with water and apples, but I'd thought it was some strange kind of refreshment.

As we watched, one of the young Novobergers thrust his entire head into the tub. Several of his friends cheered him on, and when he yanked his head up again, he had an apple in his mouth. I had to squint to be certain, but I thought I saw something shiny, like a coin, embedded in the underside of the

apple. The man's friends all cheered as he took the apple out of his mouth and pulled the coin out, claiming it as his prize.

"I was always terrible at bobbing for apples," Peter said with a wince. "Every time I tried, Hans and the rest of my brothers would shove my head under the water and keep me there until I nearly drowned."

A pang of regret for the cruelty my Peter had experienced in his former life hit me, and I grasped his hand.

"I was always pretty good at it," Neil said with a cheeky grin.

"Is this apple game something unique to Novoberg?" I asked.

"We used to do it in Hedeon at harvest festivals, too," Jace said. "Only, the way Hedeon did it, everyone would count to fifty or a hundred, and the bobber had to see how many apples they could bite before they ran out of time."

"We used to do something similar in Neander," Igor said. "Only there, it was potatoes, not apples."

"Ten marks says Neil can bite more apples than you, Igor," Peter said, the light of competition in his eyes.

"You're on," Igor said, as delighted as a boy.

They all started off, Jace and Gennadi too, but Peter glanced back at me, as if asking for permission.

I nodded to him, then winked to let him know I thought his idea was brilliant.

"Igor shouldn't be behaving like a child," Sai grumbled beside me. "It's unbecoming of a king."

I shifted to face him, since it was only the two of us, Orel, and Jeremy left observing the festivities.

"Unbecoming for a king to demonstrate to the citizens of a potential ally city that he is one of them and respects their traditions?" I asked.

Sai sulked, then sighed. "I know you think I was a terrible king, Magnus. Your point has been made."

It had, and even though I wanted Sai to learn from his mistakes, I didn't want to beat the poor man with them.

I was lucky that Cid and Avenel came our way with their trays just then. It gave me a moment to consider how to proceed with Sai.

"Thank you, Cid," Sai told the young man, taking a small, savory tart from the tray that Cid offered.

I watched the interaction closely. Cid didn't look at Sai's face and his expression was as vacant as ever, but his cheeks went pink and he lingered perhaps longer than he needed to, in case Sai wanted something else.

"Thank you for your assistance earlier as well," Sai went on, holding the tart awkwardly, like he wasn't certain he wanted to eat it. "Will you...will you be assisting me after this party is done as well?" he asked.

Cid didn't answer. I wasn't certain the question had penetrated whatever brokenness Yiannis's wolves had left him with. And if he was hopelessly broken, Sebald's plot to distract Sai might not work.

But just as I was about to give up hope, as Avenel cleared his throat in a signal that they needed to move on, Cid peeked up at Sai for the barest of seconds, then nodded.

And Sai smiled. It wasn't much of a smile and it was gone as soon as Avenel and Cid moved away, but it had definitely been there.

"What did you need Cid's assistance with earlier?" I asked, nibbling on the small flatbread piled with what appeared to be pâté of some sort, and definitely not a puree of olives—I didn't think I would ever be able to eat olives again—pretending innocence.

Sai's face colored. "Something happened with the chimney in the room where I was staying," he said. "An animal of some sort must have gotten stuck. My entire room was filled with soot when I returned to wash and dress for tonight."

"How very unfortunate," I said, my face a perfect mask of concern, though I feared my eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Cid was sent to help me pack my things and relocate to another room,” Sai went on. “It’s one of the rooms that has only just been cleaned, though, and the fire still wasn’t lit when I was up there just before coming here. I fear the room will be frigidly cold tonight.”

It was just as Sebald had planned, the clever man.

“And Cid will help by warming your bed tonight?” I asked, still feigning innocence.

Sai went bright red and shifted awkwardly. “Not in *that* way, not at all,” he said, his voice rough.

“In what way?” I asked, blinking rapidly. I was certain Sai would see through my ruse. “You were a soldier, Sai,” I reminded him. “Surely, you must know that another warm body can be appreciated without anything untoward happening. Besides, poor Cid seems to be more in a state of mind to need a protector and champion than a lover.”

Sai bristled and looked so uncomfortable I feared his head might pop off and roll out of the room. He cleared his throat and said, “I suppose,” then cleared his throat again. “Excuse me,” he said, tugging at the hem of his jacket with one hand, then marching off in the opposite direction to where Cid and Avenel had gone, shoving the tart he’d taken from Cid into his mouth as he went.

“Why does everyone seem so intent on throwing that poor, damaged pup into Sai’s bed?” Orel asked once Sai was gone. He’d stepped back towards us as the conversation with Sai had progressed.

I turned to Orel with a smile. “It is a strategic distraction,” I said honestly. Orel was a Son, after all, and had served as a Justice for Savoberg for a time. He was as deserving of respect as anyone.

Orel hummed and nodded slowly. “If he’s too caught up with uncomfortable feelings for another man, maybe he’ll stay out of more important business.”

I beamed at Orel. “My, my. It seems as though all of you Sons have the sort of strategic mind that will challenge my

Peter for kingship someday.”

Orel met my teasing smile with a tight one of his own. “If it is my duty to take a turn as king of the Wolf River Kingdom, then I will serve. But I am just as happy to play my part from behind the throne.”

I laughed. “You are a young man after my own heart.”

Where some of Peter and Neil’s other friends would have made a sly joke, Orel just nodded with deference.

A burst of laughter from the other side of the room caught both of our attentions, and Leremy’s, and we turned to find Igor flipping his head up out of the tub, an apple in his mouth. Water from his hair spread everywhere as he flicked his head back like some of the popinjays with which I had served at my uncle’s parties all those years ago. Those dandies had adored having men look at them. When Igor removed the apple from his mouth and pulled a silver coin from its base, the rather large audience that had gathered around him cheered.

“See?” Ox’s voice suddenly at my side startled me into turning to her. “I know how to entertain the masses as well as you do.”

I kept my cheery disposition in place, even though experience warned me to be wary. Of every soul in the room, Ox was the most dangerous to me personally.

As if to prove that, she glared at Orel and Leremy.

“Leremy, would you like to dance?” Orel asked, taking his pup’s hand and starting out to the center of the ballroom. “It looks like the musicians are ready to play.”

That was the end of that. My last ally deserted me, and I was left to face the wrath of a woman I’d wronged on my own.

Ox finished her approach slowly, her arms crossed and her eyes narrowed threateningly. “I know what you’re doing here, Magnus,” she said stopping closer to me than most men would have dared to come.

“I have made no secret of my reasons for being here,” I said, fighting the twist of anxiety pinching behind my heart.

Ox huffed and shook her head. “Pretending to be open doesn’t change the fact that you just had to rush up here, to my city, my *peaceful* city that would like to stay that way, because you can’t stand the thought of anything happening on the frontier without you being right in the middle of it, pulling all the strings.”

She was not wrong. Ox knew me well. She’d come along as part of the deal with Peter, and for five years, she’d been an intimate part of my inner circle.

There was no hiding from Ox.

“You have seen the necessity of me having a hand in the fate of the frontier from the start,” I told her, speaking to her not as a friend, but as a potential enemy who might stab me in the back as soon as I turned away from her. “You watched as the old cities died and struggled to rise from the ashes, as the wolves wrestled with each other to form the new kingdoms, or to eschew any kingdom at all. You were close enough to witness Sai making a mess of things, to see Yuri and Bela’s attempt to destroy our budding kingdom before that, and when Edik tried to end it all before it began by killing me. You know that none of this would be possible without someone of strength and cunning to orchestrate it.”

“I’ve been with you long enough to know that you have the biggest ego of anyone I’ve ever met,” Ox said, clutching herself tighter, almost as if she was holding herself together. “I’ve seen you steal another man’s lover and keep him, and his friend, as your pet playthings. I’ve seen you manipulate your own friends into believing they wanted the same things you do. And I’ve seen you callously disregard the women of your kingdom and what they want so you could force your vision on everyone.”

I smiled, though there wasn’t any warmth in it. Again, Ox wasn’t wrong. I had done all those things, and I had done them believing that I was right and that it didn’t matter what wrongs I committed in order to get the results I wanted to see.

I also knew the consequences of not standing up for what I believed in, and of allowing a weak and ineffectual system to

continue.

“I understand your hatred of me, Ox, and I will not now, nor ever, attempt to dissuade you away from it,” I said. “I accept and embrace it. It is necessary for someone to hate me, otherwise I truly would turn into the sort of megalomaniac who cares only for his own wants.”

“Don’t try to sidestep your faults by agreeing with me,” Ox said, her face growing red as her anger gathered. “You might have everyone else fooled, but not me. You are an evil, heartless, manipulative bastard.”

I nodded once, as if agreeing. I understood Ox’s feelings, and I wasn’t going to change her mind.

“If you wish for me to take my husbands and our friends and leave this place at once, then I will respect your authority here and do that,” I said, hoping she would catch the subtle reminder that Peter, Neil, Jace, and Gennadi came with me wherever I went, and they would leave when I did.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of denying you the pleasure of telling all the leaders of the frontier how they should rule their kingdoms,” Ox said, her voice filled with sarcasm.

I pressed my lips tightly together. I supposed I had earned this ire. My Peter was perfectly correct when he’d scolded me for overlooking Ox’s and the other women’s feelings in the pursuit of our kingdom’s future. I did not feel that Ox’s anger was healthy or useful, but there was nothing I could do about it. Sometimes anger was a necessary expression of grief.

“How would you propose to ensure that the fledgling kingdoms of the frontier work together for peace?” I asked her instead of trying to defend myself. “How would you have people from Good Port to Tesladom work in accord so that everyone might live a life of promise and possibility?”

“I wouldn’t,” Ox said with a shrug. “What people do should be their own business.”

“Even if it means kidnapping young men from their homes and using them viciously?” I asked, turning to her and mirroring her posture.

Ox's irate certainty waned. "Of course I don't mean that men like Yiannis and the bastards who follow him should be allowed to do whatever they want."

"No?" I challenged her. "Then how would you stop them?"

Ox's scowl deepened. "I know what you're doing. You're trying to make me see beyond the walls of Novoberg. But that's the entire point of Novoberg. We don't want anything to do with the rest of the frontier, and we don't want any of them to have anything to do with us."

"So if Yiannis and his men walked through one of your wide-open gates tomorrow, you wouldn't turn them away or impose rules and restrictions on them?" I pushed on.

"If we don't give them a reason to come here, then they won't." Ox insisted.

"Do you truly believe that?" I asked. "How many sweet young men live within Novoberg's walls? What sort of stores have you put aside for yourselves that a large pack of hungry wolves might be tempted by in a few months, when the snows are at their thickest?"

"My people will defend themselves if they need to," Ox grumbled.

I decided not to challenge the paradox she'd just placed before me. Instead, I continued with, "And what if, when Commander Kythria arrives to meet with Igor, as he's given word he will, he decides to take Novoberg in the name of Cremona? Or for himself, for that matter?"

"Kythria and I made a deal," Ox said, tilting her chin up. "He knows we will offer him hospitality if he wants it. He doesn't need to take anything if we're willing to give it."

"By your logic, perhaps," I said. "But what if he doesn't share your vision of neutrality? Could you stop him from ending everything you've worked for with a click of his fingers?"

"Why are you testing me this way, Magnus?" Ox demanded. The aggravation in her voice was a direct contrast to the merry music that the band was now playing and the joy

and laughter of the people, including my beloveds and Igor, who danced to it.

It was pleasing and settling to shift my focus momentarily to the large, circular dance that Peter, Neil, and Igor were now participating in. I thought it was significant that the old folk dance did not require partners, and that the steps were simple enough for anyone to participate and enjoy themselves.

I glanced back to Ox and said, “You cannot shut yourself away from the rest of the world entirely, Ox, my friend. The world will not allow it.” She tried to protest, but I cut her off. “The only way for you to sustain this lifestyle—one that I can see suits you and the people of Novoberg very well—is if you negotiate with the rest of us to keep your peace. And the only way you will be able to negotiate is if the kings of the frontier come together peacefully and talk their way through creating a new world. They cannot do that if even one faction chooses to be at war with the others. And seeing as not everyone is skilled at communicating their wants and needs, would you rather leave the outcome of those negotiations to chance or would you rather have a seasoned diplomat, who has already proven his mettle in raising up a functional kingdom with a future, steering the course of negotiations?”

Ox was silent after my speech. I could see the loathing in her eyes, but I knew it was born out of frustration and the dawning of maturity. Nothing vexed a young person so much as discovering that the things their elders had been telling them all along were right.

“You hurt people,” Ox said after a long pause. Her voice was brittle and emotional. “You hurt me.”

“For which I am deeply sorry,” I told her with equal openness. “You are correct that I did not take the agency of the women of my kingdom into account in my effort to ensure a future generation. I thank you for opening my eyes and for helping the entire Wolf River Kingdom change its policies and rethink its aims.”

“Don’t do that!” Ox shouted, almost loud enough to be heard over the jolly music and the clapping and stomping that

accompanied the dance. “Don’t make yourself sound all noble and wise. You did something unforgivable.”

“And I will have to live with that for the rest of my life,” I said, matching the intensity of her words. “As you will have to live with the knowledge that not everyone shares your horror of what I asked. Until you learn to accept that every belief and opinion has some validity and that not all of them will be in accord with your own, you will never be able to be a ruler, you will only be a tyrant.”

Ox let out a frustrated shriek and threw up her hands. “I hate you, Magnus! I hate you!”

The music stopped suddenly, and for a moment, I thought it was because Ox had been loud enough to bring the entire room and its revelries to a stop.

But the ripple of shock that spread through the ballroom and the sudden rise in whispers and murmurs that followed wasn’t directed at Ox or at me. It was directed in completely the other direction...to the ballroom doorways, where dozens of soldiers in bright armor had just entered the room.

I knew at once what and who I was seeing, but the thrill of an army that was dressed in the manner of the Old Realm, who were all outfitted with swords that had surely been forged by the smiths of Karamay, and who looked on the festive scene as if they were walking into a world of wonder that was entirely foreign to them, had me gawping as if I were one of the provincial frontier wolves.

Further, I knew that the tall, white-haired, bearded man with broad shoulders and a deep purple cloak over his armor was Commander Kythria, even before Igor broke away from the circle of dancers with a surprised, “Kythria!”

Another ripple went through the room, at least among those who hadn’t already met Kythria when he had visited Novoberg before. Igor was the most unnerved of the people who had been caught enjoying themselves, though. He strode across the room, running his fingers through his still-wet hair, and straightening the bottom of his jacket, as if he needed to make a good impression on his subordinate.

Peter leapt after him, a flash in his eyes that I could see from across the room. He peeked my way, and the sheer intensity of excitement in his eyes had me smiling and leaving Ox to her frustration so that I could join the meeting that was about to take place. Ox could tease and berate me about it as much as she wanted when all was said and done, but I desperately needed to meet and assess Kythria as quickly as possible.

Neil, Jace, and Gennadi made their way towards the coming confrontation a few seconds behind Igor and Peter. We all met about half a dozen steps behind Igor and Peter.

“Kythria, you’ve arrived,” Igor greeted his general. He’d managed to assume a king’s air before stopping in front of the man who was old enough to be his grandfather, which was a hopeful start.

“And you received my summons, it seems,” Kythria answered, amusement clear in everything from his expression to his voice.

I didn’t like his use of the word “summons”, even though that was what it was.

Peter stepped up to Igor’s side, and moments later, I moved into position between him and Igor as Neil settled on Peter’s other side. If the moment had not been so important, I would have let Peter remain by Igor’s side, but not only did Igor need my immediate support, I wanted Kythria to know who the most powerful man in the room was, and that it was not him.

Igor helped my presentation by subconsciously taking a half step back and nodding his head slightly to me. “Kythria, this is King Magnus of the Wolf River Kingdom.”

For once, I wasn’t going to correct the way I’d been labeled as king.

“Magnus Gravlock,” Kythria said, his smile shifting from that of a man of power who was amused by the young men playing at leadership to a genuine respect...with a hint of

challenge. He held his hand out to me as he went on with, “I have heard so much about you.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I said, taking Kythria’s hand and clasping it tightly in the manner of the Old Realm. I smiled and spoke to him in friendly tones, but it was not an accident that I claimed not to know much about him. “I had not realized that you were so august or robust.”

I truly hadn’t put that puzzle together. Kythria was old enough to be my uncle, though perhaps not my father. It occurred to me that the reason I hadn’t heard of him before was not because he’d come after my time, but because he’d come before it.

“Are you saying I’m old?” Kythria grinned at me, tightening his grip.

“I would never say such a thing,” I spoke carefully in answer.

The true battle for supremacy on the frontier had just begun, and I was determined to emerge victorious, once and for all.

“Igor, did you not tell King Magnus every small detail about my life and my service to our late king?” Kythria asked, still holding my wrist, but glancing to Igor.

Every word out of the man’s mouth was a calculation that told me precisely what he thought of himself and where he stood.

“I haven’t had a chance to,” Igor said, standing tall and refusing to let himself be intimidated. “I’ve been too busy bringing order to Cremona after the plague that caused the crown to fall onto my head.”

I was more pleased with Igor’s response than I could say. He would not let Kythria walk in and take the crown from him, that much was certain.

“Good man,” Kythria nodded to Igor, letting go of my hand at last.

I was worried that his tone implied something closer to “Good boy”, but Igor remained steadfast.

“You’ve arrived in the middle of a harvest festival that Lady Ox, leader of Novoberg, has provided for our entertainment,” he said. “I’m certain she would wish for you and your officers to join us, unless you would rather rest after what I can only assume was a tiresome journey from Klovisgard.”

“It was a long journey, and there is much to report,” Kythria said, then glanced around the room. “But I will never say no to food, drink, and dancing.”

“Then by all means, you have my leave to enjoy it tonight,” Igor said, gesturing to the room as if he was in command of everything. “Reports can wait until tomorrow.”

Kythria nodded slowly to Igor, a hint of a smile on his face. He was conceding the night to Igor, but I couldn’t tell how far his deference extended. “Ox!” he called out, stepping away from our group and striding over to Ox, who had watched the exchange from the side, her brow knit in assessment. “What is this magnificence you’ve organized?” he asked.

“Well done,” I murmured to Igor as we all turned to follow the shifting center of attention in the room as Kythria greeted Ox. “If you continue to hold your own in that way, Kythria will gladly swear his fealty to you.”

“I don’t think it’ll be easy,” Igor said, his tone more serious, even though his smile remained in place. “He plays the game well.”

“Yes, he does,” I said.

“Did you notice he’s withholding information from me?” Igor asked.

“I noticed,” Peter said, inserting himself into our conversation.

I wanted to hook my arm around his waist and draw him against me for a kiss. I loved him so, and he was adorable when he tried to remain a part of the great events of the world.

“Let him have a moment to think he’s bested you,” I advised Igor, reaching for Peter’s hand. Kythria had finished greeting Ox and had moved on to shaking hands with one of the other important men of Novoberg. “Let tonight be about camaraderie and enjoyment. Kythria needs this evening’s entertainments to let his guard down. In the morning, before he is ready to be up and about, before he has come down to whatever breakfast we should all have together, send a trusted servant to summon him. When he arrives, you will already have positioned yourself as his king. See if you can find a chair that sits slightly higher than the others in the room. It may seem silly to make a point of being physically higher than the man, but if he’s forced to glance slightly up at you, it will trigger his mind to believe you to have power.”

Igor and Peter both turned to look at me, impressed. They needn’t have been so surprised, though. I’d been born and raised in my uncle’s court. I’d been a king for the last three years. I knew all the tricks and techniques to present oneself as the most powerful person in the room.

“Thank you, Magnus,” Igor said with genuine feeling. He stood taller, tugging at his jacket. “I’ll stay close to him for a bit, then encourage him and his officers to enjoy themselves. And I’ll make him think that it’s my idea to wait until tomorrow to talk about the situation with Kostya.”

I smiled. “Wise choices,” I told him. “You’ll be king of us all before long.”

Igor laughed ironically. “Let me start with one kingdom, and then we’ll see about adding others to it,” he said with a wink.

He then glanced to Peter before striding off to join Kythria, Ox, and a few of the other Novobergers.

“You want to go with him, don’t you,” I told Peter slyly, though my eyes were still on Igor.

“Actually, no,” Peter said. When I turned to him in surprise, he added, “Well, not yet. I want to talk about this whole situation with you and Neil,” he glanced past me to Jace and Gennadi. “And Jace and Gennadi. And maybe some of the

other Sons who are here. This is important, and we need to decide how to manage the situation. Although, to be honest, I think we all just witnessed a master at work when it comes to controlling a room and all the leaders in it.”

I couldn't stop myself from pulling Peter into my arms and kissing him soundly then. “You are perfectly right, of course. Now, let us treat ourselves to some of the sweets that have been set on the table over there, in that far, lonely corner of the room,” I said once I let him go.

We headed away from the center of the ballroom, where everyone seemed to want to be remembered to Kythria from his previous visit. I would have preferred to be more discreet about our impromptu meeting, but the more time we had to sort our thoughts and the faster we were able to get that done, the better positioned our core group would be to steer the course of whatever happened next.

“I don't like Kythria,” Jace was the first to speak once the five of us were gathered around the refreshment table, pretending that was the sole aim of our flight across the room. “He reminds me too much of Gomez.”

I snapped my eyes up from where I'd been surveying the various confections on the table. “That is a curious comparison,” I said.

“Well, it's an accurate one,” Jace said. “Kythria is all smiles and pretend ease, but he has avarice and ownership in his eyes.”

That was an even more astute observation. “I agree with Jace,” Neil said. “I watched the entire exchange with Kythria and you and Igor, and, Magnus, Kythria is trying to play you the same way General Rufus did.”

I felt a twinge of shame and regret at those words. I was not entirely satisfied with the way I had conducted myself with Rufus.

“You've no need to fear, my darling,” I said, selecting a bonbon of some sort with one hand and sweeping my arm around Neil with the other, then proceeding to feed him the

bonbon, all for show, of course. “I allowed myself to be led astray once. You can rest assured knowing I absolutely will not do it again.”

“What will you do?” Peter asked, laughing at me and Neil as I kissed Neil’s mouth while he chewed, then swallowed. He was as good at subterfuge as I’d ever been. “Do you think Kythria can be controlled, or will he need to be eliminated?”

I smirked. Chocolate, kisses, and talk of political assassinations. Peter and I were in our element.

“I’ve yet to make up my mind on that score,” I said, snatching up another bonbon and treating Peter to the same ridiculous attention that I had Neil.

Our outward play was working. One of the Novobergers saw us and shook his head before walking away. No one else seemed to be sidling closer or attempting to listen to our banter.

“If he needs to be eliminated, I’ll do it,” Jace said in a serious voice, the only one of us who wasn’t pretending to enjoy the party.

“Jace, no,” Gennadi whispered, smiling, but uneasily. “You can’t.”

“If it has to be done, I can,” Jace countered.

And there it was, really. Peter was my mirror, Neil was my reason, Jace was my weapon, and Gennadi was all of our conscience.

Kythria didn’t stand a chance against us.

“Tonight, we must observe closely,” I said, picking up a bonbon and putting it in Neil’s hand, then gesturing for him to feed it to me. Before he did, I said, “Everything comes down to whether Kythria respects Igor’s authority. If he bends a knee to Igor, we won’t need to take drastic action against him.”

I nodded to Neil, and he made a show of feeding me the bonbon. Both he and Peter laughed over the show he made of it. Gennadi shook his head, pretending he found us ridiculous, but his eyes were bright with panic and his smile was brittle.

Jace crossed his arms and frowned, which, fortunately, was just the sort of reaction he should have had to our antics.

“I still think we should just arrange for the plague to come to Novoberg and be done with Kythria up front,” Jace said.

I swallowed the chocolate and giggled as I wiped my mouth. “Wait for him to give his report to Igor before you condemn him,” I said. “He likely knows more about the situation with Stepan and Cyril right now than any of us do.”

“I can spend the night with Igor to try to find out inside information,” Peter volunteered. “If Kythria doesn’t tell Igor anything tonight, then perhaps I can figure out how to be in the room tomorrow when he does.”

“You just want to fuck with Igor again,” Jace smirked at him.

“And isn’t it a good thing that what I want and what I need to do for the benefit of us all match so well?” Peter smiled.

Perhaps it was my long list of peculiarities, but I found that remark genuinely endearing. I laughed, then helped myself to another bonbon before taking Peter’s and Neil’s hands. “Come,” I said. “The musicians are starting another dance. Let us join in, and keep a watchful eye on Igor and his general as we do.”

We joined the newly forming circle of dancers in the center of the ballroom with smiles on our faces and eyes opened. I had to admit that the event, as silly as I thought it was at first, had turned into a most remarkably useful entertainment. As we spun and swirled around the room, laughing and exhausting ourselves in concert with our friends and foes alike, I was able to mark all of the key players in the drama of the frontier.

Igor was winning friends and admirers faster than the entwining steps of the dance. Ox was caught between receiving accolades from her fellow city-dwellers and, by the look of things, from Kythria himself.

Kythria spent more time watching Igor than anyone else in the room, though he paused in his scrutiny to give orders to his men. It was impossible to tell without being able to hear what

those orders were, but the majority of his officers stayed to enjoy the food and dancing, so he may have just been ordering them to have fun.

He may also have ordered them to take up positions to be ready for whatever action he would take to secure the frontier for himself, if that was his aim. His officers stayed, but they didn't look terribly relaxed.

It all came down to Kythria, really. I despised the fact that one man could have so much power, and that that man wasn't me. But as I stepped out of the dance to fetch myself a drink, too exhausted from the long, long day to keep up with the younger men, I glanced in his direction and found Kythria studying me instead of Igor.

I raised the glass of punch I'd just taken from a tray to Kythria in salute. Kythria had his own glass in hand and saluted right back. His expression was shrewd and his eyes narrowed, so I watched him a little longer, drinking my punch but not taking my eyes off him.

For a moment, it was as if the rest of the room disappeared and all that was left were the two of us sizing each other up. I needed a better read of Kythria. I needed to spend the next few days, until the other leaders of the frontier reached Novoberg, learning everything I could about the man and his ambition. Ideally, I needed to get him alone and peel away the layers of everything he was trying to hide until I reached the truth at the heart of him.

And then I needed to determine whether the man was worthy of living in my frontier or if I would have to employ Jace in the manner he wished to be employed to eliminate the man.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

The dance lasted well past midnight and grew more ribald with every glass of wine and punch that was consumed. It was in many ways the most enjoyable celebration I'd been part of for years. The dancing was enlivening, the games set up around the edges of the room kept everyone entertained, and the food was good.

People began to slip out of the room and off to bed close to midnight. With a nod of permission and well-wishes from me, Peter and Igor were some of the first to quietly leave the ballroom for other pursuits. I couldn't help but imagine the sort of amusements my Peter would give and receive with Igor that night, and I trusted him to position himself exactly where he needed to be when Kythria gave his report the next morning.

Igor and Peter were not the only ones I noted leaving together. Sometime early on in the departures, I caught sight of Sai leaving out one of the servants' doors with Cid. I could only hope that his interest in the young man would prove both to distract him from areas where he was not needed, and that it would keep Cid safe and earn him a fierce protector. Whatever else they did, in bed or out, was up to them.

Not long after Igor and Peter left the party, Kythria and a few of his officers retired for the evening as well. The speed and manner of their departure told me that the only reason they had joined the revelries to begin with was to assess Igor, as a leader and perhaps as a man as well, but that they were, in fact, exhausted from their travels.

Kythria must have seen all he needed to, because he left without a word to anyone. He did manage to catch my eye again before he went, though.

Again, the sense that we were assessing each other and weighing how big of a threat we were to each other was there. Kythria wasn't Rufus and he didn't have quite the feeling of ruthlessness about him, but I didn't think for a second that meant I could ignore him.

"Well then," I said with a sigh to Neil after Kythria was gone. "I believe there is nothing more remaining for us here, now that all the key players have departed."

"Nothing?" Neil asked with a particularly teasing and heated grin. He'd had a bit of wine. Not enough to make him drunk, but his cheeks were pink, his eyes were bright, and he stood very close to me. "Not even a dance?"

The musicians had struck up a slower, sweeter tune, and pairs had fallen into each other's arms throughout the room for the intimate dance they played.

"My darling Neil," I said with a slight gasp and an amorous grin. "Are you asking me to dance?"

Neil stepped back from me, then executed a beautiful bow from the waist. As he straightened, he offered his hand to me, as if I were one of the pretty young maids waiting around the edges of the room for a partner to sweep them off their feet.

I smiled broadly, and my heart pounded with love for my sweet Neil. He was gallant and handsome, and I wanted him with everything I had right then.

I took his hand, raising it to my lips for a kiss, then winked at him as an indication that once he finished spinning me around the dance floor, I would spin him in an entirely different way.

We were just one of dozens of couples that took up the center of the ballroom in various combinations as the musicians continued their melody, but from the moment Neil and I fell into each other's arms, stepping lightly to the tune,

as far as I was concerned, my beloved husband and I were the only people in the room.

“You’ve been looking devilishly handsome all night, Magnus,” Neil said, holding me close, as I held him. “You’ve had the look of a man in his element since the moment we walked into Novoberg.”

I laughed. “I am only in my element because I have you and Peter here with me,” I told him.

Neil made a doubtful sound and tilted his head to the side for a moment. “I think you would be happy to be here whether Peter and I were with you or not.”

“That most certainly is not true,” I told him seriously. “Politics and diplomacy are nothing but chores that need to be done unless I have two of the people I am doing it all for with me.”

Neil raised an eyebrow like he would question me. He had changed so much from the soft, unformed young man that he’d been when he’d come to me. He was so strong and steady now, and I loved him more with every passing day.

“You don’t believe me?” I teased him, sliding a hand down his back to the top of his ass.

“I believe that you love to be in the thick of things, just as much as Peter,” he said, his eyes sparkling. I started to reply, but he stopped me with, “Don’t try to tell me otherwise. You have no idea how charming you are or how much you glow when you’re moving your pieces around the sketchers board of the frontier and setting things up exactly the way you want them.”

I closed my mouth, opting for a sly smile instead of a clever reply. “I do it all for you, my love,” I told him as sweetly as I could.

Neil blushed, which made everything worthwhile. I would move mountains to put that gentle, enchanting smile on my husband’s face.

“It won’t be long now,” I went on, staring at his mouth for a moment as I distracted myself with thoughts of kissing it.

“We are in the endgame of this particular sketchers match. I predict that all the leaders of the frontier will be here in Novoberg by the end of the week, we will have talked our way through what we wish the frontier to look like once the dust of conflict settles, and by the time the snows start, the problems of Kostya and the wild wolves will be resolved and we can return to our lives in peace.”

“You really think the solution is that easy?” Neil asked.

I laughed again. “Heavens, no! I don’t think it will be easy at all. I think we’ll be working for the rest of our lives to maintain our vision. But I do think the flames will die down to embers soon.” I spun Neil around in the steps of the dance, then tightened my hold on him. “I truly just want to go home to Gravlock and live out the rest of my days as Neil and Peter’s husband and Ziggy and Ella’s father. And the father to more children, too. That is my idea of victory.”

“It’s mine as well,” Neil said, smiling amorously at me. “And do you know, I think we’ll actually be able to accomplish it.”

“So do I,” I said. The song ended, and a hum of renewed conversations filled the air as the musicians checked and retuned their instruments. “And now, my beloved,” I said, stepping away from Neil and grasping his hand, “I think it’s time for the two of us to return to our home for the night.”

“I think that’s a splendid idea,” Neil said, his entire face shining with ardor.

We left the ballroom without saying goodbye to anyone. Most of the people I would have felt beholden to had gone before us. I did spot Ox eyeing the two of us from across the room, but she was engaged with some of the Novobergers, so I didn’t even consider interrupting her for a goodbye she most likely wouldn’t have wanted anyhow.

It was a bit of a shock to go from the loud and overheated ballroom to the chilly, autumn night. The Beiste house wasn’t terribly far from the palace, but I found the walk—or rather dash, since Neil and I did not want to waste time getting to our temporary bed—exceedingly unpleasant. Not just because the

air was crisp and carried the scent of falling leaves and earth turned from the harvest along with the smoke of warming fires, but because the chill told me that the snows weren't as far off as I would have liked.

Time was running out for my and Rurik's vision of victory to be made real. Once the snows started, it was likely everything would grind to a halt for months. It would be so much better for everyone if leadership and alliances were decided before the dormant period so that everyone on the frontier could become used to the deals that were made before the world was bathed in white.

The Beiste house was calm and quiet when Neil and I reached it. The downstairs rooms were chilly, as their fires had burned out or been banked hours before. The upstairs hallway was dark, but for the low light bleeding into the hall from bedrooms of the inhabitants who hadn't returned from the dance yet.

As we passed the room where Jace and Gennadi were staying, we heard the distinct sounds of those two lovers enjoying themselves in a way that sounded surprisingly sedate for Jace. I turned to Neil with a grin, assuming that our friends were caught up in an unusually tender mood and were exploring it to the fullest.

"I like the idea that Jace and Gennadi don't always fuck angrily," Neil whispered once we'd reached our own room.

"Jace's way isn't angry," I said, peeling out of my formal jacket right away, then helping Neil out of his.

"I don't know what other words to use to describe it," Neil said, humor in his voice as he pulled my shirt out of my trousers while I pushed the jacket from his shoulders. "Everything Jace does is angry most of the time."

"Aggressive," I corrected him. "That is how I would describe our friend."

I paused to kiss Neil heatedly and was delighted when he kissed me back. Yes, Neil had changed quite a bit in the past few years. He was passionate and full of life now, and he did

everything, including kissing, with a sense of purpose and intent.

We rushed to throw off the rest of our clothing, draping it over the chairs in the room or the foot of the bed in a way that would drive Peter mad when he saw it, then burrowed under the layers of warm blankets and quilts on our bed so that we could entwine ourselves together in a sensual cocoon.

“I do love you so,” I sighed, sliding my hands over Neil’s muscular body and licking his lips before devouring them again.

“And I love you,” Neil moaned in return.

He used his superior strength to roll me to my back, which I always enjoyed. My nights with Neil were hot and exciting and very different from the sort of moments I spent with Peter. Neil and I had our own rapport, which we hadn’t been able to indulge in for quite some time.

I hummed with enjoyment as Neil straddled my hips and lowered himself to explore my mouth, skating my hands over his sides to grab handfuls of his ass as he did. Neil was a remarkable kisser. His mouth on mine alone had me hard as a winter frost in no time and buzzing for more.

“Maybe we should send Peter off on his diplomatic missions to Igor’s bed more often so that you and I can treat ourselves to more of this,” he teased, then shifted to kiss my neck and shoulders.

“Ironic though it is for me to say, Peter would become jealous,” I laughed.

Neil lifted to grin down at me again. “He hates being left out of anything.”

We shared a giggle, and then Neil dipped down for a kiss that came close to melting my body and soul. He turned into a different man entirely when it was just the two of us together. He was not quite as dominant as Jace, or even I could be sometimes, but he was so certain of himself and what he wanted.

I let him worship my body and lavish every part of me with kisses and touches, and I gave him back everything that he so generously gave to me. We were both more content than others would have understood simply to kiss and stroke and be with each other. I felt no great need to possess or penetrate Neil to show him he was mine or to put him in his place. With Neil and I, there were no places, just love.

He was so much like Rurik that way, that it was sometimes hard for me not to feel as though Rurik's spirit possessed my beloved Neil when we made love. I couldn't help but feel that the two of them were one in some moments, and that when I took Neil's dripping cock in hand to stroke it together with mine, that Rurik was there, feeling the pleasure with us.

Neil's hand joined mine, and our mouths couldn't seem to get enough of each other. It was simple and basic, but the adoration I felt for my husband was more than enough to take me right up to the edge. I waited there, wrapped in the love and pleasure of the moment, until I could feel Neil tense and thrust for the bit more that he needed to come, and when he moaned and spilled over both our hands, I let myself go and released my seed into the delicious mess the two of us created together.

Even when we were both spent, we continued to kiss and stroke and snuggle with each other as our bodies and minds gave in to contentment and exhaustion. Nothing felt better to me than to fall asleep in the arms of my beloved. Even without Peter there, knowing he was happy and would be with us again soon, I drifted into a much-needed, deep sleep.

THE LIGHT that was already streaming through the chilly bedroom's window when I awoke the next morning was equal parts harsh reminder that we were not at home and cheerful beacon of hope for the day that had dawned. I was excited for everything that might happen that day, but I was also so warm and content with Neil's still-slumbering form in my arms that I didn't feel the need to leap out of bed and rush into things.

It reminded me so much of a time near the beginning of my and Rurik's new life, when we'd been lucky enough to secure a place at an inn in Seymchan, before we'd left the

world of the cities behind to blend into the forest with men like us.

Our lives had been so full of hope back then. We'd fought hard, risked our lives, and successfully escaped from the oppressive society we would otherwise have been stuck in. Even that tiny inn had felt like an oasis of long-desired peace.

"Because we were together," Rurik whispered into my thoughts. "Any place where the two of us were together was an oasis."

"It was," I answered in my head, a smile on my face. "It's a pity we were discovered by the innkeeper and chased out of the city."

"At least we didn't have to pay for the room," Rurik's laughing voice rang like angelsong in my heart. "We might have educated the man about a thing or two as well, after what he saw."

"It was certainly a sight he wouldn't soon forget," I laughed in return.

"Magnus, why are you laughing," Neil asked in a groggy voice, stretching his way out of sleep. I was spooning him from behind, but he twisted to nuzzle his face against my neck and to throw an arm and leg over my body.

"Just reliving old memories with Rurik," I said, kissing his cheek as best I could at the awkward angle.

Neil made a sound, then said, "Tell him I say hello."

I laughed softly, stroking my beloved's side. "Rurik says hello as well," I said. "And he thinks you're one of the most beautiful things he's ever seen."

Neil smiled against my neck. "Now that I've seen his portrait, the feeling is mutual."

I sighed wistfully, and my heart ached nearly to the point of tears. How desperately I wished that Rurik was still here and that the two of us could enjoy Peter and Neil and our family together! I believed with all my heart that there must be some sort of glorious afterlife where the four of us could exist

together forever. It was too much of a waste that Neil and Peter had come along after Rurik had departed.

Neil must have felt me missing my first beloved. He snuggled closer, and the way he wrapped his body around mine became more possessive and comforting.

I was in the middle of weighing up not so much *whether* to coax Neil to full wakefulness by bringing him off but *how*, when a thump of some sort from deep in the house reminded me that we were not, in fact, the only people in the world. There were delicious scents wafting through the house as well, bacon and bread baking, and a loud rumble from my stomach switched the mood between me and my beloved from amorous to amused.

“I’m hungry, too,” Neil laughed, pushing himself up as I rolled to my back. He gazed down at me with a happy smile that was, arguably, at odds with the mission we were on.

“On this occasion, I shall not pretend that it is me you are hungry for, since that bacon smells divine,” I said.

We got up, washed, and dressed at a leisurely pace. Or, at least, at as leisurely a pace as we could manage with the room as chilled as it was. The fire had gone out in the night, and the fact that no servant had come to build it in the early hours, before we had awakened, was a reminder that all was not usual in Novoberg.

I had to admit that the house had a somewhat deserted air to it as we left the sanctuary of our bedroom and made our way down to the kitchen. Despite it being the house Neil had lived the greater part of his life in, he’d only been to the kitchens a handful of times, and he, too, glanced around in wonder at the surprisingly cozy room that met us when we found ourselves at the back of the house.

“I don’t remember the kitchen ever being this nice,” Neil said as we made our way over to a large, plain table against one wall, where Jace and Gennadi were enjoying a hearty breakfast, along with Orel and Jeremy and Sebald.

Avenel was busy cooking. He looked exhausted but happy, which was heartwarming to see. I supposed that overseeing the food for Ox's entertainment the night before had worn him out, but the sweet young pup still seemed to be in his element.

"Where's Peter?" Orel asked as I took a seat at the table while Neil fetched tea for both of us.

"My dearest Peter is likely in the middle of performing a complicated feat of diplomacy and information gathering at the moment," I said with a sly smile.

"He spent the night with Igor," Jace said more bluntly, "and is probably still balls-deep in his ass."

Orel nearly choked on the tea he'd just taken a gulp of. "And you're fine with that?" he croaked.

"Come on, Orel," Sebald said teasingly, grinning at me like he wasn't certain he had leave to be so informal with his former king, but as if he couldn't help it. "You know that Peter is and always has been a whore for a cause."

"More important information is gleaned in a moment of passion than is ever discovered across a negotiation table," I agreed with Sebald in my own way. I smiled at him, then turned that smile to Neil and winked as he handed me tea, then took the seat beside me.

"Peter was hoping to stick close to Igor when Commander Kythria shows up to deliver his report about the progress of his conquest of Klovisgard and Hedeon," Neil said, serious but still light.

"Knowing Peter, he'll find out everything," Jace said, diving into the plate of bacon Avenel had just set on the table. There was already a large bowl of eggs, a plate of toast, and what appeared to be some leftover sweetbreads from the dance on the table.

"What do we think is going on in the west?" Orel asked, treating the breakfast like a council session.

I wasn't opposed to discussing important matters over breakfast. I wanted to know what the Sons thought of the situation on the frontier as much as anything.

“We’ll know more for certain when Peter returns with news, but speculation at present is that the fall of Klovisgard means Stepan and Cyril are likely holed up in Hedeon with as much of the population of Kostya as can fit within the city walls, and they are fortifying the city in preparation for an attack.”

“And Commander Kythria has returned to Novoberg to consult with Igor about that attack?” Orel asked with a frown.

“That must be it,” Sebald said with a shrug, smiling delightedly at his pup as Avenel brought a plate of cut fruit to the table. “Why else would the two of them meet here?”

“Kythria is here to size Igor up and decide whether he wants to follow him or take the kingdom for himself,” Jace said, the fire of confrontation in his eyes.

I had no doubt that was part of it, but it occurred to me that I could use the moment to learn more about my husbands’ friends.

“Would you swear fealty to Igor if he was suddenly king of the Wolf River Kingdom?” I asked the table at large.

Orel looked suddenly anxious. “You’re not saying Igor has his sights set on conquering us, are you?” he asked.

“Not at all,” I said, shaking my head and hoping that put him at ease. “I am quite certain that Igor will make the ideal ally.”

“Because he loves Peter’s cock,” Neil added in an undertone, then snorted into laughter.

That laughter caught as the Sons at the table exchanged knowing glances and sly grins.

“Never underestimate the power of an enjoyable bed partner for making and keeping alliances,” I told the younger men. “Isn’t that what your delightful cabal is all about? It is certainly the way I managed to coordinate a gang of fiercely independent wolves who had ruled their own packs for years before Rurik and I came along.”

The young men stopped their sniggering to look at me as if I'd made a good point.

"You know, I'd never thought of it that way," Sebald said, tipping his head to the side. "But you're right, Magnus. And to answer your question, I think I would swear fealty to Igor. Especially because he's taken a shine to Peter. I assume both Peter and you plan to use that connection to whisper into Igor's ear, like you tried to do with Sai."

"Let's hope that Igor hears those whispers more than my brother ever did," Jace grumbled, then bit into a piece of bacon.

"Sai heard and absorbed everything Magnus said," Sebald defended his friend. "He had his hands tied when it came to what the people of Hedeon and Kostya at large wanted, though."

"So how do you think Igor will be any different?" Orel asked. "The people of Kostya haven't changed."

"But I think they have," Sebald said with a sigh. "Things have surely changed in the last few months since I was there, but between Stepan and Cyril's coup, which I still think was orchestrated, in part, by Lady Rozynov, and now this siege by Commander Kythria, I suspect the people of Hedeon are so exhausted and fed up with constant change and strife that they'll accept a young, vibrant, new king with ties to the old cities and the way things used to be."

And that was precisely why I wanted to get the opinion of the younger men. Sebald knew Hedeon more than any of us, even the older leaders of the Wolf River Kingdom and its allies. I trusted his judgement of the situation even more than Sai's.

"Do you think the people currently in Hedeon wish to put up a fight in defense against Kythria, or do you think they secretly want to open the gates wide to let a new king in?" I asked.

Sebald took the question seriously. "I wish I knew the answer. From the whispers I heard while I was still there, a lot

of people were pinning their hopes on Stepan and Cyril. Until we know whether their short rule has made things better or worse for the people, I wouldn't want to venture a guess."

"My brother, Stepan this time, is beholden to Cyril and my mother," Jace said, reaching for his tea. "If Sai's major fault was trying to please everyone, pleasing no one, then doing whatever he damn well pleased, with or without the approval of his councilors, then Stepan's fault is that he'll just roll over and do whatever Mother and Cyril want. I wish I knew Cyril better, but I do know Mother. She's angry about the turn her life took, and she'll inflict that anger on anyone who gets in her way."

"Is Lady Rozynov the true leader of Kostya, then?" Neil asked, blinking and sitting up straighter. "Are Stepan and Cyril just her puppets?"

Jace's face pinched. "I wish I knew. Mother is certainly strong enough to be a ruler. I don't think the remaining nobles of the old cities would accept a woman as their leader, though. The best she could do is to rule through a man."

"Which is exactly what she's doing now," Orel said.

"I hate to say this," Sebald sighed, buttering a piece of freshly baked bread. He paused, blinked, then went on with, "Or maybe I don't hate to say this. Either way, the leadership in Kostya is and has been so tangled and weak that I'd be willing to bet Kythria will be able to conquer the city and take the entire Kostya kingdom for Igor within a week."

"Which just means we're back to the original question of whether Kythria will bend a knee to Igor or whether we'll have yet another coup on our hands as he tries to steal the crown from Igor," Neil said.

"He won't get that far," Jace said, shaking his head and biting another piece of bacon.

Gennadi, who had sat by Jace's side, just listening to the conversation, the same as Leremy had listened without speaking, sent Jace a scowl. I would have thought the look was

amusing if I didn't know how sensitive Gennadi was to his beloved assassinating people.

I wished I could share Gennadi's censure over taking a life, but I hadn't yet ruled out the possibility that it would have to be done.

Our breakfast conversation continued, though it swayed more into our thoughts about Novoberg and the unique position Ox and the other inhabitants wished it to have in the newest formation of the frontier. I rather liked the idea of a neutral city. It would provide a perfect place for meetings between the powers of the frontier in future years, and it would be quite an improvement from the old meeting grounds between Klovisgard and Hedeon, where the basis of the Wolf River Alliance had been formed all those years ago.

I had just started to drift off into thoughts of that meeting, the way I'd nearly lost Peter to Bela, and how glorious my young husbands had looked when they were stripped to the waist to play kickball, when Peter burst into the kitchen. I knew before he even opened his mouth that his reconnaissance mission had been a success by the bright gleam in his eyes, the flush of his cheeks, and the broad smile he wore.

"You won't believe what I just discovered," he said, striding up to the table as Neil and I, and Jace, stood.

"I dare say you've learned much," I said, stepping over to embrace him and give him a preemptively congratulatory kiss.

My darling husband smelled of flowers and spices and sex. If it were not for the fact that I wished for all of us to learn everything he had to say, I would take him and Neil upstairs to debrief him in private.

"It must be good," Neil said, taking a turn to kiss Peter once I gave him up. "You're practically bubbling with excitement."

"It is good," Peter said, diving back in for a second kiss with Neil. He took a frustratingly long time to plow Neil's mouth, one hand clasped at the back of his head, before he let

Neil go and sighed happily. “Igor is fun, but he cannot hold a candle to the two of you,” he said, glancing from Neil to me.

My mouth twitched in amusement. “Thank you very much for assuaging any worry or jealousy I may have had, my love, but please do get on with it.”

Peter laughed, which was yet another way I knew he had something momentous to report, then turned to the table at large and spread his hands, as if making an announcement. “Yiannis and his wolves, *all* his wolves, were spotted entering Hedeon two days ago.”

The room went so silent we could hear whatever soup Avenel had cooking in the hearth bubbling. The three pups lost all their color, and Avenel and Leremy, who had been their prisoners, looked deeply panicked. Orel immediately put his arms around Leremy and whispered something in his ear, and Sebald gestured to Avenel to come immediately to him so he could embrace him similarly.

The rest of us stared at Peter.

“Were they attacking Hedeon or did Stepan and Cyril invite them in?” Jace asked, glowering like he would march to Hedeon then and there to give his brother a piece of his mind.

“Kythria didn’t know for certain, but from the report his scouts gave, it sounds like they were invited in,” Peter said. “Kythria speculated that Stepan and Cyril made some sort of deal with Yiannis for help defending Hedeon against an imminent attack.”

That news was met with hums and scoffing, as well as sounds of amazement.

I grinned, seeing the other aspect of Peter’s report. “So Kythria revealed sensitive information to Igor with you in the room?” I asked.

“Not quite,” Peter said, smiling even brighter. “I was still in bed when Igor summoned Kythria to meet with him. They had that meeting in the antechamber. Kythria never looked into the bedroom or checked to see if anyone was there.”

I nodded slowly, proud of my darling. At the same time, I had no doubt that Kythria knew someone was in Igor's bed. He'd cut his teeth in the Old Realm, after all. There was always someone in a ruler's bed. He'd been observant enough at the dance to presume that person in this case was Peter.

It didn't matter whether Peter's presence during the meeting was known or not, though. In fact, I could only assume that whatever intelligence Peter had gained, Kythria wanted me to know.

"What else did Kythria have to say?" Jace asked as we all moved to sit and resume our breakfast.

Peter must not have been fed before leaving Igor's bedchamber. He dove into everything on offer that Avenel had cooked for us.

"Taking Klovisgard was every bit as easy as we assumed it was," Peter said, his mouth full of eggs as he spoke. He chewed and swallowed, then nodded to Neil, who had gotten up to fetch him tea, then continued. "There was a bit of resistance there, a bit of fighting. Archers from the walls, mostly. But as soon as the full strength of General Rufus's army was known, the people of Klovisgard gave up. Kythria said the city leaders that he met with didn't want a single man more to die. A lot of the population of the city had already evacuated to Hedeon anyhow."

"Hedeon must be bursting at the seams right now," Sebald said, brushing a hand through his hair, his eyes wide. "And Stepan and Cyril invited a bunch of wild wolves into the city on top of that?"

"Bursting at the seams? It must be a complete madhouse in Hedeon right now," Orel said with a frown of disapproval.

"We might not have to do a thing to make the city fall," Neil said, as if he found the idea odd but compelling. "It might collapse from the inside."

"That's what Igor thinks," Peter said, chewing on a piece of toast. "But Kythria still believes some sort of attack should happen. I personally think the attack should go forward, but it

should be framed as a rescue mission to liberate the people of Hedeon from a tyrant.”

I grinned. “And did you share this opinion with your lover king?” I asked.

“I did,” Peter said with a proud smile. “And he agrees with me.” He bit off the corner of his toast and chewed it with a smile.

“That’s all well and good,” Sebald said, adjusting the way he sat, now with Avenel in his lap, “but what about the most important thing? Is Kythria going to obey Igor or is he going to try to take the crown from him?”

That was what I wanted to know as well.

Peter pinched his face a little as he swallowed his current bite of breakfast, then said, “I wish I knew. I had to stay out of sight during the meeting, so I only heard the words. I couldn’t see the expressions on Kythria’s face or how he was standing in relation to Igor.” He took a drink of his tea, then continued with, “Igor says he has a good feeling and that he believes Kythria will follow him, but he didn’t look as certain as I wanted him to when he told me that.”

“We need to know more,” Neil said. He turned to me and asked, “Is there a way we could invite Igor and Kythria to tea or something to get to know the man more? I know that’s a silly way to interact with a powerful general, but it might work?”

I didn’t dislike the idea of inviting Kythria to tea. At the same time, I felt like there needed to be a stronger way to meet the man face to face and to learn more about him. If he was already a friend, tea would be an option, but for all I knew, like Rufus, Kythria thought everyone on the frontier were no better than children. A tea party wouldn’t help dispel that notion.

“We do need to meet with him,” I said, sitting back in my chair and stroking my chin. I desperately needed to shave, but there hadn’t been time. “I would suggest something stronger than a tea party, though.”

“You could take a turn bringing in the last of the harvest here in Novoberg and convince Kythria to come with you,” Sebald suggested with a shrug. “Or some other task. The people of Novoberg see performing labors as equal to money when it comes to currency.”

“I would pay money to see you and Kythria go at it in a wood-chopping contest,” Neil said with a bright grin.

He was joking, but the idea sent a surge of excitement through me. “What a perfect idea,” I said, reaching for my tea. “I’ll challenge Kythria to chop wood for the people of Novoberg with me.”

Jace snorted a laugh. “Magnus, you’re as fit as any man ten years younger than you, but you’re not a soldier. You haven’t had the sort of training Kythria has likely had.”

“Perhaps not,” I said with a shrug. “But in this case, it’s not the winning that matters, it’s the competing.”

“Maybe you and Igor could have a side contest and a night with Peter could be the prize,” Neil laughed, directing the comment to Jace.

Jace sent Peter a saucy look. “I can have a night with Peter whenever I want it,” he said, then made a rude gesture at Peter with his tongue.

Peter laughed freely. It was a sound I loved dearly and that made my heart soft and my cock hard. “We haven’t played in a while, have we,” he said, making eyes at Jace across the table.

“After this is all done, you need to come spend some time tied up in Genny’s play room,” Jace replied, wiggling his eyebrows at Peter.

“I will never understand the two of you,” Orel said, shaking his head.

He also glanced at me, nonverbally including me in the list of people he wouldn’t understand because I gladly gave my permission for the sort of play Jace and Peter liked.

“So are you going to propose this contest of strength to Kythria?” Neil asked, wisely changing the conversation.

“Yes, I think that would be wise,” I answered. “We could all go up to the palace together to issue the invitation once breakfast is done.”

“I need a bath first,” Peter said with a wicked grin.

“Yes, you do,” Neil said, wafting his hand in front of his wrinkled nose.

I laughed as I set about finishing my breakfast. The young men around me, my wonderful husbands and their friends, made me feel young again myself. Rurik and I had been just like them years ago, when we’d forged our friendships with the likes of Ludvig, Feodor, Dushka, and Edik.

As the young men continued their banter, I felt a tight squeeze in my heart. I dearly hoped that the lot of them would remain friends for their entire lives without having one of their number turn against them, like Edik had turned on me, or without one dying prematurely, like Rurik.

I could only hope that the world we were trying so hard to create would be more conducive to long lives and good health than the one that had come before us. We had a grand infirmary in New Hope now. Perhaps some sort of healing center could have saved Rurik’s life. And if we had a settled, prosperous frontier, perhaps none of the Sons would think to turn on the others, as Edik had.

I pushed those wistful thoughts aside in favor of finishing breakfast, and once the meal was done, Neil and I helped Avenel tidy the kitchen while Peter went upstairs to bathe. Jace, Gennadi, and Sebald went off to the palace ahead of us to seek out Sai, and Orel and Leremy left to see how they could be of use in the city.

CHAPTER

NINE

It was already near to noon when Peter, Neil, and I joined the others at the palace. We were lucky to find a sort of pseudo court made up of Igor and the men who had come with him, Kythria and a few of his officers, Ox and some of the other leaders of Novoberg, Sai, Sebald, Jace, and Gennadi when we got there.

The first thing I noticed about the arrangement of the players in the room was that Igor and Kythria were at the center, and everyone else, including Sai, had made the two of them their focus, whether they were aware of it or not. Igor appeared to have taken my suggestion of raising himself physically above Kythria. He sat in a chair that was a bit larger than the others in the configuration near the fireplace.

Kythria didn't seem all that fussed about the smaller chair he'd either been given or had chosen for himself to Igor's right. He lounged comfortably, one boot crossed over his leg, his arms resting on the chair's arms, a glass of what looked like punch leftover from the dance in one hand.

Ox made up something of an inner triangle with the two men, and though her chair was a match to Kythria's the way she sat forward on it and gestured wildly as she spoke, evidently commanding the conversation, made me proud of her. It was a rare thing for a woman on the frontier to converse with kings and generals, but Ox seemed to be holding her own and keeping the men around her a captive audience.

It was a flash of what I felt in my heart was probably to come for Ella.

Of course, as soon as Neil, Peter, and I entered the room, everyone's attention switched to us.

I intended to keep it there and to command the conversation for as long as I could.

Igor immediately helped me accomplish that goal by sitting straighter and greeting us with a rousing, "King Magnus, Peter, Neil, how good to see you again after the festivities of last night."

My mouth twitched, and I let myself smile, though likely not for the reasons Igor thought. Beside Igor, Kythria arched an eyebrow, then rolled his eyes slightly. The gesture told me in an instant that he saw right through Igor's attempt to make it seem like Peter hadn't been in his bed that morning, and that he knew Peter had overheard the report he'd given to Igor.

Kythria stood to greet us, and his gaze went straight to me, knowing I was the most formidable man in the room.

Bless Igor. Without saying a word, he'd just told me everything I needed to know so that I could fine-tune precisely how to behave as Kythria approached me.

"You are all looking remarkably fit and well-rested for the day after a grand revel," I said, smiling at Igor, then glancing to Ox with a nod, before finally settling my attention on Kythria. "I would expect a general of your renown to leave the diplomacy to your subordinates so that you might sleep the day away and recover your strength."

I stepped towards Kythria with my hand outstretched in the style of the Old Realm, but stopped several feet away.

With a smirk that I could only describe as knowing, Kythria took the necessary steps to reach me. He clasped my hand and nodded respectfully, but I couldn't quite tell whether the spark in his eyes was because he was humoring me or because he was enjoying the scene as a whole.

"I wouldn't dream of offending Lady Ox by failing to attend her court," Kythria answered, winking at me like the two of us were in on the joke together.

I found it curious that he showed his deference to Ox but not Igor. It made me wonder if I would have to work to convince Kythria to proceed the way everyone on the frontier needed him to.

“I would gladly have spent a lazy day in bed with my husbands myself, but I would not dream of passing up the chance to learn more about King Igor’s most trusted general,” I said.

Kythria laughed and squeezed my wrist to the point where I would have winced, if not for decades’ worth of practice in not showing pain in exactly that sort of moment.

“I am not a general,” Kythria said. “Merely a commander. Rufus was the general.”

“And yet, we all know that Rufus was a king in everything but name,” I said, holding Kythria’s wrist for a moment longer when he relaxed his hand and tried to pull it away.

Kythria narrowed his eyes slightly at me, then inclined his head to me so subtly that I wasn’t certain the others would see. That made me stand a bit straighter.

Good. The man knew when he was in the presence of someone formidable. Rufus might have thought I was little more than a whore with ambition, but I could see Kythria had more of a sense of what he was up against.

“I always wondered when Rufus would drop pretenses and call himself a king,” Kythria said, returning to his chair and sitting. “I suppose I’ll never know now.”

While we’d been greeting each other, Igor had ordered more chairs brought for me, Peter, and Neil. Both Neil and Peter glanced to me to know which chair to sit in. They understood that our arrangement would signal more things to everyone in the room than simply who wanted to sit where.

If it had been any other sort of meeting, I would have let Peter sit next to Igor and flirt with him. But until it was determined whether Kythria was loyal to Igor or to himself, I needed to maintain as commanding a presence as possible.

I took the chair that had been placed to Igor's left, closer to Igor than Kythria's own chair. The chair was high enough that Igor would have been able to whisper in Peter's ear if my beloved had taken the seat.

"Yes," I said, sitting with grace, but keeping my back straight and my head held high, "it is a terrible shame that Rufus and so many others succumbed to the plague in Teslalom. I was on death's door myself, but the quick thinking of my beloved Neil saved me."

I waited, staring sharply at Kythria, to see what he would make of that.

"We heard all about the plague in Teslalom," Kythria said, sitting again and leaning into the back corner of his chair. He rested his booted ankle over his knee once more. He stroked his white beard as he went on. "We'd just taken Klovisgard and imprisoned its recalcitrant leaders in their own dungeon when I was informed that a boat from Teslalom had docked with news of Rufus's death."

I nodded in understanding. Kythria had taken command of Klovisgard without shedding the blood of its leaders. Whether that was a sign that he was merciful or that Arseny Rozynov and the other men Stepan and Cyril had left in charge of Klovisgard had surrendered, willingly or under duress, had yet to be determined.

"I remember a similar plague in Royersford about forty years ago," Kythria went on, "when I was a newly-minted officer in King Cassander's army. I was young and eager to fight for my kingdom, but our planned mission to the northern islands was canceled when so many in Royersford were taken ill."

I sucked in a breath, tingling all over, and worried that my eyes were sparkling with excitement, giving everything away. I could tell from the way Peter caught his breath too that my beloved understood Kythria had said more than was apparent.

Had he ever! The plague he spoke of was another internal coup, precisely like the one Igor had carried out. It had

resulted in my uncle becoming king, which he likely knew as well.

Kythria knew Rufus had been murdered by Igor, whether Igor had figured that out yet or not.

Furthermore, there was nothing incidental in the mention of the campaign to the northern isles. That entire endeavor had been conceived of by one General Demetrios. Demetrios had been Cassander's bitter rival and a friend of my grandfather's. Instead of attacking the northern isles, that division of the army had played an instrumental role in my uncle's coup.

The officers of that army had been rewarded with titles and wealth, and their sons and grandsons were still some of the most powerful men in the Old Realm, or had been when Conrad had given me his full report of the state of my former homeland a few years ago.

In short, Kythria had proven himself to be loyal to my family at one time. Very loyal. Whether that meant he would be loyal to me, or if that loyalty would extend to Igor if I said it should, was still an unknown.

"I was only just too young to remember that plague," I said, as if making casual conversation, "but I remember my uncle and my mother speaking of it often when I was a boy. They likened it to the great fire in the Forest of Bashkir that blackened the entire western province."

I didn't have to wait at all to see if Kythria understood the reference.

"The flowers that were discovered growing up out of the ashes were my first wife's favorite," he said with a smile. "I used to bring her baskets full of them when I was given leave to visit her. She always used to say that it was amazing what sort of beauty and resilience could grow out of so much devastation."

It took all my power just to smile sentimentally at the story. Inwardly, I felt a surge of excitement. If I wasn't mistaken, Kythria was revealing his admiration for everything that had been built on the frontier in the last few years.

Whether he wished to enjoy it or to claim it as his own was the next thing I needed to discover.

The conversation was turning out to be more fun than any game of sketchers with my beloved Neil.

I was glad for Cid to come along with a tray of steaming mugs of tea just then. I needed the refreshment, but more than that, I needed a moment to figure out how to ask more questions and learn more about Kythria.

Amusingly, Kythria seemed just as relieved to have a moment to figure out what he made of me. He took a fresh cup of tea from Cid, then sat back, watching me with a sly smile.

It was then that I realized none of the others had struck up conversations of their own while Kythria and I had been engaged in our verbal joust. In fact, everyone else was watching the two of us in awed silence, waiting for the game to resume.

I had to admit, my ego enjoyed that. It was nice to know that, even without a crown on my head, I could still command attention and leave everyone speechless.

“What do you think of our frontier so far, Commander Kythria,” Neil asked in a polite, noble way as he sipped his tea. I was, at first, nervous about the forward simplicity of his question until he went on with, “I’ve never been to the Old Realm, and I suppose I won’t have that chance now, but I’m curious how you think the landscape compares to your homeland.”

I relaxed and smiled. Neil knew what he was doing after all. He was addressing Kythria like he was a fellow nobleman. Meaning Neil was behaving with all the formality and decorum of a noble and not like a savage frontier-dweller, as Rufus had assumed we all were.

“There are many similarities,” Kythria said, enjoying his tea. “But I have found the frontier to be a beautiful contrast of rugged wilderness and surprising refinement. I’ve always loved trees and forests, and I’ve got more of that here than I ever could have wished for.”

“I found it unnerving to live in the forest at first,” Neil went on in an open, confiding tone, sending me a flirtatious look. “But Magnus quickly made me see that leaving everything I once knew for an entirely new life could be quite enjoyable.”

“But you still have your old friend Peter with you,” Kythria said. I tensed, ready to defend my beloveds if need be, but Kythria went on to explain with, “Lady Ox here was just telling me that Peter is the son of the former ruling duke of Novoberg and that you,” he nodded to Neil, “are the son of an important noble family. The two of you were childhood friends, is that correct?”

“Not exactly,” Peter said, smiling at Neil and taking his free hand. Peter had declined a cup of tea, so he had both hands free. “Neil and I have known each other our entire lives, but we were always too afraid of showing our true natures to declare ourselves. It was Magnus who brought us together.”

“And how did that happen?” Kythria asked, looking at me.

I felt as though his curiosity was genuine and not the sort that was intended to dig deeper and find a weakness.

Peter and Neil both looked to me as well, so I started the ball rolling.

“I’m certain my husbands could tell you more of the story, but to begin with, Peter convinced me to purchase Neil from an odious man called Karpov the slaver at one of the old-style faires. Then Peter broke with the man he had been with for a time to join us a few months after that.”

“You left another man for Magnus here?” Kythria asked Peter with an amused smile.

“Yes,” Peter said with a slight wince. “But it’s a more complicated story than that. Sascha and I were never suited to each other, though I have nothing but respect for him now. I came to be with him by default, not by choice.”

“How fascinating,” Kythria said, adjusting the way he sat to focus on Peter. “How exactly did you end up with someone by default?”

What followed was a good half hour of Peter and Neil telling the story of how they had come to be in the forest, what their lives had been like in Novoberg before joining me, and some of the adventures we'd had in the last few years. Jace joined in now and then, and Sebald spoke up at one point as well. And, of course, Ox had to tell bits of the story from her point of view.

I was fascinated by everyone's understanding of the events that had broken the frontier from its former form and remade it into the kingdoms we had now. They understood everything that had happened from a somewhat different perspective than I understood it, which was only natural. To them, it was more haphazard with more credit given to fate than to the fact that Rurik and I, and then just I alone, had worked our fingers to the bone arranging every last thing so that the Wolf River Kingdom could rise up and gain prominence in the new world of the frontier.

It didn't matter to me how the story was told, though. The boys got the gist of it right, and Kythria seemed enthralled by every part of the story.

Igor was deeply interested in the story as well.

"I never knew about half of those things," he said once Sebald and Neil had finished jointly relating the story of the Meeting of the Four Kingdoms from a few years before. "We hardly heard about any of that all the way over in Tesladom."

"Was that before or after Rufus dragged us all over the mountain to fulfill his ambitions of conquest?" Kythria asked.

I nearly sat bolt-upright as Neil answered that it was before Rufus destroyed the pass, his statement was so significant. I wasn't sure Kythria was fully aware of what he'd said either. His manner hadn't changed from the conversational interest he'd shown for the past half hour, and he didn't have the calculating spark in his eye from our earlier conversation. I could only conclude that he hadn't known Rufus intended to destroy the mountain pass once he had everyone on the western side of the mountains.

So perhaps there was a chance that he could see himself as a man of the frontier after all, and that he would feel no need to be a conquering king, like Rufus had.

“Magnus had an idea earlier that we should spend at least part of today giving back to the city that has been so kind to shelter us by helping with their chores, as is the custom,” Peter said, drawing my drifting attention back to the conversation.

I had missed the end of the discussion of the past and whatever had led up to that statement, but as everyone had turned to look at me, I felt obligated to speak.

“That is the tradition in Novoberg, is it not?” I asked. “To lend a hand where needed in exchange for food and shelter?”

I glanced to Ox, who had narrowed her eyes at me, as if I was playing some sort of game.

“What chores did you have in mind?” Kythria asked with a laugh.

“Can you believe that he suggested we should all chop wood?” Jace asked with a tiny bit of scoffing.

As it turned out, he knew exactly what he was doing.

“Magnus? Chop wood?” Ox scoffed ten times harder than Jace. “That’ll be the day.”

“I would be honored to provide the people of Novoberg with firewood for the winter,” I said, sitting straighter and doing my best to look manly.

“I still can’t see it,” Jace said. “If any of the old men here are capable of chopping firewood, that would be Commander Kythria.”

Kythria burst out laughing. “Why do I have the feeling we are being challenged by the younger men?” Kythria asked, arching an eyebrow at me.

I could have shouted for joy. Jace had manufactured a scenario for us that I had not considered, but that could be even better than what I had originally intended.

This was precisely why, as powerful as I was on my own, I was infinitely more powerful with Peter, Neil, Jace, and Gennadi acting in concert with me.

“A contest of strength and endurance, then,” I said, slapping the arms of my chair and standing. “The old men versus the younger men.”

“I like the sound of that,” Kythria said, rising as well.

“Sai, will you join us?” I asked, glancing over to the far corner of our group, where Sai had been watching but not participating in the conversation.

He stood slowly, glancing towards the door that the servants providing us with refreshments had been going in and out of for the last half hour. “I think not,” he said, then glanced back to me. “I am too young to be on the old men’s team and too old to chop with the young men.” He paused briefly, then murmured, “I don’t fit anywhere.”

A second later, he shook himself, as if he’d heard how gloomy he sounded. “To be honest, I need to check on...a few things here in the palace. There is a matter that has concerned me greatly, and I want to make certain he, er, it is handled appropriately.”

Once again, I had to reign myself in so that my smile only seemed passingly interested instead of reflecting the way I wanted to celebrate. Sebald’s gambit of throwing Cid into Sai’s path was working.

“If you change your mind or wish to join us later, you will be welcomed,” I said.

“Understood,” Sai said with a weary nod.

He did understand. Nearly everything, most likely. I couldn’t say I approved of his melancholy approach to the new situations of his life, but I had more important things to do than to soothe a failed king’s battered ego.

“Shall we go?” I asked Kythria instead, gesturing to the door.

“Absolutely,” Kythria replied. “I’m looking forward to this.”

It was perfect. Within minutes, we were all leaving the palace and heading out to a place in the city where raw trees recently felled from the forest outside of Novoberg were brought for chopping.

Unsurprisingly, we gathered quite an audience as we paraded from the palace, through the noble neighborhood, and down to the southwestern quadrant of the city. The people of Novoberg did not, apparently, adhere to any sort of set schedule for their days, and they felt no anxiety about leaving their daily tasks to join the parade and the fun that was promised at the end of it.

I was in a frame of mind to enjoy myself, that much was certain. But as we left the noble neighborhood and passed a particularly large square with a fountain where the soldiers who had accompanied Kythria from Klovisgard, I was taken aback.

“Are these your men?” I asked Kythria, adjusting my stride to walk by his side instead of being flanked by Peter and Neil as I walked a bit in front of Kythria.

“Some of them,” Kythria confirmed, nodding to the soldiers, who stood as we passed.

I tried counting the soldiers—most of whom were lounging and eating or polishing and sharpening weapons—but at the speed we were walking, there wasn’t time to get a precise number, only to see that they were numerous.

“Are any of Cremona’s soldiers left in Klovisgard?” I asked on, making my tone humorous and teasing.

Kythria laughed. “Plenty,” he said. “The army Rufus formed for the conquest of Kostya turned out to be far larger than was needed. I told him that he didn’t need to send so many men to tidy up a crippled and weakening kingdom of children, but he insisted.”

It would be so easy to pretend our conversation was casual and of no importance, but I knew better, and so did Kythria.

I saw my chance and grasped at it.

“If you still believe the people of the frontier are no better than children playing games in the woods, you are deeply mistaken,” I said in a serious tone that was so unlike the way I’d been speaking moments before that Kythria snapped his head to look at me. “Rufus believed we were harmless and paid the price. I would hate for the same to happen to you.”

Kythria’s expression went deadly serious, and he drew in a long breath, as if he’d been playing with a big of rope and suddenly realized it was a venomous snake. “Did you have something to do with his demise?” he asked.

“No,” I answered honestly. “That was entirely the decision and execution of your new king.”

I nodded ahead of us, to where Peter and Neil had shifted to walk by Igor’s side, Jace on his other side. The four of them sauntered like cocky young men and were boasting to each other about how they would win the competition Kythria had called for.

You wouldn’t think to look at them that they were listening to a word Kythria and I said. But Gennadi walked a step behind Jace, and though his face was forward, his eyes looked to the side, like he could see us in his peripheral vision, and his flushed cheeks indicated he was listening to every word.

Peter too kept stealing looks at us. Despite being in the center of the young men’s conversations, I knew he was aware of Kythria and I talking as well.

“I take it you chose your words just then deliberately,” Kythria said in a more somber tone.

I smiled thinly at Kythria. “I always choose my words deliberately.”

Kythria hummed and rubbed his beard. “I told Rufus that he was underestimating his new home,” he said in a tone that was almost confiding. “He was mistaken about the population numbers for the frontier after arriving here. He insisted that hardly anyone survived the Dying Winter, as you lot call it.”

“The Wolf River Kingdom sustained almost no losses,” I said, glancing forward as we walked, as if the nature of our conversation were as friendly as that of the younger men. “Neither did Good Port. The northern cities would have suffered more had they not welcomed the rule of Jorgen Iceblade and his mate, Hati. It was only the old cities, the ones that refused to accept that the way of life on the frontier had irrevocably changed, who experienced great losses. Those losses were mostly because the common people turned on the nobles and ruling dukes after years of despotism.”

I looked straight at Kythria and added, “A precedent now exists in the frontier, particularly with the people of the old cities. Despotism will not be tolerated. Those who wish to rise up and rule the people of the frontier with an iron fist will find themselves at the wrong end of a sword.” I glanced forward again as we neared what looked to be a vast square dedicated entirely to chopping wood and shrugged. “Or a bowl of olives, as it happens.”

“Olives?” Kythria asked, one eyebrow raised.

I glanced back to him and said with a sly lilt, “It was a bad batch of tapenade, apparently. I nearly succumbed to it as well.”

“You?” Kythria seemed surprised.

I nodded ahead of us as Peter elbowed Igor jovially. “The chef of the evening was mistaken in regards to what my beloved Peter wanted from his life. He thought he was doing Peter a favor by offering me the dish. He proved he will stop at nothing to secure what he believes to be his.” I glanced to Kythria again. “I was not exaggerating when I said that my dear Neil’s quick thinking was the only thing that saved me.”

I held his gaze fiercely for several moments before glancing away as Ox stepped ahead of us to have a word with the men organizing the wood choppers. Peter and Jace jumped with her to negotiate with the woodsmen, leaving Igor, Neil, and Gennadi to turn back to us.

“What do you think?” Igor said with the breathlessness of excitement. “Are you up to the challenge of besting four men

younger than you?”

Kythria seemed busy assessing Igor in the new light I had shed for him, so I answered with, “I think it only fair that we are allowed two more men on our team to make it an even competition. Those two, perhaps.” I nodded to who I assumed was the head woodsman and perhaps his second, who stood with him.

Both men were stripped to the waist, despite the chill of the afternoon. Their thick, corded muscles glistened with sweat from their labors.

“I’m not sure that would make for a very fair contest,” Neil laughed at the sight of the men.

“And you think the four of you against Kythria and myself is fair?” I asked, stepping over to hook an arm around my beloved’s waist so I could draw him in for a kiss.

“I wouldn’t call it unfair,” Igor said with a confident and cocky smile. “I’d call it utilizing an advantage to the fullest. Right, Kythria?”

Yet again, inspiration struck me. When I finished kissing Neil, I pivoted to Kythria and said, “Your young king appears to be calling on the wisdom of an old man to guide him, Commander.”

Kythria sent me a wry look that told me he was well aware of what I was actually suggesting. “I think we are entirely capable of besting the younger men on our own,” he said, unbuttoning his jacket. “But if you don’t think you’re up to the task...” he went on to tease me.

“I am almost always up for anything,” I said, letting go of Neil and starting on the buttons of my own jacket.

“Unbelievable,” Jace said as Ox and the two woodsmen came our way. “If I thought that Kythria liked men, I’d be convinced he and Magnus were showing off for each other and that they’d be handling a different sort of wood in no time.”

Kythria’s hands froze on his buttons. “Who says I don’t like men? Young, cocky ones in particular.” He sent Jace a look that would have a submissive pup melting.

Jace paused and gaped at Kythria.

I let out a laugh and shook my head as I finished unbuttoning my jacket. Whether Kythria liked men or not was irrelevant. I was only interested in my husbands. Besides which, from the smirk Kythria sent me, it was clear to me he was playing with Jace more than making any declaration.

I liked that. I liked Kythria. I couldn't decide if that was fortunate or inconvenient, but it was true. Kythria was powerful, but he didn't feel stubborn or arrogant. Not like Rufus. He had me rethinking my strategy for manipulating him into doing what was necessary to keep the crown on Igor's head, and by doing that, to maintain stability on the frontier.

“So here are the rules,” Ox said a few minutes later, when those of us who were participating in the contest had stripped down to our shirtsleeves, or in the case of Jace and Peter, their bare torsos. Because of course they had. “Timor here has fetched this hourglass. You'll have until the sand runs out to chop as much wood as possible. At the end of the time, the wood will be weighed to see which team has done the better job.”

“So it's all about brute force instead of precision?” Peter asked, winking at me.

“There is a time for precision and perfection, my love, and a time for strength and speed,” I said, speaking about so much more than chopping wood.

“And which do you think is called for in order for the old men to win?” Kythria asked, undoing the last buttons of his shirt, then shrugging out of it.

My eyebrows lifted as he bared his chest. For a man even older than me, he was astoundingly fit. Enough so that I might have been a little jealous.

I reconsidered my plan to keep my shirt on and pulled it out of the waist of my trousers and up over my head instead. I knew my physique wasn't quite a match for Kythria's, but I was fitter than most men my age.

“God! Men!” Ox grumbled, shaking her head at the display.

“I think what you meant to say was ‘Thank God! Men!’,” Peter teased her, eyeing my naked chest like I was a strip of the bacon he had devoured that morning.

I sent him a lascivious look and eyed him with equally appreciative lust.

Kythria laughed loudly. “Now I understand everything,” he said.

I would have loved to question him about what he understood, but the woodsmen were impatient for our silly contest to commence, likely so they could be done with it and get on with their work.

Everything had been set up in perfect order. Kythria and I joined the head woodsman and his assistant on one side of a sort of aisle, and Peter, Neil, Jace, and Igor took up positions at stumps on the other side. We were all provided with axes that Ox herself handed out, which made me certain mine would be as dull as could be.

“Ready?” Ox called out, checked us all, then shouted, “Begin!”

The contest was wild and far more enjoyable than I would have imagined. It had been ages since I’d used the muscles needed for chopping wood. I tried to keep my strength up by joining my husbands in their daily exercises whenever I could, but the duties of a king had kept me too busy to make a regular occurrence of it. All the same, I was able to heft and wield the ax far more deftly than even I had thought I would.

The young men had more than enough strength to make quick work of their first few logs, but it was clear to anyone watching that they weren’t particularly adept at chopping the larger logs to the right size and shape. My dear Neil missed the log he was trying to chop entirely a few times, and Peter seemed to be creating more kindling than anything else with his merciless hacks.

Igor did a fair job of chopping wood the way it was supposed to be chopped, which surprised me. I also realized about halfway through the competition that he'd taken up a position directly opposite Kythria, which had to have been deliberate.

Kythria surprised me with the clumsiness of his chops. His strength wasn't in question. He wielded his ax as if it weighed nothing and could chop straight through a log with one blow. But like Peter, the results of his efforts were better suited for kindling than fire logs. It was a good thing for both of them that kindling was also needed to start a fire.

"You're more than two-thirds done!" Ox called out at one point.

We all redoubled our efforts. My back and shoulders were aching, but I refused to let Kythria think that I was nothing but a used-up whore, like Rufus had thought. And if I was honest, I was determined to impress my husbands as well. Even if I ended up groaning with soreness on the morrow. If they liked what they saw, maybe I would be groaning for other reasons, too.

I was impressing them. As the contest grew pitched and the small crowd that had gathered to watch us cheered, Neil took a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow and glanced my way. One quick peek was enough to see the lust in his eyes as he distracted himself by watching me.

If there was time later, I fully intended to fuck my husbands into puddles to prove just how powerful I could truly be.

If I wasn't exhausted and battered from overexertion.

"Going, going, done!" Ox called as she watched the last of the sand slide through the hourglass. "Put your axes down."

I reeled back, gasping for breath, surprised by how vigorously I'd thrown myself into the competition. I was glad I'd removed my shirt, because sweat poured down my back and brow. My lungs felt like they were on fire, and so did my

hands, for that matter. I dropped the ax I'd been given, and looked at my hands to find them red and blistered.

"We should have worn gloves," Kythria said with a wince, pain in his voice, looking at his hands as well.

Once again, I decided to shift tactics. We were on the same team against the younger men for the contest, so perhaps treating him like a long-lost friend would draw him deeper into an understanding of the frontier and the necessity of order.

"That or perhaps we should chop wood more often," I laughed, glancing from my hands to his. "We're getting soft in our old age."

Kythria chuckled. "Happens to the best of us."

I laughed with him as a few of the woodsmen came around to collect everything we'd chopped for weighing.

"You need to wash those soft hands of yours," the head woodsman said, nodding to us as he collected the axes we'd all used. "There's a bucket over there, and there's salve on the table next to it."

"I take it people have this problem often?" Kythria asked as the two of us started for the table.

"Everyone contributing to the good of the whole sometimes means that men who don't know what they're doing end up set to tasks they're not ready for," the woodsman said with a shrug.

He couldn't have given me a better opening if he'd tried.

"I suppose that's why it's best to leave important jobs to those who have been born and raised for them, then," I laughed as Kythria and I reached the table.

Kythria smirked at me as we both thrust our hands into the blessedly cool water to clean our blisters.

The action put the two of us extraordinarily close together. The younger men were still teasing and jabbing each other as well, which gave us a golden opportunity.

“We’ve been dancing all day,” Kythria said in a low voice that only I could hear. “Why don’t you tell me what you really think?”

I saw no reason not to.

“I may have been born and raised a member of the royal family, but the frontier is my home,” I said. “The Wolf River Kingdom is my child. I will do whatever is necessary to protect and nurture both it and the frontier as a whole. I think you are well aware of the lengths my family will go to in order to protect what we love and what we want.”

“I know it well,” he said. He swished his hands around in the water, then pulled them out and shook them. “So you’re the true power on the frontier, then?” he asked as if asking me to hand him a towel.

I pulled my hands out of the water and fetched a towel from a stack on the table, never letting my gaze stray from him.

“Not as much as you might think,” I told him. “This is not our old kingdom. I have influence, but the other kingdoms on the frontier are their own entities.”

“But if you, for example, ordered the execution of someone you thought was a threat to peace, any number of men in any of the kingdoms of the frontier would leap when you snapped your fingers,” Kythria said.

I smiled, glad he saw the truth for what it was without me having to spell it out further.

“I knew you were a wise man,” I said, winking at him and handing him the towel I’d finished with before moving to the table.

“So what do you want, King Magnus of the frontier?” Kythria asked. “What would you have me do?”

I could see he was testing me, but it was more encouraging than anything. A dolt bent on conquest, like Rufus had been, wouldn’t bother to ask the question.

I picked up one of the jars of salve and started coating my poor, blistered hands with it. “I want you to swear fealty to Igor and to become his most trusted and valuable advisor,” I said, laying everything on the table. “I believe that if you do so, Igor will unite the kingdoms of Cremona and Kostya and bring peace to the old cities. Furthermore, I want you to aid and advise Igor as all four of the major powers of the frontier work together in the coming years to ensure prosperity and advancement for all.”

“And why should I do that?” Kythria asked with a wry grin, tossing the used towel into a bucket beside the table and taking up a jar of salve for his own hands.

“Because you are too old to continue fighting for much longer,” I said with a smile, more as if I were speaking to an old friend than an enemy. “You, as much as I, wish to spend the second half of your life in contentment, surrounded by love, and perhaps raising a family of your own and watching them grow and prosper.”

“I have a family,” he said, a hint of wistfulness pinching his face. “I have grandchildren who I adore and who I will likely never see again.”

My heart thudded in my chest as Kythria inadvertently handed me the ultimate tool to ensure his compliance with my vision of the frontier.

“What if I told you that the men of my kingdom are already hard at work building a southern pass through the mountains to reach the Old Realm again?” I murmured, leaning over the table to speak so only he could hear. Kythria’s gaze focused on me, and his eyes lit with hope. “What if it were possible to see those grandchildren again someday? Perhaps older than you would wish them or yourself to be, but to see them all the same?” I stood straight again and shrugged. “And there is nothing to say you could not find a clever young woman still in her child-bearing years to give you a new family and a new life.

“That is the vision I have for the frontier,” I added. “If you share that vision, if your ambitions run to peace and family

and the chance to watch the younger men grow and to guide them when they need it, then the frontier has everything you could desire and more.”

Kythria simply stood there, watching me with his gaze unfocused, breathing shallowly. I’d won. I knew it without having to take the conversation any farther.

The sound of the young men laughing as they finally decided to stop whatever cock-measuring contest they were engaged in and join us in cleansing their sore hands broke the intensity between me and Kythria. Kythria’s gaze focused on me once more.

“Do you think he’s up to the challenge?” he asked honestly, flickering a glance to Igor.

Igor smiled at us as he drew near, looking young and full of promise.

“Absolutely,” I said. My mouth twitched into a wicked grin. “He has my Peter for an occasional bedmate, so he is guaranteed to make the correct decisions for the frontier and everyone living in it.”

Kythria laughed. “Because you will be whispering in his ear through your randy, young husband?” he asked.

“No,” I said honestly, my expression showing my faith in Peter and my trust. “Because my beloved Peter is one of the cleverest, most driven, most determined men I’ve ever known. He will be king of the Wolf River Kingdom one day. But even before that, I would trust him with my life and the lives of everyone I know.”

“Magnus, are you bragging about Peter again?” Neil asked with a laugh, coming over to thrust his hands in the bucket, then making an obscene sound at the relief he felt there.

“I am, my love,” I said, shifting to cup his face and turn it to me so I could kiss him. “But only because I have yet to begin bragging about you.”

Neil laughed and blushed.

I turned to Kythria and raised an eyebrow at him, hoping to underscore everything I'd just told him.

"Do you want to know who won the competition?" Ox asked, walking over to us with a scowl. That scowl was all the answer I needed.

"It was the old men, wasn't it," Jace said with a peevish pinch of his face.

"It was," Ox sighed.

I turned to Kythria with a victorious smile. "I would shake your hand, but I'm not certain the blisters mine now bear would allow it," I laughed.

"Oh, the price we pay to prove that we're still strong and relevant," Kythria said with a wink.

He was entirely correct, and his wink filled me with confidence that I'd won an even larger competition, with fewer blisters.

"It's not fair," Neil laughed. "You had the trained woodsmen on your team."

"My dear Neil," I said, pretending imperiousness. "Don't you know that old age and treachery beats youth and enthusiasm every day?"

Neil laughed. So did the others, including both Kythria and Igor. It was a perfect moment of camaraderie after the competition.

But as with everything, the moment moved on.

"Magnus, if you don't put a shirt on soon, I'll be forced to throw myself at you in front of all these people," Peter said, surprising me by sweeping his arms around me from behind and kissing me the way I usually did with him and Neil.

I didn't think he'd heard what I'd just said to Kythria about him being the future king of the Wolf River Kingdom, but his gesture could not have been more perfect to prove that he and the rest of the younger men had every bit as much strength as we older men did.

“You must forgive my friends,” Igor said to Kythria with a fond smile. “The way they flaunt their affection so openly is shocking.”

“Just wait until you have a beloved of your own to flaunt,” Peter said, still hanging off me, his chin resting on my shoulder. “You’ll be just as shameless as the rest of us.”

Kythria looked surprised for a moment, then laughed. “You can take the Gerzia out of the kingdom, but you can’t take the kingdom out of the Gerzia,” he said.

He seemed genuinely amused instead of malicious, so I merely shrugged, pulled Peter around so I could hold him obscenely close, and said, “It’s my kingdom.”

Kythria’s answering smile was everything I needed to be assured I had won Igor his greatest advisor, and through that, the Wolf River Kingdom our best ally.

CHAPTER

TEN

I spent the rest of the day basking in the contentment of one of the most important victories I'd yet seen in the establishment of the new frontier. After a short interlude, in which we all returned to our lodgings to bathe the sweat of our competition from our bodies and to change into fresh clothes—and where the only thing that prevented me from tumbling into bed with my beloved husbands was the promise of more political maneuvering elsewhere—we reconvened at the palace for lunch and what turned into an impromptu diplomatic negotiation.

“Tell me why I should pledge my loyalty to you instead of seeking a way back to the kingdom or casting my lot with someone else on the frontier?” Kythria asked Igor in front of all of us. He did so while casually mopping up the last of the stew we'd all been served for lunch with a heel of the delicious, fresh bread Avenel himself had presented for us.

Igor nearly choked on the last bit of weak ale at the question.

I was confident enough in the progress that I'd made through the course of the chopping competition that I, too, pivoted to hear what Igor would say as if the topic of conversation wasn't serious.

Igor took an extra gulp of his ale to clear his throat, then said, “The reasons are simple, really,” with the sort of shrug only a nobleman of the old cities could manage. “I am the one who can satisfy all the needs of the people when it comes to what they've been craving in a king.”

He sent a cheeky look Peter's way. Peter winked back at him, which I found even more charming because of the way Peter had decided to share the bench at the table we all sat around with Neil. He leaned against Neil on the one hand, and Neil had his arm thrown around Peter's shoulders, and flirted with Igor on the other.

It was a perfect representation of what I hoped for on the frontier.

"And you know what the people of the old cities crave?" Kythria tested him.

"Absolutely," Igor said with full confidence. "They crave a return to the way things used to be. Mind you, they aren't going to get it," he added before Kythria could say anything, "but I can give them the illusion that the old order has been restored, that peace will reign throughout the frontier, and that they and their families have a future of prosperity ahead of them."

Kythria looked like he would respond, but Sai—who had quietly joined us for lunch, but hadn't said much up until then—asked, "How will you do anything differently from the way I did it? I, too, am the son of a ruling duke. I represented continuity and the old order as well."

Kythria made a considering face as he glanced from Sai to Igor. "Yes, King Igor. What do you plan to do differently from the way King Sai ruled?"

Igor sent Sai an awkward, apologetic look. "Forgive me, my friend," he said to Sai, "but I believe I am better at managing people, particularly other nobles, than you are. Do not misunderstand," he rushed on, holding up a hand as Sai started to sulk. "I think you are brilliant when it comes to leading soldiers. If King Ludvig offers you a position leading whatever armies the Wolf River Kingdom has, I think you should snap that up, and that you will outshine any other potential generals on the frontier, except, perhaps Commander Kythria." He nodded to Kythria.

I nearly needed to bite my knuckles to stop myself from squealing with glee at how brilliantly Igor was doing, and how

perfectly everything was falling into place. I couldn't have asked for a better ruler for one quarter of the frontier if I'd constructed him myself.

Kythria obviously saw that Igor had handled the challenge well. He smiled knowingly and sat back, waiting to see where the rivalry between Sai and Igor would go next.

"My hope is that there won't be much call for an army on the frontier, if King Magnus gets his way," Sai said, still clinging to his sullenness.

"On the contrary," Igor said, surprised. "As long as men like Yiannis roam the forest, preying on the innocent people of the frontier, there will always be a need for a peacekeeping force of some sort to keep people safe. I could read between the lines of the reports General Rufus received of your rule in Kostya. Everything you did was intended to keep your people safe, am I correct?"

"You are," Sai said, his mood and manner apparently lightening.

Igor nodded to me, but glanced back to Sai to speak. "Then you will make the perfect keeper of the peace for your king rather than being a king yourself."

Sai tensed, leaning slightly forward as if he would argue. But then he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "I need to stop fighting," he sighed, seemingly talking to himself, "so that I can fight another day."

I smiled fondly at my friend. At last, he was starting to see the truth of his situation.

I wondered if young Cid had anything to do with that.

"So you see?" Igor went on, smiling at the young woman who approached the table to place a platter of sweets in front of Igor. "Your talents lie with organizing military men. Mine happen to be in appeasing and directing common citizens. At the risk of sounding arrogant, many of the changes Rufus implemented in Cremona were my ideas."

"Were they?" Kythria asked, his brow going up.

Again, Igor looked just the right amount of abashed. “Many of them, yes. Rufus took some of my suggestions and twisted them into something vile that suited him. But a good many of the changes that made up for the shortfalls of the Dying Winter and that enabled enterprising younger people to establish themselves faster than the older order would have let them were mine.”

Kythria hummed and stroked his short beard. He glanced briefly to me, then said, “My observation of the cities we’ve taken so far is that their downfall came about because the ‘old order’, as you call it, fought to maintain an iron grip on their prominence. Klovisgard was easy to take because so many of the younger men who had remained within its walls after King Stepan and his advisor ordered them to return to Hedeon helped us in our siege instead of defending the city, including Stepan’s own brother.”

“Did he really?” Jace asked, stunned. “Arseny let you all into Klovisgard?”

I noticed that Sai was also stunned, but he looked hurt as well. Seeing as Stepan and Cyril had only been in power for a handful of months, the resentment that led those young men to turn on their city had been born and fostered during his reign, perhaps even Arseny’s rebellion.

I felt sorry for him, but it was all water under the bridge now, and everything Kythria had to say was far more exciting to ponder.

“Your brother, and the other men who let my army into the city of Klovisgard, had much to say about their rulers,” Kythria went on.

He looked to Igor for, I hoped, permission to share the intelligence, and when Igor nodded, which I took as a very good sign, he continued, telling his story mostly to me.

“The younger men of Kostya are a funny lot,” he said. “They reek of frustration and desperation, but they are like a gang of children whose parents have deserted them. For all their energy and desire to do something, they have no

guidance and no idea what they could possibly do to make their lives better.”

“How old are these men precisely?” Peter asked, sitting straight and leaning his arms on the table, as he did in King’s Council meetings in New Hope.

He already knew how old Arseny was, but I knew what he was actually getting at. I wasn’t surprised when Kythria answered, “About your age, I would imagine.” He smiled at Peter and Neil, then on to Jace and Gennadi.

“They’re the sons who were too young for Gomez to murder, and who escaped the rage of the masses during the Dying Winter,” Peter said, glancing at Neil.

Neil nodded in agreement. “They truly *are* frustrated young men who lost their guiding parents.”

“Unlike you lot, though,” Kythria continued, “they don’t seem to have much more than the stirrings of ambition.”

“Because I thwarted that ambition at every turn without realizing,” Sai said, looking frustrated with himself. “I bent over backwards trying to appease the old nobles who were left when I was king. But they refused to listen to a word I said most days. That’s why Stepan turned on me and Arseny rebelled against him. I should have written the old order off in favor of bringing up the younger men.”

“No one should ever be written off,” I said kindly. “You found yourself in an extraordinarily difficult position during a trying time. I’m surprised you held Kostya together as long as you did.”

I believed those words somewhat, but not entirely. It would be of no use to kick Sai when he was down, however. Not if I wanted to raise him up to a better place for him later.

Both Kythria and Igor caught on to what I was doing.

“The same discontent that ruled in Klovisgard is present in Hedeon as well, or so my informants tell me,” Kythria went on. He wore a cheeky smirk, as if he knew full well he was telling the rest of us the precise sensitive information that we were all so eager to know. “King Stepan, they tell me, is

working hard to encourage the people of Hedeon as they prepare for a siege, but apparently, the queen mother and Councilor Cyril have far more bellicose aims in mind.”

“What is my mother planning now?” Jace asked, attempting to be aggressive, I assumed, but coming off as anxious instead.

Kythria studied him for a moment before saying. “As near as my informants were able to determine, She intends to defend Hedeon to the last man.”

“Does Stepan favor surrender, do you think?” Peter asked, glancing from Kythria to Jace.

“That would be typical of Stepan,” Jace huffed.

“It sounds like Cyril won’t let him,” Sai said, more serious than before.

“I assume you know Cyril’s character and motivations well,” I said to Sai. “Do you think he’ll override Stepan, potentially all the way into taking the crown, perhaps with Lady Rozynov’s help, and fortify Hedeon to resist any sort of siege?”

Sai let out a heavy breath. “Possibly. In our council meetings, Cyril never displayed the same sort of care for life and understanding that the population of the frontier—or, at least, the cities—has diminished to the point where every life is necessary.”

“I’ve seen his sort before,” Kythria said with a grave nod. “If he cannot win, then he will make certain everyone loses.”

I absorbed those words with a worried frown. As Vitrius had counseled me all those years ago, there were victors and there were the vanquished. But Vitrius hadn’t lived long enough to expand that truth to include another, more dangerous group. Because sometimes the vanquished turned to the utter devastation of all when they could not accept their fate.

The rest of the conversation turned to living conditions in Klovisgard, which sounded appalling. Kythria had also been shocked that people had been living like that, without proper

sanitation or enough laborers to make repairs to buildings. Unlike the people of Novoberg, it seemed the few citizens of Klovisgard bickered over who should do the necessary work to keep a city functioning.

The more Kythria reported, the more I cringed for our former ally. The pity I felt for the people of Kostya was tinged somewhat by increasing frustration with Sai, however. My friend should have informed me of the condition of his people.

But again, Sai had had so many plates spinning that I wouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't known half of what was going on within his own borders. That was not the sign of a good king.

THE REST of the afternoon was spent touring Novoberg. We'd barely had time for anything the day before, and I was eager to learn more about the city of my beloveds. Igor invited us to dine with him again at the palace, though it was a quieter and more intimate affair.

After supper, I could tell that Igor wanted another night with Peter, but one subtle look from Peter told me that my heart wanted to share a bed with me and Neil that night. I claimed Peter's time for myself to Igor, which gave Peter the opportunity to pretend he was doing my will, which, in turn, helped keep his relationship with Igor where it needed to be.

Interestingly, Peter quietly suggested another friend for Igor's bed in the form of one of our Gravlock men who had been part of Sai's army. I was surprised that Igor accepted the offer.

We were all so exhausted after the day we'd had that with only a bit of cozy snuggling, the three of us fell fast asleep and slept relatively soundly through the night.

The next day unfolded much the way the day before had. We ate a lovely breakfast with our own group at the Beiste house, then took ourselves up to the palace to see how our new friends were faring. Once again, we volunteered our time helping in Novoberg...while I quietly sent runners out to see if they could determine whether the summonses I'd sent on our first day were being answered, and meeting with a few spies

from the forest who had slipped into Novoberg and who might have been able to give me intelligence on Yiannis's whereabouts.

I was fairly certain Kythria did the same throughout the day, even though neither of us spoke about it. A few cunning grins between the two of us was all I needed to know which way the wind was truly blowing.

It was on the fourth day since we'd arrived that everything took a sudden and unexpected turn.

It was an hour or so after lunch, and Kythria and his men had been exercising in the barracks courtyard—Peter slyly explained to me that watching his father's guards train in that courtyard, one-handed, had been one of his favorite activities as an adolescent—and practicing their sword skills. Peter, Neil, Jace, Sai, and Igor had joined in with the soldiers, both to show off their skills and to learn a few new ones. Gennadi and I sat at the side with Sebald and Orel, who had Leremy with him, though Avenel was busy in the kitchens.

My appreciation of the display of skill and skin was interrupted by Ox's furious shout of, "Magnus! This is your doing, isn't it."

I turned from the sparring warriors to see Ox marching through the archway at the side of the yard...with Ludvig and Renz, Feodor, and Katrina, who was the most shocking of all, behind her.

I stood at once to greet my friends, both relieved and excited that they had received my summons and come so swiftly.

"Ludvig! What a surprise!" I stepped away from the arrangement of chairs and refreshment tables at the side of the practice yard and walked quickly to meet the new arrivals. Gennadi and Leremy followed and greeted Renz with open arms.

"This is not a surprise," Ox growled. "Not at all. You called them here, didn't you."

I considered denying it, but before I could, Ludvig shrugged and said, “Of course he did,” before shaking my hand. “We came as soon as we got your message,” he said, then glanced past me, to where Kythria and his men, and Igor, had paused their training to study the new arrivals. “I must say, though. This is not what I expected to see.” His tone was vastly appreciative.

Kythria approached the group, standing tall with his shoulders squared, like he was in my uncle’s court, even though he was shirtless and glistening from his exercise.

“King Ludvig of the Wolf River Kingdom, I would like you to meet Commander Kythria, general and advisor to King Igor of Cremona.”

Before Kythria, and Igor behind him, had quite reached us, Ludvig smirked at me and said, “You calculating bastard.”

I smiled back at him and batted my eyelashes.

“King Ludvig,” Kythria said in a tone of surprise, extending his hand. “It is an honor to meet you at last.”

“And you as well, Commander Kythria,” Ludvig said, a touch of suspicion in his manner as he took Kythria’s hand.

So much had happened since I’d sent out runners to fetch the leaders of the frontier to Novoberg. It was no wonder Ludvig treated the man who had been such an unknown to all of us for so long with suspicion.

I could tell that the handshake the two of them exchanged was intended as a show of strength and will. Knowing what I knew of Kythria’s inclination to bow to Igor, it was amusing to see the degree of competition between the two men.

“I believe you know King Igor of Cremona,” I went on, stepping back to Igor’s side and gesturing for Igor to step up.

“Of course,” Ludvig said, giving him an equally firm handshake, but also grinning. “I’d no idea the next time I saw you it would be as one king to another.”

“I’d no idea either,” Igor said with a sigh that came just short of being genuine.

“We were sad to learn of the plague that struck Teslalom and took so many lives,” Ludvig said, still not quite able to keep the sparkle of knowing out of his eyes.

“Yes, the devastation was unexpected and regretful,” Igor said, letting go of Ludvig’s hand once they’d gripped each other for long enough to communicate everything that could not be said.

“So that’s it,” Ox said, standing by with her arms crossed, staring at me. “You’ve called a summit in Novoberg without consulting any of us first. I suppose we should expect Vikhrov and Jorgen and Hati soon, right?”

I pretended sheepishness as I answered, “Perhaps.”

Kythria glanced to me, then burst into laughter. “You are your father’s son,” he said.

I lost my smile at that. I detested being compared to the man who had sired me. The two of us were nothing alike.

The conversation continued, despite my hurt feelings, from an unexpected quarter.

“Is that any way to greet your old friend?” Katrina asked Ox, a broad grin lighting her eyes.

Ox stared at her for a moment, then asked, “Are you complicit in this cockfest, Katrina?”

Katrina shrugged. “The fate of the frontier is about to be decided. I wanted to be in the center of the action. And when I heard that you’d gone and found yourself an entire city to rule over, I just had to see for myself.”

“Careful,” Ox said, loosening a bit and sending her old friend a smug look. “If you look around too much, you’ll want to stay. And if you stay, I’m sure the entire Wolf River Kingdom will fall apart without you.”

Katrina laughed louder than any of the men and threw her arms around Ox in a bear hug. “I’ve missed you, my friend.”

She then grabbed Ox’s face and tilted it up so she could kiss her with sloppiness that put Peter in his randiest moods to shame.

“This frontier of yours gets more and more interesting with every new thing I learn about it,” Kythria said, glancing to Igor. “What other surprises do you lot have in store for me?”

“How about this one,” Ludvig said with a frown, suddenly turning the mood of the meeting to stark seriousness. “My informants in Hedeon had only just reached me before your man, Magnus, to tell me that Yiannis has joined forces with Stepan and Cyril.”

It was as if a great gust of wind swept through the courtyard. Those of us in the inner circle already knew, of course, but many of the men who were training with Kythria evidently had not heard.

“Did your informants have anything to say about the intensity of this alliance?” I asked.

Ludvig deflated a little. “You already knew,” he said, smirking at me.

“Of course, my friend,” I told him with a fey shrug of one shoulder, in the same manner Peter often used. “I know everything.”

Ludvig eyed me wryly, then said, “Yiannis has apparently made himself comfortable in the castle. The informant who brought me the news said he has Lady Rozynov’s ear, and that ordinary citizens of Hedeon are terrified of him.”

Kythria didn’t look surprised. “It’s as I’ve feared, then. Yiannis is an opportunist who attaches himself to whomever he thinks will serve his aims. I can only imagine what the leaders in Hedeon have promised him.”

“Protection against us, I’d wager,” Ludvig said in a dark voice. “I plan to eviscerate the man personally for what he did to my Renz.” He pulled Renz closer, closing an arm protectively around him. Renz smiled adoringly up at him.

“Hedeon is gearing up for a protracted and likely bloody defense,” Jace said, scowling.

“That’s what worries me, too,” Ludvig said. He turned to me and went on with, “What do you think the chances are that Stepan and Cyril have let a snake into their basket and that the

bastards will all take care of themselves without us having to lift a finger?”

I winced. “I would say that possibility is high, but it isn’t one I wish for.”

“Why not?” Igor asked with a puzzled frown. “Won’t it help us if our desperate enemies cancel each other out?”

I sighed and shook my head. “They will take the lives of too many innocents with them when they do.”

“Yiannis shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near the young men of Hedeon,” Sai growled, reminding me that he was part of our group.

Again, I had the feeling that his comment was inspired by his new connection with Cid. On top of that, he was absolutely correct in his assumptions.

“Well,” Ox sighed, “if you’re all here to have some sort of grand summit of frontier leaders, why don’t you lot go and claim one of the noble houses, and once again, I’ll arrange for enough food to feed your bottomless stomachs this evening.”

“So you’re an innkeeper now?” Katrina teased her, throwing an arm around Ox’s shoulders. Since Katrina was a good foot taller than Ox, and pretty much everyone else, the gesture was comical.

“Are you going to help me or are you going to tease me?” Ox asked.

“Can’t I do both?” Katrina smiled.

It was just the comment that was needed to diffuse any lingering tension in the moment.

“Come,” I told Ludvig and my other friends. I glanced over my shoulder at Peter, Neil, and Jace—who had dressed again, though they were still sweaty and tousled from their exercise. “We’ll show you the Beiste estate, where the lot of us are staying. I believe the house next door is unoccupied. King Igor, Commander Kythria, I hope you will excuse us.”

“By all means,” Igor said with a friendly smile, though he peeked at Kythria, as though he felt the need to confer with his

new advisor over everything I'd just sprung on them and everything that they now knew was to come. "We'll see you at supper."

A short round of goodbyes was said, then I reached back to take Peter's and Neil's hands and continued out of the barracks yard with our expanded, core group of allies.

"So that's what you've been up to here without us," Feodor told me with an astute look once we'd left the palace grounds and walked on to the noble neighborhood and the Beiste estate. "Pulling strings and wooing the leaders of the frontier, eh?"

I laughed. "Both Kythria's and Igor's arrivals in Novoberg were unexpected," I said.

"But definitely not unwelcome," Peter added, like the councilor he was.

"Magnus has already managed to get Kythria to give up any ambitions to take the crown from Igor that he might have had and to bend the knee to him," Neil said, gazing rather proudly at me.

"Have you really?" Ludvig asked, surprised.

"It wasn't quite as crafty as all that," I said, downplaying my influence. "I honestly don't believe Kythria had any intention of usurping Igor's throne."

At least, not once he'd seen Igor in his element at king. If Igor had been a less competent man, it might have been a different story.

"How did you hear about Yiannis joining forces with Stepan and Cyril?" I asked as we walked on.

Ludvig grunted. "The usual way. Just because Sebald is no longer our diplomat in Hedeon doesn't mean we haven't kept our eyes and ears in the town." He nodded to Sebald, who had come with us. "But to answer the question you're really asking, your messengers had already reached New Hope and preparations were already underway for us to speed up here when the two men arrived. They barely had time to tell us the

basics before we set out through the forest on the fastest horses I could find.”

“We don’t know much more than you do, I’d wager,” Feodor said.

“Kythria told us a few days ago that that particular alliance was in the works,” I said. “I cannot imagine what Stepan and Cyril are thinking.”

“The only way we’ll ever learn that is to either break down the walls of Hedeon and seize them or to lure them out so we can ask them the truth ourselves,” Jace said.

“So, do we have plans to do either of those things?” Feodor asked.

I shrugged. “We don’t have any plans as of yet. That is why I summoned everyone to Novoberg.”

“Jorgen and Hati, and Vikhrov, too?” Ludvig asked to be sure.

I nodded. “They could and should be here within the next couple of days, provided they respond to my summons as directly as you did.”

Feodor let out a loud laugh as we reached the Beiste estate and the house next door. “Our Magnus. Always making the frontier dance to his own tune. Ox isn’t the least bit wrong about you.”

“Someone had to take the initiative,” I said with a cheeky smile, then paused in front of the houses, gesturing to the unoccupied house. “I believe this estate would make a good headquarters for the contingent from the Wolf River Kingdom.”

We accompanied Ludvig and the others into the house. It was cold and dusty, though not quite as forlorn as it had been before Sai had begun the efforts to clear out the noble houses. Ludvig had brought a dozen men along with him, and as exhausted as they all were from their swift journey through the forest, they set to work at once making the house habitable.

We all joined the efforts to settle Ludvig and the others in. I was pleased to see that Gennadi and Leremy were glad of their reunion with Renz. Avenel had somehow been notified of his friend's return as well and joined us, and as I fell into conversation with my old friends, Peter, Neil, and Jace settled in a corner to chat with the Sons that were in Novoberg, the pups closed their own ranks to catch up.

It gave me immense joy to see that none of the apples fell very far from their trees.

I had many questions about my own kingdom, regardless of the situation we found ourselves in with the frontier at large. I'd been away from New Hope and the center of things for so long that I was beginning to feel out of touch. Ludvig and Feodor put an end to that.

"From the way people have responded to the change in king, and how they're already decorating and preparing for the harvest festivals and Solstice beyond, you would never know there was anything at all amiss on the frontier," Ludvig said.

"Burkhov is claiming credit for things he didn't actually do, as usual," Feodor said, gesturing with the mostly empty flagon he'd just drunk about a half-gallon of ale out of. "He'll tell anyone who listens that it was his idea not to drain the swamps to the south and to plant rice there instead."

"Burkhov is still sore that he was barely in the running to take over as king," I said, rolling my eyes.

"People only listen to him because it's easier than ignoring him," Feodor went on. "If he doesn't think he's been heard, he gets even louder."

"To his credit, he's been adept at organizing the citizens of Edikton to harvest and store more than enough rice to last us through the winter and beyond."

"How are our winter stores?" Neil asked, turning away from the Sons' conversation, like he'd been trying to listen to both. My dear Neil, concerned, as always, with the human element of politics.

The rest of the Sons left off with their conversation and scooted closer to us.

Ludvig shrugged. “We’ll be fine this winter. More than fine. It was a particularly abundant year.” He glanced to me and said, “We should be able to sell a portion of our stores to Kostya, or whatever kingdom they all end up as, if they need it.”

“We shall see,” I said with a positive nod. “If all goes well, Kythria, on Igor’s command, will return to Klovisgard to gather up his armies and then proceed on to Hedeon soon. Immediately, I hope. He should have gone yesterday.” I feared that my presence, and Peter’s for Igor, had delayed the campaign that Kythria intended. “If all goes very well, Hedeon will fall in a matter of days, and we’ll have Igor as king of the United Cities of the Frontier before the snows start.”

“Is that what he plans to call the combined kingdoms?” Ludvig asked.

“It is,” Peter said, glancing to me. “Unless he’s changed his mind.”

“There’s nothing wrong with calling them the United Cities,” Feodor said with a sloppy shrug.

I grinned at my old friend. He was devilishly entertaining when he was sloshed.

“What are your hopes for the longer term?” Ludvig asked me with a more serious look. “How do you envision us all getting along after this latest conflict?”

It was precisely the question I had hoped someone would ask me.

“Presuming everything is settled before the first snows,” I began, sitting in my chair rather like I used to sit in the throne of the government building in New Hope, “I believe we should send everyone off to their own kingdoms to settle domestic matters for the winter. Let’s call it a ‘cooling off’ period, in more ways than one. Then, in the spring, I will propose we have a more formal summit. Here, in Novoberg, most likely.

Quite by accident, our friend Ox has created the ideal location for a meeting of multiple kingdoms.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Feodor said, holding up his flagon, then draining its dregs.

I laughed. It felt so good to be with my friends. Political machinations and manipulations aside, nothing was quite as enjoyable as spending an afternoon with men who had known me and shared my life for decades.

If only Rurik were there to enjoy the good times with us. He and Feodor used to get drunk together and crack moronic jokes that only they would think were funny. Of course, the rest of us laughed, too, but mostly at how ridiculous they were.

A snap of melancholy gripped my heart, sending my thoughts scattering.

“I assume this springtime summit will be for the purposes of establishing trade relations, policing the forest, and worrying about the day when the Old Realm reaches us again,” Ludvig said, as if those things were incidental instead of likely the greatest concerns of our time, after the reformation of the frontier.

“It will,” I said, pulling my attention back to the moment. “The stronger and more prosperous the four kingdoms of the frontier are, the better chance we stand of building ourselves into a force that the Old Realm will think twice about attempting to invade or influence again.”

“That’s a good point,” Feodor said, smiling hazily. “It was those Old Realm bastards’ fault that all of this got started. Your brother took the throne, then took it upon himself to meddle with us.”

I was fairly certain that the meddling began before Julius was made king, but then, not having been in Royersford for decades, and knowing my extended family’s penchant for assassination and crown-snatching, I’d lost track of which of my relatives had sat on the throne of the Old Realm and when in the last twenty years.

“I will rest easily as long as my children are able to grow in peace and achieve their dreams,” I said, reaching for Neil’s hand, since he’d scooted his chair closer to mine. “That is what I consider the greatest victory of—”

A clattering commotion in the doorway cut me off before I could finish the happy thought. We all turned in unison to find one of Kythria’s officers standing there, panting and winded, his eyes wide and his face pink.

“King Magnus, your presence is requested at the palace immediately,” the officer said. “Yours too, King Ludvig.”

Ludvig and I exchanged an alarmed look. I wondered whether it was Igor or Kythria who had called for us, and if either of them were dead, as I stood, but any temptation to smirk over the question died in an instant when the officer continued with, “Klovisgard is under attack.”

I nearly swallowed my tongue at that news.

“Under attack?” Peter asked, shooting to his feet as well. Everyone rose, as if we were the ones under attack. “Klovisgard? How on earth did that happen?”

“I don’t have that information,” the officer said, looking wary. I took that to mean he did have the information, but he was not at liberty to say.

“Who, precisely, is attacking Klovisgard?” I asked as I stepped around my chair and headed to the doorway. “Is it the wolves? The cities?”

“The armies of Hedeon with the assistance of Yiannis and his men,” the officer said as we all crossed into the hallway and marched out of the house.

“My brother is attacking his own people?” Jace blurted as we all set off for the palace at a swift walk.

“I bet he’d argue that he’s attacking an invading army,” Neil said.

“King Stepan has reportedly been deposed,” the officer said, glancing over his shoulder at Jace.

That nearly brought our party to a stumbling stop.

“He’s what?” Jace asked, suddenly looking like a boy instead of a man. “What happened?”

The officer cleared his throat. “I’ve said too much already. I should leave the rest for when you reach the palace.”

He was correct, but it was aggravating to be left in suspense as we hurried the rest of the way to the palace. I was as anxious as Jace to know what was going on, and Jace looked like he might not be able to contain himself until we reached the people who could tell us more.

Jace wasn’t the only Rozynov who was upset. When we reached the old throne room of Novoberg’s palace—which had been transformed into a lounge when we’d arrived a few days before, but now had the distinct feeling of a throne room again with Igor sitting on the old throne—Sai was there, pacing anxiously. I even noticed his hand shaking as he pushed it through his hair.

“Jace!” The way he called out his brother’s name and ran to him as soon as we all entered the room felt like a very bad sign.

“What’s going on?” Jace asked as we all poured into the room. “What happened to Stepan?”

“He’s dead,” Sai said, a hollow look in his eyes.

“What?” Jace gasped, rushing to grasp Sai by the arms.

I strode past them to where Igor and Kythria had taken up positions, along with Ox, on the dais where the throne and a few other chairs stood.

“I assume Cyril grew tired of sharing leadership and took the crown from him,” I said, taking the chair to Igor’s right, like we had gathered for a summit.

“No, actually,” Igor said, looking as pale and baffled as he had at the feast where he’d killed half the room.

I was so shocked I nearly missed the chair as I sat.

“Who’s in charge, then?” Ludvig asked, taking one of the other chairs as Peter and Neil sat flanking me. “Yiannis? I

knew he was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and that they never should have let him into the city.”

“Not Yiannis either, though he was instrumental in the overthrow,” Kythria said. He, too, looked thoroughly stunned.

“Then who?” I asked, though a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach formed as I anticipated the answer.

“It was Lady Rozynov,” Ox said, a little too much pride in her voice, though she appeared equally gobsmacked. “She paid Yiannis to assassinate Stepan and Cyril both, then declared herself Queen of Kostya.”

We all went silent. Even the men already in the room, who had likely been digesting the stunning turn for quite some time went silent.

There were at least twenty men in the room, and under any other circumstances, it would have been comical to watch as none of them knew who to look to. My husbands and household glanced to me for answers first, but I had yet to form my thoughts into anything past shock. Everyone else seemed to look to Kythria or Igor, though a few watched Sai and Jace.

Igor and Kythria exchanged a look. I read volumes into the exchange. It was the moment of truth for both men, for Igor's rule, and for Cremona. Igor was a new, young king who faced the greatest challenge to his rule from a woman old enough to be his mother, and who had most likely shared power with her husband, her sons, and her lover. She very well could be just the sort of ruler that the people of the old cities craved, even though she was a woman.

Igor's most important strategic advantage might have just vanished.

“When did the attack on Klovisgard begin?” Ludvig asked into the anxious silence.

Kythria cleared his throat and broke eye contact with Igor to look at Ludvig, his glance passing over me as he did. “My messenger rode the fastest horse he could find to reach Novoberg not more than an hour ago. Blasek, the lieutenant I

left in charge in my absence, sent him almost as soon as they realized the attack would take place, in case Yiannis's armies surrounded the city and made it impossible for anyone to leave."

"Which they were already in the process of doing when I escaped," a haggard-looking young man added.

"What sort of strength does Yiannis's army have?" Ludvig asked. "How many fighting men were in Hedeon who could have joined them?"

"Kostya's army isn't large," Sai answered, standing at attention like a soldier. "At least, it wasn't when I was king. I've speculated to Igor and Kythria that my mother has probably drafted every able-bodied man in Hedeon to fight. That's not an inconsiderable number, but they won't have had enough time to train."

Ludvig nodded. "And how strong is your army, Commander Kythria?"

"There are three thousand trained soldiers in Klovisgard at the moment," he said, frowning. "But those men do not have the sort of supplies that are needed to withstand a protracted siege."

"All Yiannis and his men need to do is seal the city off from outside help," I said, frowning and rubbing my chin. "They don't need to attack, they just need to trap the men who are already there."

"Which was precisely the strategy we'd planned to use to overtake Hedeon," Igor sighed, seemingly speaking to himself.

I sat a little straighter with indignation. "Doing so would have caused the death of more men than we can afford to lose on the frontier," I said. "Victory does not mean slaughtering one's foe, it means removing all obstacles to peace."

Kythria smirked at me. "Are you a general now?" he asked, not unkindly, but in a way that irritated me nonetheless.

"I do not need to be a general to be a victor," I said, thinking of Vitrius's advice again. "The frontier needs every last life that can be spared to be spared so that we might grow

and prosper. Sieging cities until their population wither and die means ensuring there are not enough men and women to work, to live, to love, and to produce the next generation.”

Kythria hummed as he smiled at me. “You are an interesting leader, King Magnus.”

“He’s the most interesting man I’ve ever known,” Ludvig said impatiently. “But we can all have a long chat about the philosophy of kingdoms some other day. Do we know whether Yiannis has successfully surrounded Klovisgard, or if the forces that you left within the city walls have attempted any sort of counter offensive?” he asked.

“We do not know, your majesty,” Kythria said with a respectful nod to Ludvig, even though he remained seated while Ludvig stood. I was relieved at the comfort he displayed with the role he’d apparently chosen for himself, but as with the philosophical discussion, those feelings would have to wait for another time. “The only way to find out would be to return to Klovisgard.”

Ludvig glanced to me. “What do you think?” he asked. “Should we pack up and head off to Klovisgard to decide things once and for all?”

I smiled, adoring Ludvig’s enthusiasm for the situation we all found ourselves in.

But instead of answering, I glanced from him to Kythria to Sai to Igor, and even included Ox in my questioning. “What sort of military force do we have outside of the army in Klovisgard, and how quickly can they be assembled for a counter attack?”

I heard Peter catch his breath by my side, but I couldn’t tell if he was excited or alarmed by what I was suggesting.

“The men I set off to rescue the pups with are still in Novoberg,” Sai said. “Though I’d hardly call them an army.”

“The people of Novoberg aren’t fighters,” Ox said, crossing her arms and staring at a point on the floor, like she was trying to think things through. “But if I were to explain the situation and ask if any of them wished to be a part of an

army that I assume we're sending to stop the siege of Klovisgard, some might join. But you cannot force anyone who doesn't want anything to do with your conflict to become a soldier," she added with a particularly fierce look at me.

"I wouldn't dream of it," I said to appease her.

"The army of the Wolf River Kingdom is currently in New Hope," Ludvig said, shifting his weight as he puzzled through the situation as well. "I will admit, though, they aren't anywhere near as spectacular as Kythria's army."

"Kythria's army will be more than enough to defeat Yiannis and his men," Peter said, frowning as he, too, thought about the situation. "There are more of them, and they're better trained. All we need to do, if Yiannis and his men really have besieged the city with the intent of starving that army into submission, is figure out a way to break the siege and get the greater army out into the open."

"Once we do that, Kythria's army would surely win in a traditional battle," Neil finished the thought.

"I'm not even sure Yiannis and his armies or Klovisgard are the real problem," Jace said, still looking uncharacteristically anxious. He glanced away from Gennadi, who I was certain he'd been looking to for strength, and over to Sai. "Mother is the problem."

"And she's a very big problem," Sai agreed.

I didn't envy the two men. They'd been through so much. The entire Rozynov family had been through too much. And now, in order to end it all, it was very likely that they would have to end their mother. I prayed that it wouldn't come down to actually killing Lady Rozynov, but I feared one way or another, her days were numbered.

"We don't have enough information about what is actually happening in Klovisgard," Kythria said, pushing himself to stand. "Your majesty," he nodded to Igor, "I suggest sending me back to Klovisgard to take charge of the situation. Once we know more about the situation, I shall send you a full report and my recommendations for what should be done."

Another small silence followed as Igor nodded slowly, considering.

Before anything could be decided, Jace burst in with, “I want to go to Klovisgard. I need to see for myself what my mother has done, and if I can, I need to do something about it.”

The declaration was very much like Jace. I wasn’t surprised in the least when Sai seconded him with, “I wish to go as well, whether as the leader of the small force with me or as my mother’s son.”

My instinct to try to cool the tempers of the two men was surprisingly absent. Because when all was said and done, I wanted to see what was happening in Klovisgard, and in Hedeon beyond that, myself. The armies could deal with the possible siege and whatever battle resulted, but I wanted to face Lady Rozynov personally and prevent the bold woman from destroying my dream for the frontier.

“I believe we all should go,” I said quietly, breaking the silent moment.

Half a dozen startled faces turned to me.

“Really?” Peter asked, sitting straighter, his eyes glittering with excitement. “You really think we should go to Klovisgard?”

“I think we should go to Hedeon to inquire what Lady Rozynov thinks she’s doing,” I said. “But to do so, we must go by way of Klovisgard and resolve that situation first.”

“Yes,” Jace said, a vicious gleam in his eyes.

“Magnus, are you certain it’s safe?” Neil asked, reaching out and taking my hand. “This could be it. This could be the great battle of our time that decides the fate of everything.”

“All the more reason for us to be present for it, my love,” I told him, squeezing his hand. “But to be clear, no, I do not think it’s safe at all.”

“Then why do you want to put yourself in danger?” Neil asked, as if we, and Peter, were the only people in the room.

The word “Again” was implied at the end of his statement.

Peter was the one who answered with, “Magnus was the one who started this whole thing. Magnus and Rurik. He should be there when it ends, and we should be there with him.”

I glanced between my two beloveds, holding one of their hands in each of mine. Peter was exactly right. I had started this whole thing. Rurik and I had lit the match that was touched to the fuse that ignited the frontier, even though that fuse had been a long and winding one.

And Neil was right. I could feel it in my soul. The great battle that decided everything was waiting for us somewhere between Klovisgard and Hedeon.

“We’ll go,” I said, lifting Neil’s hand and kissing it, then Peter’s. “We need to be there. But we’ll depart tomorrow.” I looked on to Kythria, assuming that he would want to return to his men as quickly as he could. “We need to prepare for a mission like this and plan every step we must take.”

“And I need to rejoin my men as quickly as possible,” Kythria said precisely what I’d assumed he would, standing. “I’m inclined to take the river to Klovisgard. Since the city is downriver, we should be able to get there faster by boat. I should leave within the hour, if possible.”

“I agree,” Igor said, also standing. He hesitated, moving anxiously for a moment, peeked at me, then said to Kythria, “To be honest, I don’t know whether it would be best for me to come with you immediately, to wait and travel with Magnus on the morrow, or to stay in Novoberg entirely. I would appreciate your council on this matter.”

I smiled, finding Igor’s request for guidance to be surprisingly mature. He truly didn’t have the experience of war that Kythria had, or of leadership, like me or Ludvig. And as soon as he mentioned staying in Novoberg, it occurred to me that it would be wise to have at least one of the leaders of the frontier directing matters from well out of the way of danger. I didn’t think Yiannis or Lady Rozynov had a chance of

defeating Klovisgard and advancing on Novoberg, but nothing was ever certain in war.

I stood at that point, taking Peter and Neil with me. “I will leave you to your council,” I told Igor. “If my husbands and I are to travel to Klovisgard tomorrow, we have a great many preparations to make.” I turned to Ludvig, my gaze traveling over Sai as I did. “I believe it would be wise for those of us from the Wolf River Kingdom to make preparations together.”

“I agree,” Ludvig said. He glanced commandingly at all of us from the Wolf River Kingdom and said, “Come along,” as he led us off to our own war council.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

We retired to the Beiste house, since it was far warmer and better suited for the sort of meeting our party from the Wolf River Kingdom had in mind.

“As much as I hate to say this,” Ludvig said almost as soon as we were seated in one of the front parlors, “neither you nor I, Magnus, can get anywhere close to the heart of the fighting in whatever battle is about to take place.”

“I agree,” Neil rushed to say, before I could so much as express my thoughts on the matter. “You cannot put yourself in harm’s way again. No matter what happens with this battle, you’re not a soldier. We need you to still be alive once someone has won this war.”

My heart swelled with love for Neil. I’d been considering donning some sort of armor in order to join the heat of the battle, but his words changed my mind.

“You are right, my darling,” I said, leaning over the arm of my chair to cup the side of his face and kiss him. “Wars are for soldiers. Their aftermath is for kings.” I glanced to Ludvig as I spoke.

“Bugger,” Ludvig huffed, his eyes sparkling, even though he frowned. “And here I was hoping that I could personally run Yiannis through and drag out his entrails with my bare hands.”

He shifted to rest a hand on Renz’s head as Renz knelt beside his chair.

All of the pups in the room had knelt beside their master's chairs, which I found to be a paradoxically sweet expression of power. Their power, not their masters'. Gennadi knelt beside Jace's chair with his head resting on Jace's thigh, Leremy beside Orel, Avenel beside Sebald, and in a twist that made me want to learn more, Cid sat on the floor beside Sai's chair, though not with any sort of pose that suggested ownership.

It wasn't exactly a sign of that sort of agreement between the two of them, but the fact that Cid was there at all—in body only, because his expression was as vacant as ever—meant something.

“I question how much direct involvement the Wolf River Kingdom should have in this battle at all,” I said, focusing my thoughts where they needed to be. “This is a war of Kostya versus Cremona. The Wolf River Kingdom is not one of the players.”

“You know it will end up being more than Kostya versus Cremona,” Sai said, scratching the arm of his chair nearest Cid's head, as if he wanted to mirror the way Ludvig stroked Renz. “If my mother and Yiannis show any sign of winning, we'll have to step in. It will become a war of the entire frontier.”

“I agree with what was said at the palace, though,” Feodor put in his bit, though he seemed to be struggling to be sober enough to tackle the matter at hand. “It sounds as if all that is needed for Cremona to win without any of the rest of us taking an active part is to figure out how to get Kythria's army out of the city.”

“Could they just power their way through the gates to battle with Yiannis and my mother's men?” Jace asked, beginning the process of strategizing.

“They could,” Sai answered him. “But the last time I was in Klovisgard, the gates and walls were the one part of the city that its residents worked diligently to maintain.”

“We won't know the condition of those walls and gates until we see them,” I pointed out.

“If the walls and gates are solid, what about getting men in and out of the city through the sewers?” Peter suggested.

“Ugh,” Neil said, scrunching up his face. “We did that already when we escaped from Novoberg. I wouldn’t wish a trip through the sewers on anyone.”

Peter sent him a smirk, which Neil returned. For a moment the two were caught up in their memories of the last time they’d ventured to their home city.

“Klovisgard is directly on the river,” Orel pointed out from the edges of the conversation. “Kythria’s men could simply escape that way.”

“And Yiannis’s men could just as easily infiltrate the city by water,” Sebald countered.

“We genuinely won’t know what either side could or should do until we see the situation for ourselves,” I said with a sigh. “The best we can do today is to gather as much as we can in terms of supplies and transportation and set out at first light tomorrow.”

“Agreed,” Ludvig said. “So what sort of horses and wagons are available to us?”

The conversation turned to how we would reach Klovisgard—which was usually a day’s journey from Novoberg—as swiftly as possible. It was decided that a core group of us—me, Peter, Neil, Jace, and Gennadi, along with Ludvig, Sai, and Dushka—would borrow the fastest horses we could find and ride full-out for as long as our horses could stand it to get there as quickly as possible. Feodor, Sebald, Orel, and the pups would come along behind us with a cart carrying our supplies, and whatever we could provide for our allies within Klovisgard, as soon as they were able.

Once that was decided, we broke to gather supplies and pack our things. Peter and Neil went with Orel and Leremy to find horses. Jace wanted to go with them, but I pulled him aside, into the kitchen, before he could leave.

“I wish to have a word with you,” I told him as I beckoned him into what looked to have once been a housekeeper or

butler's room.

“Can't it wait?” Jace asked, agitated and impatient. “There's a lot to do, and we need to be ready to leave at first light.”

“It cannot wait,” I said, patiently but firmly. I also added, “Gennadi, would you be so kind as to excuse us?” as I stepped into the small, dusty room.

Gennadi glanced, surprised, from me to Jace. Jace frowned and placed a hand on his beloved's shoulder. “You know that anything you have to say to me, Gennadi can hear as well.”

“I do,” I nodded. “And under usual circumstances, I would welcome Gennadi's presence. But I believe Avenel would like Gennadi's assistance preparing our food supplies for the journey, and nothing I have to say is so delicate that I would wish for him to hear it as well to help you process it later.”

I could tell neither man expected me to say something like that. Gennadi grinned knowingly and stood just a little taller. “I'll go help Avenel,” he said. “I don't mind.”

He kissed Jace softly, then nodded to me before leaving the room.

“I don't like you ordering Gennadi around,” Jace said, crossing his arms and standing like he was trying to intimidate me once Gennadi was gone.

I laughed aloud. “I could no more order Gennadi to do anything that neither he nor you wanted him to do than I could scoop up a handful of stars to give to my husbands.”

“Fine,” Jace said, loosening a little. “What do you want to talk to me about?”

I drew in a breath and squared my shoulders, putting aside everything light for the moment to speak with Jace as his friend, albeit an older and wiser one.

“How are you absorbing the unfortunate twist of circumstances that we have just been apprised of?” I asked him.

Jace transformed in a moment back to the stunned, floundering young man he'd appeared to be when the news of Klovisgard had first reached us. "My brother is dead," he said, his voice catching. "And our mother might have somehow ordered his execution. How do you think I feel?"

It was a typically Jace sort of question, but without the usual aggression. That was a sure sign that Jace was struggling.

"I am genuinely sorry for your loss," I said, stepping forward and resting a hand on his arm. "I only ever met Stepan at the coronation, but he seemed like a good man who cared for his city."

Jace shook his head. "If he cared for his city, he never would have let Cyril influence him. He never would have usurped Sai. He would have supported Sai and helped him to be a better king."

My brow went up. It was an astute observation. Sai alone had been a poor leader. Stepan had been as well. But if they had worked together, perhaps they could have shored up each other's weaknesses.

"My mother should know better," Jace continued with a great deal of emotion before I could make a comment. His face pinched with the intensity of that emotion, as if he was engaged in an inner battle. "She should have helped Sai as well. I can't believe she's made her own children her enemies. I can't believe she—" His emotions became too much, and he turned his face aside and sneered, as if angrily fighting off tears.

I remembered then how cold Lady Rozynov had been to Jace when they'd been reunited at the Meeting of Four Kingdoms. I remembered how she had rejected him for loving Gennadi and how viciously she had made her views known. She'd even kept Taisiya, one of Jace's other sisters, away from him. Only Vera had had the courage to defy their mother's orders to cut Jace off.

My thoughts turned to young Taisiya for a moment. I prayed that she was still safe in body and mind, and that some

sort of reconciliation could be made between her, Jace, and Sai. I wondered what had become of Yulia, Sai's estranged wife, as well. The other Rozynov sibling, Alyona, had married a man in Good Port and was happy there. I wondered again about Arseny Rozynov and what role the last remaining Rozynov brother would play in the endgame of this conflict.

I gripped both of Jace's arms and faced him like he was my equal. "It pains me to say it, but your family may face more deaths before this conflict is done," I said.

Jace raised his red-rimmed eyes to look at me.

"Your mother is standing directly in the way of peace throughout the frontier," I went on. "I do not think she will relinquish that place easily. And I have not heard anything about which side your other siblings have taken in this conflict."

"I'm worried Mother has poisoned Taisiya's mind," he confided. "And I haven't heard anything from Alyona in almost a year."

That was either a bad sign or a very good one. I hoped the two, and Yulia, had stayed out of Lady Rozynov's way.

"Jace," I said, focusing once more. "I need you to answer me honestly. Can you face what might be waiting for you in Klovisgard? Are you strong enough to be your mother's enemy?"

"I don't want to be," he admitted, his voice tight. He blinked rapidly, glancing up at the ceiling, then to the side, then anywhere he could to avoid my eyes as he held back his tears. He growled, then said, "This is not how things were supposed to be. We were supposed to be happy. We were a good family, a strong family. We survived so much when everyone else around us was falling." His gaze finally settled on me, and with heartbreaking intensity, he whispered, "How did this happen?"

I rested one hand on the side of his face. "Because even good families can break in extreme circumstances," I said with a sigh. "Because even beloved mothers can succumb to the

agony of loss and seek vengeance over acceptance. My own mother let the frustrations of a restricted and squandered life get the better of her as well.”

“Did she?” Jace asked, hollow hope in his voice.

I nodded. “She ignored her children in favor of a hedonistic life, but that life proved no more fulfilling than the royal one she was doomed to. We can only pray that your mother will not end as many lives as mine did in an attempt to assuage her anger.”

“Your mother killed people?” Jace blinked. Anger seeped into his expression as he said, “Did she kill any of your brothers, her own children?”

“I cannot say,” I admitted. “She may have. I was the eldest, then came Clelia, my sister, and then Julius. The three of us were healthy, but every other child she bore after that was dead within a week. I believe my mother decided she hated children and did not want any more, one way or another.”

Jace’s eyes went wide. “That’s horrible.”

I shrugged. “It is diabolical. But it just goes to show that we have one more thing in common.”

Jace closed his mouth and clenched his jaw for a moment.

Then he blew out a breath and sagged.

“What should I do, Magnus?” he asked quietly. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to control myself if I come face to face with my mother again.”

“Then make certain you do not come face to face with her,” I advised him.

Jace tensed all over. “But I have to,” he said. “What kind of a leader would I be if I didn’t face even the most difficult meetings? I cannot let the injustices my mother has committed continue. I cannot let her destroy what we have all worked so hard for. But if it comes to it, how am I supposed to stop her? By killing her the way she killed Stepan?”

I squeezed Jace’s arms. “No one ever promised that peace would come easily. Living a life in service to the greater good

often means making difficult choices for ourselves.”

“Like giving up your crown to someone you think is better suited to the job when circumstances change?” Jace asked, managing to smile weakly.

I smiled back at him. “Precisely. It also means enduring the pain of putting aside childhood and fighting for better lives of people you do not know, may never meet, and who could very well curse your name at the expense of someone you once held dear.”

“I don’t want this,” Jace said, clenching his hands into fists. “I don’t want any of this. I just want to live a peaceful life with Gennadi, serving my kingdom and my family so that everyone is happy.”

I smiled at Jace, my heart swelling for him as if he were my son. Or perhaps a brother, since I didn’t count myself as old as that yet. “Then you know exactly why I have fought so hard and for so long, and why I will fight in whatever way I can until my dying day,” I said.

Jace blinked at me, as if suddenly realizing just how similar we were. He then did the most shocking thing Jace had ever done to me. He surged forward and threw his arms around me, burying his face against my neck for a moment, as if seeking comfort in my arms.

I let the moment blossom. There was no fire in it, just the connection of two people whose lives were now inextricably linked. Jace was my family as much as Peter and Neil were, though in an entirely different way. I would protect and advise him as such.

“A wise man once told me that this world and any endeavor it produces divides people into victors and vanquished,” I said with all the unsettled emotions that came with remembering my past.

Jace pushed himself to stand straight and stared resolutely at me. “I will not be one of the vanquished.”

I smiled despite myself. Most men to whom I would give the advice that followed my words would have asked what it

took to be one of the victors. Jace was already changing the script and proceeding with determination and pride.

“Good,” I said, nodding in approval. “Then you must start your mission by not vanquishing yourself.”

Jace blew out a breath, his shoulders dropping. “Like both Sai and Stepan did,” he said, staring past me at nothing as he fell into his thoughts. “Because a victor puts others before himself and his own wants. It’s not about trying to fill another man’s shoes and appeasing everyone who has ideas about how their kingdom should be, like Sai thought it was. And it’s not about grabbing power and forcing others to do your will, like General Rufus. Or making a dangerous alliance to try to hold onto a family legacy that crumbled years ago, like Stepan and my mother tried to do.”

He drew in a breath, and his gaze focused on me. “Victory comes through making those around you happy,” he said, as if just coming to an understanding about everything I had showed him through the days of my life in the time we’d been together. “It comes through making difficult decisions and caring for others before you care for yourself.”

I was prouder of him than I could say, but of course I had to shrug one shoulder lightly, grin impishly at him, and say, “You have to please yourself at some point as well. A true victor is pleased by the safety and contentment of others, however, so, say, if bringing peace to the frontier is something you would desire above nearly everything else, it makes victory that much easier and sweeter when it’s achieved.”

Jace smiled wryly. “You crafty old bastard. You’ve had the secret to victory under your thumb this entire time.”

I laughed. “Hardly. I’ve just been very clear about the sort of world I want my family to live in. You are my family as well, Jace,” I added, cupping the side of his face again. “I will be happy if you will be happy. So tell me, what will make this tumultuous episode that we are nearing the end of happy for you?”

With only the slightest moment of hesitation, Jace said, “If Gennadi feels safe and content for the rest of his life. If he

spends one more moment of his life than he has to feeling afraid or upset or disappointed, then all the riches and prestige in the world wouldn't matter to me at all."

Something settled inside me with those words. I smiled at Jace and patted the side of his face in praise before lowering my hand. Peter and Neil had already grasped my philosophy of victory and shared it. The three of us were of one mind about the way our world should be. But to see the values my husbands and I held dear extending out beyond us, knowing that Jace understood and had the power to make his understanding reverberate through the entire frontier and the years to come, had me feeling as if I'd already won whatever battle awaited us in Klovisgard.

"So what do you want to do?" I asked him again, smiling this time. "What course of action do you think would make Gennadi the happiest with the unfortunate situation that awaits us in Klovisgard?"

Jace held his breath and his gaze remained unfocused for a moment. Then he seemed to reach some sort of decision. He stood taller and focused on me again.

"He wouldn't want me to fight or to put myself in harm's way, for one," he said. "There are more than enough trained soldiers to fight this battle. Genny would want me to find the most peaceful resolution to the conflict. He would want me to spare as many lives as possible, including my mother's."

"I agree," I said with a nod. "Which is why I think that, once we reach Klovisgard tomorrow, the best thing our party could do would be to sit back and observe, offering help if we can and if it is needed, until the conflict has been settled."

"And then we need to step in and work with Igor and Ludvig and whatever other leaders are present to dictate the terms of peace," Jace finished my thought. He then growled, looking fierce, even though his eyes started to sparkle with mirth. "Fuck, Magnus. This is why you're always having summits and getting everyone together to talk about things incessantly. Because negotiating brings about far more comprehensive victories than fighting."

I burst into a broad smile. “I’ll make a king out of you yet,” I said, stepping towards the doorway, as I felt the conversation had reached its zenith.

“I can’t believe talking about things sounds like such a good idea to me now,” Jace sighed, shaking his head as we stepped into the hall. “I’m embarrassed for myself.”

He paused before we could take more than a few steps towards the kitchen, his faux embarrassment fading.

“I am going to have to face my mother, Magnus,” he said, stopping me with a hand on my arm. When I turned to face him, he looked young and anxious again. “I don’t know what I’m going to say to her. If she killed Stepan or had him killed, she’ll have to face justice for that. But...but she’ll always be my mother.”

“No one ever said the mantel of leadership rested lightly on one’s shoulders,” I said with a sigh in return.

Jace looked unhappy with that answer, but he nodded, and we walked on.

We spent the rest of the afternoon figuring out everything we needed to do and to gather to depart for Klovisgard at first light the next day. Kythria and his soldiers departed out of Novoberg’s north gate, heading for the boat Igor had traveled in from Tesladom—which, I was informed, my messengers heading to Good Port had not taken like Jace had suggested they should, for which I was now grateful—within an hour of our conversation at the palace, just as he’d said he would.

Igor had made the decision to stay in Novoberg, though I could tell he wasn’t comfortable with that decision when we all dined together at the palace that evening.

“Part of me feels like I should be there,” he said, rubbing a hand over his face and glancing from me to Peter, then back again. “It is my duty and responsibility to see that the kingdom I want to rule is secured.

“But on the other hand,” he continued, “I just can’t put myself in harm’s way like that. And if I truly am a king, I need

to become comfortable with ordering men who are trained and capable to accomplish the tasks they are best suited to.”

“So Magnus has gotten to you, too?” Jace asked with a smirk from a few places down the table.

“I beg your pardon?” Igor frowned in confusion.

Jace huffed a laugh and raised his glass to me. “We might all be kings in our own right, now and in the future, but we all owe our regal wisdom to the king of kings right there.”

Peter laughed and jabbed his elbow into my arm. “King of kings. I’ll drink to that.”

“So will I,” Neil said, snatching up his wine goblet and toasting me with the others.

Within moments, all of the young men around the table, even Sai, had raised their glasses to me to drink to my health.

“God help us,” Ludvig said, sending me a lopsided grin. “We’ll never hear the end of it now.”

I let the toast be, but I honestly felt a bit sheepish about it. It had never been my intention to raise myself up beyond the reach of other men. I truly didn’t want anything more than to live a life of peace and to watch my family grow.

But sometimes even the strongest and most powerful men needed someone to look up to and emulate. I distrusted any man who put himself on the top of the mountain with no one else around him. If allowing the young men around me to admire me kept them from spinning off with wild fantasies of being master of all they surveyed, then so be it.

“That was awfully cheeky of you at supper this evening,” I scolded my Peter and my Neil once we’d made our way back to our bedroom at the Beiste house, relatively early so that we could get as much rest as possible before departing in the morning. “King of kings,” I snorted.

Peter was in a spritely mood—most likely because he could sense he was about to be part of the next great iteration of politics on the frontier—and he turned to me with a brazen

look once Neil had shut our room's door. "It was Jace who came up with the term, not me," he said.

"Yes, but you were the first one to raise your glass," I reminded him, one eyebrow arched, as I stalked towards him.

The flush that filled Peter's cheeks as he caught the ardor in my advance only made me feel randier. His body language shifted at once to that of the eager, fey, young man who had demanded entrance to my yurt all those years ago.

"And why shouldn't we all see you as the ultimate power on the frontier?" he asked, slipping easily into my embrace when I was close enough to loop an arm around his waist and pull him close. "I, for one, relish the idea of being the fuck toy of the king of kings."

I laughed, deep and low, and moved my other hand to hold the back of his head. "You're my husband, not a toy," I told him, then slammed my mouth over his with all the love and possessiveness I felt.

"I don't know," Neil commented from the side as he removed the coat he'd worn to supper. "He looks like a fuck toy to me."

I pulled away from Peter, laughing. "Just because I would gladly spend every hour of my day between Peter's legs, and yours too, I might add, does not mean our husband is a toy."

"I suppose I am far too precious to be a toy," Peter said, batting his eyelashes at me. "Considering I am the plaything of the *king of kings*."

"Right," I said, grasping Peter tightly enough to back him towards the bed without toppling him onto the floor. "That's about enough out of you."

I waited until the backs of Peter's legs hit the bed before pushing him hard enough that he flopped to his back with a laugh. Once I had him prone, I stepped far enough back to untie his boots and pull them from his feet. As soon as they were gone, I leaned over him and undid every button I could find in between searing kisses.

Peter laughed the entire time, splaying and squirming like the wanton whore he was. As soon as he finished the hasty removal of his clothes, Neil came over to take my place undressing Peter while I stepped aside to throw off my clothes.

By the time I was undressed and had found the ointment that would, undoubtedly, be needed in moments to come, Neil had Peter naked with his legs spread while he knelt beside the bed, lavishing Peter's cock with attention.

"One of my favorite sights," I sighed, stroking myself to bring the physical sensations that went along with the mental arousal of watching my husbands enjoy each other.

Neil was exceedingly skilled at swallowing cock these days, and watching Peter's thick shaft slip in and out of his mouth with a glistening of saliva had my body tightening with excitement. Seeing that I was watching, Peter began making wicked sounds of arousal. He grabbed his legs under his knees and held himself as wide open for Neil as he could. That only encouraged Neil to take Peter so deep that he began to choke.

The combination of sights and sounds had moisture forming on the tip of my cock and my balls ready to empty their essence into either one of my beloveds, or both, if I could manage it.

When Neil pulled back, gasping to catch his breath, he glanced to me with a naughty glint in his eyes. "Would you like a turn, oh king of kings?" he asked.

"I want more than a turn," I said, crossing to the bed.

Neil stood and had just begun to laugh when I surprised him by pulling him to the side and pushing him to bend over the bed. The jar of ointment was open and within close enough reach that I was able to scoop some out, coat my cock, and spread the rest over Neil's hole, then surprise him by taking him hard before he had caught up to my intentions.

Neil let out a cry that nearly broke the spell of passion that had surrounded us all. For a moment, I worried that I'd been too forceful and that I'd hurt him. But after a few quick thrusts on my part, his cry turned into long, obscene moans of

pleasure, to which he added, “Yes. Fuck me, my king of kings. Make me your slave.”

My mouth twitched into a grin despite myself, then I doubled the power of my thrusts, pushing his upper body down to take him as fiercely as I knew my Neil could stand.

The sounds my beloved made changed quickly, as did the tension in his body. I almost regretted that I had him bent forward over the bed so that I could not see his face. It was as if he’d surrendered to me completely, giving himself to me, body and soul, to do whatever I wished. The only sign that he still had a care for his own desires was the way he slipped one hand between his legs to stroke himself as I fucked him.

“I completely understand why you enjoy watching so much,” Peter panted eagerly to Neil, stroking his own cock between his open legs as he watched Neil from the bed beside him.

As if in answer to Peter’s voice, Neil let out a cry as his body tensed and he came. That was something else I would have liked to see, and under other circumstances, the speed with which he’d spilled would have caused Peter and I to tease him relentlessly. But I merely smiled with aggressive pride at my ability to undo such a young and virile man with only a few strokes.

Knowing that continuing would be more uncomfortable for my Neil now, I pulled out and rolled him to the side so that I could see the results of my work. Neil’s hand was sticky with cum. I grasped it and lifted it so that I could lick the nectar from his friction-warm fingers. Neil watched me, his eyes half-lidded and his mouth open as he caught his breath.

“Magnus,” Neil muttered, as if he’d intended to say something much longer, but had lost his strength for it.

“That’s right, my darling,” I growled.

I leaned over to kiss him, giving him a taste of himself, before rocking back and turning my attentions to my bright-eyed and dripping Peter.

“And now for you,” I said, shifting so that I could best overpower my other beloved.

“Are you certain you don’t want me to clean up first?” Peter asked cheekily as I used one of our discarded shirts to wipe myself clean, then dug into the ointment jar again to slick myself once more.

I grabbed Peter’s legs and yanked him to the edge of the bed before folding him over so his ass was in the air and his hole gaped at me.

“Since when does the king of kings care about a bit of mess when he wants what he wants?” I asked with a wicked look.

Peter laughed, but I cut that laughter short by lining up and thrusting inside him. Then he moaned and clutched at my arms as I held his legs and did whatever he could with his limited leverage to fuck himself on my cock as I thrust.

My Peter was pure, wanton lust. He was the picture of hedonism as he switched to holding his legs open for me as I pounded him, growing closer and closer to my orgasm. The transported twist of his expression as he drowned in the pleasure I gave him was a far better compliment than being called the king of kings. And the sounds he made when an exhausted Neil reached over to stroke his cock for him made me feel far more like a victor than any conquest of the frontier.

For a handful of blissful minutes, the three of us were united in the pursuit of pleasure. The rest of the world ceased to exist. It was only me and my beloveds as we grunted, sighed, moaned, and slapped our way into heady oblivion. I could tell Peter was trying to outlast me, but I knew my husband’s body so well, knew just how to slam that spot inside him over and over, and with Neil fisting his cock, even Peter’s best efforts couldn’t stop him from groaning as jet after jet of pearly cum erupted from him.

That sight, combined with the way Neil dragged himself over to take Peter’s mouth and swallow the moans of bliss he made, ended things for me. With a sound of satisfaction, I shot everything I had into him, feeling as though the circle of the

three of us, no, the four of us with Rurik forever in my thoughts and heart, was complete.

“Exquisite as always,” I panted once I’d pulled out and cleaned myself up enough to feel comfortable collapsing into a heap with my sweaty and overheated husbands.

“I love both of you,” Neil said. He’d somehow ended up in the middle this time, and he attempted to snuggle with both Peter and I simultaneously.

Peter rolled to his side with a happy sound and threw an arm and a leg all the way across Neil to reach me. “Can’t we stay here like this instead of going off to some boring old war in Klovisgard?”

I laughed and embraced both of my husbands in return. “You won’t say that once you’re in the thick of the action,” I said.

Peter made a sound of grudging agreement. “Alright, but as soon as it’s all over, I need at least a week in bed with the two of you.”

I laughed louder and used the last of my energy to pull myself over enough to kiss Peter, and then to kiss Neil on the way back to flopping by his side. “If that isn’t motivation to end the conflict between Kostya and Cremona as quickly as possible, I don’t know what is,” I said.

I sounded light and teasing, but I was completely serious. The conflict on the frontier had gone on long enough already. It was well past time that everything be finished and settled at last. I had no idea what precisely we would face in Klovisgard, and I was as determined as ever to play only a peripheral role, if that was at all possible, but one way or another, this had to be the end of things.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

As intended, my husbands and I, Jace and Gennadi, Ludvig, Feodor, Sebald, and Sai, along with their pups, set out for Klovisgard at first light the next morning.

I had never really considered myself to be the most accomplished horseman, and after only an hour of hard riding, I was glad I'd fucked my beloveds into oblivion the night before. By the time we stopped for a short rest, a small meal, and to relieve ourselves, my thighs were so chapped that I feared I would never be able to manage the motions necessary to please my Peter and my Neil ever again.

"We're making extraordinarily good time," Ludvig said as we tidied up our midmorning meal and refastened our saddlebags. "It usually takes all day to reach Klovisgard from Novoberg, and most people split the journey into two days. But at this rate, we'll be there before supper."

"Who knows what we'll find when we get there, though," Sai said, frowning and tense.

"I know it is useless to say," I told him as we walked back from visiting the trees in the clearing where we'd paused, "but whatever happens in Klovisgard and with your family, you will always have a place in the Wolf River Kingdom, and you will always be welcome in my house for as long as you wish to stay there."

Sai stopped, and I walked a few more paces ahead of him, but he caught my arm and held me back.

“You’ve no idea how grateful I am for everything you’ve done for me,” he began, hesitated, then finished with, “And everything you tried to do for me. When my father died—” He stopped, his face pinching with grief that I was fairly certain had taken him by surprise.

I stepped closer to him, sending a glance to Neil, who had walked past us and questioned me with his eyes. I nodded for him and Peter both to move on and give the two of us a moment.

“There were so many things I thought I was supposed to do and be when my father was killed,” Sai went on in a quieter voice. “I’m the eldest. It was my responsibility to keep my family and my kingdom together. But....”

He hesitated again, blowing out a breath and pushing a hand through his hair.

“I think I would like to coordinate some sort of peacekeeping force for the Wolf River Kingdom, after this is all over,” he went on in a stronger voice, standing a little taller. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about it in the last few days, and I’ve...I’ve spoken about it with Cedric.”

I blinked, lost. “Cedric?”

Sai blushed scarlet. “That’s Cid’s full name. He said that Yiannis and his wolves changed all the pup’s names to make them into something short and...inhuman. Like something you’d name a dog.”

A rush of anger threatened to consume me. If I found myself anywhere near Yiannis, the man would die without being given a chance to explain himself. I had a feeling I’d have to wait in line to kill him, though.

I attempted to soothe my anger by focusing on the things Sai had told me without saying anything. Cedric had clearly spoken to Sai, which was the first I’d heard of the poor lad saying a single word to anyone. That was a good sign that some form of trust had built between the lad and Sai.

“Do you have plans to take him as your pup?” I asked.

Sai winced. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I've never considered...loving a man before. Sebald once theorized to me that nothing is set in stone when it comes to who we fancy and that, given the right circumstances, any sort of relationship could evolve between any two people. I...I might believe him now, but...I find it all...confusing."

I smiled and patted his arm. "Don't worry yourself over young Cedric yet," I counseled him. "We have a long way to go still before thoughts of domesticity can take priority again. The very fact that you would consider helping and sheltering a young man who has been savaged and damaged makes me admire you quite a bit."

"Really?" Sai asked as we walked the rest of the way back to our horses. His blush hadn't gone away, and it seemed more pronounced as he asked, "Would you think less of me if I claimed him as a pup...but didn't use him for gratification? I mean, my marriage to Yulia is over, one way or another. She may have died with Stepan, or she might have fled, or thrown her lot in with my mother. You wouldn't think less of me for abandoning all thought of her to take a young man as my... consort?"

"Not at all," I said with a shrug. "Just because I and my husbands have the self-control of rabbits doesn't mean there is anything less valid about a chaste relationship of caring and understanding."

Sai smiled and relaxed. "You never cease to amaze me, Magnus. Just when I think I have you figured out, I discover some new facet of you that makes me like you even more."

I grinned broadly. "That is precisely the way I have designed it," I said.

As brief as it was, that conversation with Sai bolstered me for the rest of the journey. My thighs would never forgive me, and after another few hours of hard galloping my back wasn't particularly happy with me either, but my heart felt light, and every pain I had endured to get me where I was destined to go seemed very much worth it.

“This is your doing,” I complained teasingly to Rurik in my mind, after we’d been riding for so long that everything felt like a blur around me. “It is because of you and the promise I made all those years ago that I’m putting my poor body through all this.”

“I’ve always adored your body,” Rurik answered merrily. “And I greatly appreciate you for pushing it for my sake.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, my love,” I thought.

“We’re nearing the climax of everything we’ve worked for, Maggy,” Rurik’s voice sounded in my head, soothing me and encouraging me. “I can feel it. If Lady Rozynov and Yiannis are defeated at Klovisgard, we will have accomplished everything we set out to do.”

“At least, to begin with,” I answered him in my heart. “Conquering the frontier is nothing. Raising our children will be the much longer and harder battle.”

“One that I know you’re looking forward to,” Rurik laughed.

“I am,” I admitted, smiling outwardly as well as inwardly. “But I look forward to the day you and I are reunited as well, my heart.”

“As do I,” Rurik said. “But don’t you dare rush into our reunion. Peter and Neil still need you. Ziggy and Ella and the others will need you as well for a long time to come.”

I sighed inwardly. “How is it that everything that gives me joy and fulfillment keeps me away from you?” I asked. “All I ever wanted was to live in your arms and bask in your smile until my dying day.”

“I am still with you, my darling Maggy,” Rurik said in a way that had my whole chest squeezing with emotion. “I will always be with you, every step of the way. I expect you to live a long and illustrious life. If you show up here with me too soon, I’ll thrash you within an inch of your afterlife.”

I laughed out loud, which caused Peter, who galloped just beside me, to turn and glance at me strangely for a moment.

I sent him a quick smile before focusing on the road in front of me again.

“Someday, all four of us will be together,” I promised Rurik. “Whatever the afterlife looks like, whatever sort of existence we will have, I know that much. And once we are all together, we will truly be victorious.”

Rurik didn't answer me, but his rich laughter reverberated through my memory and my soul, giving me the courage to go on.

Ludvig was correct in his assumption that we would arrive in the clearing around Klovisgard before supper. Given the late time of year, the sun set before we finished our journey, forcing us to slow down. But even as it disappeared, bathing the forest around us in darkness, we knew we were close by the orange glow on the horizon.

“We should make the final approach cautiously,” Sai said, stepping up to lead as an experienced soldier who had been part of an army approaching a battle before. “The less attention we draw to ourselves, the more likely we are to arrive unseen.”

“And if we arrive unseen, we'll be able to observe the situation more fully and get a better picture of what to do,” Jace added, riding beside his brother with Gennadi seated behind him, his arms wrapped tightly around Jace's middle.

I smiled at the sight of the brothers, especially the way they rode and worked together at the front of our party. Who would have imagined five years ago that Sai and Jace Rozynov would have settled their differences and joined forces...to oppose their mother?

That aspect of their partnership took some of the delight of seeing them together away. But not so much as to keep the seed of the idea that Jace would make a perfect deputy for Sai in his efforts to form a peacekeeping force from taking hold in me. As soon as Jace finished his five years of service, I would be more than happy to hand him over to his brother to make the world and the forest a better, safer place.

Our group was much quieter simply walking our horses instead of galloping. We all sensed how important the moment was as well, which kept conversation to a minimum. But one look to Peter on my right and Neil on my left as the forest thinned and the darkened road led us out into the open was all I needed to see how excited we all were.

“Do you see them out there?” Sai asked in a voice we could barely hear. “See how the campfires are brighter to the south than in the north?”

“I see,” Feodor said with a nod.

I could see as well. The darkness that blanketed the clear spaces around Klovisgard was not enough to conceal the shapes of campsites and the outlines of men. There were just enough fires burning for me to make out movement as well.

I was surprised that there were not a greater number of men surrounding Klovisgard. At least, there weren't within our line of sight. That seemed to fit with the intelligence we had on the size of Yiannis's pack and Hedeon's army, however.

“We need to keep as close to the edge of the forest as we can and move in the shadows until we find the best vantage point,” Sai finished.

We did as he said, keeping quiet and walking our horses just behind the first row of trees off the road, circling the city to the north.

It had been ages since I'd been to Klovisgard, and even then, I'd only attended a faire there and not gone inside the city. Much had changed in the intervening years. The space between the city walls and the trees had expanded significantly. We had to be careful not to let any of our horses trip over stumps and decaying branches that had evidently been discarded by whomever had cleared the forest sometime in the past. That task was made even harder as none of us dared to light so much as a candle to show us the way. We relied entirely on the waxing moon above us.

The city still had a vital feeling to it, even though the amount of light cast by the moon and the fires and lanterns inside of the city walls was dimmer than the light a city of that size should cast. The scents of civilization were in the air—wood smoke, animals, and turned earth, since the harvest had already been brought in—but they were joined by more savage scents as well—unwashed bodies and something foul, like decay.

“How do we know whether Kythria and his men have reached Klovisgard yet?” Peter asked as we rode closer together.

“I don’t suppose we can know until we reach the river side of the city,” Neil answered.

“I wish we could see more of Yiannis’s camp,” Peter spoke again. “I guess we’ll have to wait until morning.”

“Here,” Sebald commented, riding up behind us. “Use this.”

He took out a collapsible spyglass that he’d already extended and handed it over to Peter.

My brow shot up, and I glanced from Peter to Sebald, impressed.

Sebald shrugged at my expression. “I’ve always been nosey, and many have been the times I’ve wanted to take a look at something from a distance.”

I laughed, then thought better of it and cut my laughter off. “With your young men keeping so well on top of things, we grizzled old wolves will be able to retire in no time.”

Sebald grinned at me, but before he could say anything, Peter pulled the spyglass away from his eye and said, “What the hell is going on over there?”

That comment caught my attention more than anything could. As soon as Peter offered me the spyglass, I took it and lifted it to have a look.

I had to search the blackness for a moment before I saw anything that could have fit my beloved’s comment. I focused

on the campfires at first, but all I saw were men milling about, and in one case, what looked like a scuffle over a smaller man. I prayed that I was not seeing a young man who had been taken against his will being violated by Yiannis's horrid wolves, but I couldn't think what else that could be.

That wasn't what had confused Peter, though.

"You're looking the wrong way," he told me, nudging my arm. "Look over there, along the wall, closer to the east gate."

I shifted to search the length of the wall. At first, I thought my darling Peter was imagining things. Then I saw it as well.

"What are they throwing over the wall?" I asked.

"Throwing over the wall?" Neil repeated.

"It could be bundles of rotten meat," Sai said ahead of us. He, too, had a spyglass and was just handing it over to Jace. "Or bundles of cloth soaked in the vomit of people with some sort of plague or illness."

I nearly dropped the spyglass as I handed it to Neil. "I've heard of such things," I said in an angry voice.

"You've heard of people hurling vomit over city walls?" Peter asked.

He had a glint of amusement in his eyes that I could just catch in the moonlight, but that vanished as soon as Sai gave his explanation.

"It's a particularly deadly tactic for a siege when the attacking army is outnumbered," Sai said grimly. "The city is sealed, and various contagions are catapulted or thrown over the walls. The people trapped inside the city get sick, the plague spreads, and without lifting a finger, the sieging army is able to kill every person within the walls."

"They wouldn't dare," Neil gasped, horrified.

"How long does it take to kill a city that way?" Jace asked, moving his horse back to join us.

Sai's face pinched as the rest of our party gathered around as well. "Longer than Yiannis must think," he said. "Or

perhaps it's my mother who thought to strangle Cremona's army this way. Either way, they must not realize we're coming to help Kythria's men, or that there are other soldiers and fighting men on the frontier."

"Or else they know they're going to lose, but they're trying to take as many people into death with them as they can," Feodor grumbled.

Sai nodded, as if he thought that was a possibility. "Whether the plague is successful at killing anyone or not, there's a fair chance that many of the people currently inside Klovisgard's walls will be sick by the time we get to them."

"And if we're not careful, we might be, too," Ludvig added with a frown.

"They're trying to keep us from going into the city to help Kythria's men," I spoke my thoughts aloud. I glanced around at my friends and beloveds, then added, "They've succeeded in that much as well. It would be madness for any of us to go into the city if there is even a slight chance of any one of us falling ill."

"I agree," Ludvig said with a frustrated sigh.

"But we can still help Kythria and the army from outside the city, can't we?" Peter asked.

"Most likely, yes," Sai said. "We should continue on to the river to see if Kythria has arrived and if he's aware of what Yiannis and my mother are up to."

We all agreed with that and slowly moved on.

"If those men were throwing things contaminated with plague over the city walls," Neil asked as we moved on, "then won't those men get sick as well?"

I frowned sharply. "They very well might, which only goes to show that Yiannis has no respect for human life."

Both Neil and Peter, and likely everyone else, would know how little I esteemed anyone who would treat any life as cheap and expendable. I didn't mention Lady Rozynov by name, but if she was responsible for the diabolical act that could take so

many lives, my care for what happened to her at the end of this would plummet.

It took another few hours of tip-toeing through the darkness so as not to be seen before we made it to where the forest joined the river just north of Klovisgard. Like many of the other cities along the River Kostya, the entire northern face of the city butted up against the river. The wall extended into the river a bit on both sides of the city, like the walls of Gravlock now extended into the Wolf River, but unlike Gravlock, because Klovisgard was only on one side, there were no bridges spanning the expanse of the water.

Our luck held out. A large boat was moored just off the riverbank, on the east side of the extended city wall. Enough light was visible from the boat's decks that we were able to catch the flash of Kythria's white hair in the moonlight.

"It's about time you lot got here," Kythria teased us when our party reached the small encampment on the riverbank, close to the forest.

I could tell from the size of the fires and the tents that had already been pitched that Kythria had been there for quite some time.

"When did you and your men arrive?" I asked as I climbed down from my horse, groaning and wincing with pain as I did.

Kythria laughed at me as if he knew exactly why I was grimacing. "Next time, you'll hurry up and leave by the river with the rest of us," he teased me, then grew more serious as he went on to say, "We arrived at first light this morning."

"Did Yiannis and his men see you?" Sai asked, stepping up as he had been all evening.

Kythria looked surprised at Sai's confidence for a moment, but one nod from me, and he treated Sai as a fellow general. "They saw us arrive, yes," he said. "That was about it. Our opponents are disorganized and undisciplined. There was some sort of guard detail or scouting unit near this bit of the city wall, but as soon as they spotted us, they ran off to the south."

“So Yiannis knows you’re here,” Jace said, looking as fierce as any wild wolf.

“He most likely does,” Kythria agreed with a nod. “He didn’t try to stop us from setting up a camp or shoo us away, though.”

“Did you see the men throwing what Sai thinks are plague contaminants over the walls?” Neil asked, moving to stand by my side once he’d dismounted.

“I haven’t seen them, no,” Kythria said. “But when Blasek rowed around the end of the wall to have a word with me, he told me all about it.”

That tidbit of information had me starting. I didn’t have to express my surprise, however. My Peter did it for me.

“Wait, one of your men rowed out of the city to speak with you?” he asked. “They aren’t barricaded inside?”

“They are,” Kythria said cautiously. “At least, by land. The river is barricaded to the west, but we encountered only a few boats that immediately rowed away to join the ranks of boats on the west when we arrived.”

“But if the siege of the city is so weak, why haven’t your men broken through to end Yiannis and his forces?” Jace asked.

Kythria humphed. “Blasek tells me our army has been laying low and waiting for my orders. He and Dryden agreed that it was a better strategy to maintain their position until I arrived rather than attacking without clear and specific orders. And it appears as though that was a wise decision.”

“How so?” I asked, eager to understand more about what we were facing.

“I was able to send out scouts this afternoon to assess the strength and numbers of Kostya’s army,” Kythria said.

“And?” Ludvig asked.

“And I estimate it would take about three hours for the full force of my men to flatten every last one of Kostya’s soldiers and mercenaries,” he answered.

I tried not to smirk, but there was something about Kythria's earned arrogance that I found amusing.

Particularly when he glanced to me again and said, "But I hear that someone wants as many lives spared as possible."

I wasn't certain who of my friends and companions had shared my philosophy of life, but I was glad they had.

"What do you think needs to be done in order to cause as little carnage as possible?" I asked.

Kythria huffed another laugh. "As I understand it, capturing and killing the leaders of the wolves will cause the rest of them to scatter."

"You'll have more than a few volunteers to slit Yiannis's throat," Ludvig growled, glancing to Renz, who stood beside him and half a step back. "I'd gladly slice off his balls and feed them to him myself."

"Not if I can get to him first," Sai said in a dark voice that surprised all of us.

Kythria seemed amused by the display of bloodlust in front of him. "It's the lady warrior you'll have more problems with," he went on.

For a moment, I thought he meant Ox. I almost made the mistake of looking around for her. But the truth dawned on me a moment later when Jace asked, "And where is my mother anyhow?"

"In one of the camps," Kythria said, surprising us all.

"She's here?" Sai asked, his proverbial armor slipping a little. "My mother is here in Klovisgard?"

"Blasek tells me she's been spotted riding on a white horse, dressed in golden armor, urging her men to take back what is theirs and to spare no prisoners," Kythria said.

Most of our group looked impressed. I was merely disappointed. Lady Rozynov had clearly let her thirst for vengeance over what had happened to her husband get the better of her.

“If Lady Rozynov is here in Klovisgard, then who’s minding Hedeon right now?” Sebald asked.

“None of my men know,” Kythria said with a shrug. “I’m not familiar enough with the inner workings of Kostya to make a guess. All I know is that she is here, King Stepan and Councilor Cyril have definitely been killed, and every able-bodied man in Hedeon was conscripted into their pitiful army and sent here to take Klovisgard back.”

Several things tried to shoot through my mind at the same time. Hedeon was unguarded. Chances were, any army that wanted to could march in and take the city and whatever else they wanted from it. The other was that Klovisgard must have had something more that would convince Lady Rozynov herself to join the effort to take it. Either that or she knew she was already vanquished and she preferred to die in glory than ignominy.

“Have you made any plans to defend Klovisgard or to attack Kostya’s army yet?” I asked Kythria, already forming a plan.

“Not specifically, no,” Kythria said. His mouth twitched into a smile. “I thought you might want to have a say in what happens on your frontier before I do anything.”

I smiled despite myself. In the short time we’d known each other, Kythria had come to understand me well.

“I think this matter will take some careful consideration,” I said. “We won’t need to act tonight in any case. I suggest those of us who have only just arrived eat and drink, take care of our horses, and then we should settle in to plan for the morrow.”

My suggestion was met with hearty agreement, particularly from those of us who had just arrived and who desperately needed to sit—or in Peter’s case, lie flat in the grass with his arms and legs stretched in a position I found obscenely tempting—and to eat something.

Ludvig and Feodor took themselves off to one side to converse with one of Kythria’s officers, Sai, Jace and Gennadi, and Sebald formed a group with Kythria to discuss the

situation in more detail, but I helped myself to some of the mediocre stew I was offered and to sit near one of the fires, Peter and Neil with me.

“What are you thinking?” Neil asked me, scooting close enough that our arms touched.

I hummed as I stared into the fire for a moment, then I said, “I’m considering ways we could end this whole thing quickly and cleanly.”

“Without anyone dying?” Peter suggested, getting up from where he’d spread himself in the grass and moving to sit by my feet.

I found his change of position deliciously endearing. If only I could keep my beloved young husband young enough to sit at my feet and gaze up at me forever. We were more equals now than anything. If the past few months had taught me anything, they had taught me that. I could never go back to a time when Peter and Neil were my pupils and when I was their undisputed master.

I was still their master, but they disputed it at every turn.

Which I secretly adored.

I shook my head to clear away thoughts that would have to wait for later.

“If I had to make a wager on it, I would bet that Lady Rozynov has abandoned Hedeon in order to take a stand here at Klovisgard,” I said.

“I would make that wager, too,” Neil agreed.

“So that means Hedeon is unguarded and undefended right now,” Peter said with a frown. “Why would she do that?”

“Maybe she thinks there’s no one left who could attack Hedeon,” Neil said with a shrug. “Kythria’s army is here, Yiannis and the wild wolves are on our side, and our own armies from the Wolf River Kingdom, which Ludvig said will be coming, are days away.”

“Good Port doesn’t have an army,” Peter said. “Not really. And Jorgen and Hati’s wolves are too far away to get here

before things are decided.”

I smiled suddenly, remembering the summons I'd sent. “That might not be true,” I said. “The runners I sent to fetch both Vikhrov and Jorgen and Hati to Novoberg could have already reached them. They very well could be on their way already.”

Peter and Neil both paused, gaping. Then Peter broke into laughter.

“Magnus! Don't tell me you anticipated that Hedeon would be abandoned just at the time that two of our strongest allies would be sailing up the river to reach it,” he said.

I thought the whole thing was laughable as well, but it was true. “I'm not as omniscient as that,” I told my beloveds with a cheeky grin. “But when everything falls into place with astounding ease, I trust you will make everyone believe that I orchestrated it all.”

Neil laughed with me, shaking his head. “Magnus, you're impossible.”

“I think he's brilliant,” Peter said, pushing himself up and shifting to the fallen log Neil and I sat on so that he could throw his arms around my shoulders. “Accidentally brilliant, but brilliant all the same.”

I laughed with pure joy and looped my arm around my Peter's waist to pull him closer to me for a kiss. Neil hugged me from the other side, so I hooked him as well and kissed him.

“This is all I need, right here,” I said, glancing between the two of them again. “My kingdom is as vast as the entire frontier as long as I have the two of you, and our children, with me.”

“What a load of sentimental bollocks,” Peter said, kissing me again.

“He's right, though,” Neil agreed with me, taking a turn kissing me as well.

“Is this the sort of treatment the architect of the frontier is given?” Kythria said as he and the men with him joined us at the fire.

“Magnus doesn’t really care for the rest of us,” Ludvig said as their band joined us as well. “He’s only ever done what he does to make his lovers happy.”

“And what better motivation to mold the frontier is there than love?” I asked, feeling no shame at all in that love.

Kythria smiled as he sat across the fire from the three of us. “I think you have the right way of things,” he said. “As soon as this mess is cleaned up, I plan to find myself a pretty young woman who doesn’t mind my white hair and who might be convinced to call me ‘Daddy’.”

Feodor had just taken a gulp of the weak ale we’d all been given, and he nearly spit it out laughing at Kythria’s statement.

“Maybe you should take my mother into custody and give her something other than destroying the frontier to think about,” Jace said sullenly, and half to himself, as he and Gennadi took seats on the far end of our log, next to Peter.

“Funny that you should mention Lady Rozynov,” Sebald said, settling in with the rest of us. “We were just talking about her.”

“Oh?” I asked. My thoughts had been headed in her direction as well.

I glanced to Kythria as he said, “Sai here seems to think that Lady Rozynov is holding everything together by a thread.”

“I can’t imagine that morale among the combined forces of Kostya and the wild wolves is good,” Sai picked up the explanation. “There’s no way to know for certain, since all of the intelligence we have is patchy at best, but Kostya has lost two kings within the space of a season. I know the people of Hedeon. I cannot imagine for one moment that they approve of my mother killing Stepan to take the throne.”

“I cannot imagine they would be happy about that either,” I said. “But I will agree that it is entirely possible Lady

Rozynov is the linchpin holding what is left of Kostya together.”

“So we take her out,” Kythria said with a shrug. “Her and the leader of the wild wolves. It shouldn’t be that difficult to do. I can either send the force of my army into her camp, which would be obliterated within minutes, or I can order assassins to steal into the camp to take care of the problem before sunrise.”

“I can’t believe we’re sitting her, thinking up ways to kill my mother,” Jace said.

I knew him well enough to know he’d likely tried to sound fierce with his words, but they came out as sad and hopeless instead.

Jace was a part of my family now, even if he wasn’t one of my beloveds. Gennadi was as well. I hated to see either of them suffer. Because if Jace was suffering, Gennadi would suffer along with him. I reached past Peter to rest a hand on Jace’s leg.

And then I stopped as a mad idea came to me.

“I propose a third option,” I said, glancing to Kythria as the ideas bloomed and blossomed in my head. I pulled my hand away from Jace, glanced momentarily to Peter, then continued. “I propose a small, diplomatic corps be sent into Lady Rozynov’s camp at first light tomorrow.”

“Magnus?” Ludvig said warningly. “What are you plotting over there?”

I sat a little straighter as more ideas came to me. “I propose that Peter, Neil, and I, Jace, Genadi, and Sai go into Lady Rozynov’s camp under the flag of truce to negotiate with her.”

“You must be joking,” Ludvig huffed.

“What about Yiannis’s wolves?” Sebald asked at the same time.

“You can’t put yourself in danger like that,” Sai also spoke on top of the others.

“I’m all for it,” Jace said a few seconds after they stopped speaking. “But I’m going in armed.”

“Why do you always have to put yourself in a position where someone might kill you,” Peter pretended to scold me. I could see the genuine alarm and disapproval in his eyes, though.

“Because I believe Lady Rozynov will listen to me,” I said, “and that Yiannis and the other wolves will respect me just enough not to attack us outright.”

“You can’t take that risk,” Ludvig said with less humor.

“Yiannis doesn’t respect anyone,” Feodor said, overlapping Ludvig.

“If it goes wrong, we’ll all be dead,” Neil said before they had finished.

I reached for Neil’s hand. “Then we’ll all be dead together.”

“Magnus, no,” Ludvig said, more forceful than ever. “It’s far too great a risk. Just the six of you?”

“The fewer the better,” I argued. “Especially if two of our party are Lady Rozynov’s sons. I’d wager anyone with inclinations to attack us as we approached would wait and bring us to Lady Rozynov before they drew their swords. And once in Lady Rozynov’s presence, I’m certain I could talk her out of this mad scheme of hers.”

The others all gaped at me with varying degrees of amazement and incredulity.

The only opinions that mattered to me, however, were those of my husbands and our friends. They were the ones I was proposing to step into harm’s way with me.

“I’ll go wherever you go and do whatever you think is best, Magnus,” Peter said, taking my hand and squeezing it.

“Me, too, of course,” Neil said, mirroring Peter’s gesture.

The three of us glanced between Jace and Sai. Really, it was all up to the two of them.

“I have to admit,” Sai said, letting his shoulders drop and running a hand through his hair, “the idea of speaking directly with Mother is appealing.” He glanced to Jace.

“To be honest, I’m not sure she’ll even look at me, let alone speak to me,” Jace said. He glanced to Gennadi as well.

“She’ll speak to us,” Sai said. “If only to chastise us for not being the sons she hoped we would be.”

“If only Vera were here,” Neil said. “I bet she’d speak to Vera.”

I was immediately reminded of a thought I’d had a few days before. “Has it been determined yet whether Arseny Rozynov is still in Klovisgard, or where Taisiya Rozynov is?”

Both Sai and Jace looked to me in surprise.

“I seem to recall one of the young noblemen who helped us enter the city was named Arseny Rozynov,” Kythria said, looking suddenly brighter. “I could send one of my runners into Klovisgard to see if it was, indeed, him and to determine what has become of him.”

“If only we could send someone to Hedeon to fetch Taisiya here by morning, too,” Sai said.

“If she’s on our side,” Jace said. “She might be under Mother’s thumb.”

“Send someone into the city to fetch Arseny,” I told Kythria. “Once he’s here, we’ll determine whether he might be of the same mind as the rest of us or not.”

“And if he is, having him with us when we confront Mother might help our case,” Sai said.

“It’s worth a try,” Jace said, sitting straighter and nodding.

“Just to be clear,” Ludvig said, raising a hand. “You’re talking about taking a tiny force of men without any formal military training into the heart of our enemy’s camp. You want to take your beloved pup into the same band of wild wolves that savaged my Renz, and you expect to come out unharmed and victorious?” He reached for Renz’s hand as he spoke.

“If one of them so much as looks at Genny wrong, I’ll kill them,” Jace said.

He was deadly serious, but I saw Ludvig’s point a bit too well. Gennadi would not be so lucky as to die if things went wrong in that camp.

“Would you be amenable to me sending a force of protectors into that camp?” Kythria asked.

My initial instinct to be grateful for the help instantly fell flat, and I shook my head. “We need to keep our numbers small and unthreatening if we’re to have a chance of reaching Lady Rozynov.”

“I didn’t say I would send them in with you,” Kythria said with a grin.

“What do you mean?” Sai asked, looking intrigued by the idea.

Kythria shrugged. “I’ll send men over tonight, in the dark and in disguise. They’ll be able to blend in with the rest of the wolves and keep quiet until morning. Then, when you lot wander over there, they’ll already be in place. If anything should go wrong, they’ll leap to your defense.”

I loved the idea, but it was not without complications.

“Do you have enough men to spare?” I asked. “Would they truly be able to ensconce themselves in the camp without being noticed?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Kythria said. “And yes, I have more than enough men within the city walls to accomplish the task. When I send someone to look for Arseny Rozynov, I can ask for as many trained, discreet men as you want to come out and make their way into the enemy camp.”

It sounded like the best plan we would be able to form under such short notice. It might have been the best plan we could come up with if we had much more time as well.

“I think it would work,” I said.

“I’m willing to give it a try,” Sai agreed quickly.

I noted the way Jace looked at Gennadi and the way Gennadi nodded before Jace said, “We’re in.”

“You know we’re in as well,” Peter told me, exchanging a nod with Neil.

“The matter appears to be settled, then,” I said. “Provided you can send, say, fifty of your men into Lady Rozynov and Yiannis’s camp in disguise, and whether Arseny wishes to accompany us or not, we will ride out at first light tomorrow to parlay with the last of our enemies.”

The plan was set into motion at once. Kythria departed to give orders to be taken into the city. Sai and Jace stepped aside to discuss the mission and what they might be able to say to their mother to get her to listen to them. Peter and Neil set off in search of weapons they could conceal on their persons and some sort of armor that they informed me I would wear under my clothing, whether I wanted to or not.

Given what had happened to me in the past, I was more than willing to wear whatever sort of armor they wanted me to.

That left me with a few moments to spend with two of my oldest friends.

“Are you certain you haven’t gone completely mad, Magnus?” Feodor asked, handing me a mug of ale.

“Of course he’s mad,” Ludvig said with a laugh, slapping me on the back. “This is why you stepped down as king, isn’t it? You left me in charge of the Wolf River Kingdom so you could be the one to ride off into the heart of things and gain all the glory of making a definitive peace for yourself.”

“Naturally,” I said with a one-shoulder shrug, like Peter often did.

My friends both laughed with me, but then Ludvig sighed.

“Rurik would be so proud of you, you know,” he said, old grief and even older love for his brother shining in his eyes. “He would be right there with you, putting his life in danger in order to secure peace for every soul on the frontier.”

“Why do you think I am so able to risk all for people I do not and may never know?” I said in a soft voice, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I do it for Rurik. Always for Rurik. I would be nothing without him. I made this promise to him, that I would bring the world we envisioned together into being, and I will strive with everything I have to fulfill that promise.”

“I’m sorry you lost him, my friend,” Ludvig said, drawing me into an embrace.

“But I did not lose him,” I said, feeling teary as we stepped away from each other. “He is with me always, in my heart, in my thoughts, and in my every action. I see him in my husbands and I speak to him in my thoughts and dreams. You may all joke and call me the king of kings, but Rurik always has and always will rule my heart.”

“Sentimental old sod,” Feodor grumbled, then pulled me into an embrace and sobbed on my shoulder.

Rurik had been Feodor’s friend, too, and friendship was one of the most powerful forces known to man. More than a decade later, those bonds of friendship still touched us and still informed our every move. None of us would be anything without our friends.

I could only hope that the bonds of love that Lady Rozynov had once had for her children would prove just as strong, even if those bonds were broken. Yiannis was the easier target, since he loved no one and nothing.

A man without love could be defeated with one well-placed knife-stroke, which I was certain would happen. And because Yiannis’s men didn’t have even a shred of love for him, I predicted they would scatter like leaves, the same way Yuri and Bela’s men had years ago, as soon as their supposed leader fell.

All of that would be determined in the morning, and then all there would be left to do would be to reset the pieces on the game board and pray that we had a long and fruitful game ahead of us.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

As much as I knew I should, I could barely sleep at all that night. In the first place, we were all kept up well past midnight, planning the specifics of our campaign and working out exactly who should say what and when.

We received the best boon of all just as we were about to retire to the tents Kythria graciously offered to us for the night when the scout who had been sent into Klovisgard returned with not only Arseny, but Taisiya as well.

“I fled Hedeon as soon as I heard Stepan was dead and Mother had ordered the execution,” she said tearfully as she plastered herself in Sai’s arms. “She had Yulia killed as well, and I...I worried I might be next, since I spoke against her.”

“Yulia is dead?” Sai asked, his expression grave and sallow.

Taisiya nodded as she wiped tears from her eyes. “You’ve no idea how glad I am that you took Argus and Alexandre with you when you fled. I’m not convinced Mother would have spared them, her mind is so deranged.”

“I’m glad as well,” Sai said, his breath catching. He closed his eyes for a moment as he hugged his sister tight. I knew the sort of pain that even the thought of losing his sons had ignited in him, and I bowed my head for a moment in sympathy.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t speak up for you while you were king,” Taisiya went on, pulling back from her brother a bit. “And I’m so sorry I let Mother keep me away from you the way she did,” she told Jace.

“It’s not your fault,” Sai said, hugging his sister with more affection than I’d ever seen him embrace anyone before. “Mother must be possessed with some sort of madness born of the grief of losing Father.”

“Kythria says you want us to go with you to confront her,” Arseny said. “Do you think that will accomplish anything?”

“It might,” Jace said, wrapping his arms around a half-asleep Gennadi, who stood in front of him. “If she sees all of us together, as much of the family as we can get or that still exists, it might remind her of what’s truly important.”

Neil leaned into me with those words, and I instinctively stretched my arm around his waist to hold him close. Same with Peter on my other side. It meant everything to know that more people than just me and my husbands truly understood where we could all go and what was truly important.

“I know it’s late, but I would love to hear more about the bigger picture of what’s going on and what I can do to help bring an end to this conflict,” Arseny said as everyone started to drift off to their tents for the night.

“I’d like to know as well,” Taisiya said. “I might not be much of anyone, but I will give everything I have to make Mother see reason and end this war.”

“Let’s talk,” Sai said, leading his siblings to the fire in front of the tents he and Jace had been given.

I took that as a good sign of what the Rozynov siblings might be able to accomplish when they worked together.

I turned to take my Peter and my Neil to bed for what little sleep we could get, but before we could reach our tent, Kythria approached us.

“I’ve just sent fifty men in disguise to infiltrate Yiannis and Lady Rozynov’s camp,” he said. “They have orders to position themselves in the area around wherever those two have their tents so that they’ll be just a shout away if you should need them.”

“Thank you, my friend,” I said with a smile, extending my hand to Kythria. When he took it in the Old Realm fashion, I

raised an eyebrow and asked, “You are my friend, are you not?”

Kythria laughed. He then hummed and tilted his head to the side, as if he were still considering. “I might as well be,” he said with a mock careless shrug. “I’ve had more fun and excitement in less than a week since meeting you than I had in three years under Rufus’s rule.”

“That’s good to know,” I said, trying not to show how relieved I was.

“To be honest,” Kythria went on, “I’d rather serve a young king who’s still wet behind the ears and who can be influenced than a grizzled old despot like Rufus.”

I laughed, though I wasn’t entirely certain whether he was being funny. Influencing a young man could mean a variety of things, not all of them good.

I left it at that, though. For now, I’d count Kythria as my friend, but I’d keep an eye on him. If he began to tilt in a direction I didn’t approve of, then I’d take action.

“I really want to believe that this is the last time we’re going to bed in a divided and conflicted frontier,” Peter said with a sigh as the three of us settled into our specially made bedroll, still mostly dressed. “I never thought I’d say this, but I am ready to go home and spend the winter with Ziggy and Ella, letting things settle.”

“I miss our babies so much,” Neil groaned with emotion that broke my heart.

“As do I, my love,” I said, stretching to kiss Neil. “As do I,” I repeated, twisting to kiss Peter.

None of us slept well, but we didn’t speak, despite knowing the others were mostly awake. I could sense my beloveds were caught up in their own thoughts. I imagined Neil was thinking about the boy he’d once been and how unexpected everything that had happened in his life in the last five or six years had been. I imagined his thoughts turning to his own family, those who had turned out to be a

disappointment, like his fathers and brothers, and those who had been true and good and joined us, like Nadia and Oscar.

I imagined Peter's thoughts turning to Sascha and the long and winding road he had traveled from the day he'd been locked out of Novoberg by his brothers. He'd grown into the man, the leader, he was born to be, and I could practically see his thoughts spinning and spinning as he retraced those steps.

My beloveds had endured so much in their short lives. Much of it had been caused by me. But I flattered myself to think that I had given them a better life than either of them would have had otherwise.

They'd given me a better life than I could have imagined without Rurik.

I drifted off to thoughts of the four of us being reunited in the afterlife. As I hovered just on the other side of sleep, it truly felt to me like Rurik was nestled in the tent with us, watching over us in the night.

"Keep us safe on this mission," I asked of him as I began to hear stirring outside the tent in the morning. "Bring us all home, and let peace reign on the frontier, no matter who wears the crown."

"Of course, my love," I swore I could hear Rurik whisper in return.

"Magnus, we're rising," Sai's quiet voice called from outside our tent.

"Thank you," I called back as Neil, Peter, and I stirred and pulled ourselves out of our restless drowsing.

It didn't take long to wash and dress for the mission of the morning. No one expected us to be ballroom-ready, and since we hadn't undressed completely the night before, all it took was a change of trousers and jackets, along with a quick scrub of our faces and water combed through our hair until we looked...pitiful. At least we didn't look like vagabonds. And perhaps looking a bit shaggy would help us to gain entry into Lady Rozynov's camp.

“Do we have everything we need in case the wolves try to attack us?” Sai asked as our group gathered near the horses that Kythria’s camp squires had prepared for us.

What he was really asking was if we had enough weapons concealed on our persons to defend ourselves if we were suddenly attacked.

“I’ve got a knife in my boot,” Neil said, glancing anxiously at me, “but I think it’s as likely as not that they’ll search us as soon as we enter their camp.”

“I plan to do my best to dissuade them from checking,” Sai said. “But the more deeply concealed your weapons are, the better.”

“Yiannis’s men won’t even know that what I have is a weapon,” Jace said with a vicious grin.

I arched one eyebrow and sent Peter a look, which was returned in kind. Heaven only knew what kind of weapons Jace was bringing with him.

“I doubt they’ll check me,” Taisiya said, then smiled. “Which is why I have half a dozen blades sewn into the underside of my skirts.”

I laughed and nodded to Taisiya as a show of respect. The Rozynovs were the most unique family I’d ever known.

“Here, wear this, Magnus,” Peter said, fetching a vest of thick, course fabric from one of the soldiers who was helping us prepare. “It’s not full armor, but I’m told it has plates sewn into it, and it’ll make it that much harder for someone to stab you.”

I laughed again and took the surprisingly heavy vest from my love, but there was nothing funny about it. I let Peter help me remove my jacket, then don the vest under it before dressing in the much tighter jacket again. It was desperately uncomfortable and it forced me to stand exaggeratedly straight, but that would likely come in handy later.

The only tiny tell I had that I was nervous about the importance of our mission was that I couldn’t eat a bite when Kythria’s cook tried to nourish us for the journey. I grew

impatient as the others took a few mouthfuls. The closer we came to the end, the more my thoughts were filled with my home and my babies. If I closed my eyes, I could see the magnificent back garden and smell the fresh scent of the Wolf River as it flowed through the kingdom I'd built. I could see Rurik standing there, enjoying Peter and Neil's company and cooing over the babies.

That's what I wanted. It was all I'd ever wanted. That was what all of this, every trial, every effort, and all the years it took to reach this moment, was for.

"Magnus, are you ready?" Sai asked.

I opened my eyes and smiled with as much confidence as if I'd already achieved victory. "I have been ready for this for ten years," I said.

"Good luck, my friend," Ludvig said, a bit blearily. I was grateful that he'd come out to see us off all the same.

"We'll be back before breakfast," I told him with arrogance I didn't actually feel, then marched towards my horse.

It was the longest ride of my life, even though it was under a mile. The clearing around the city walls of Klovisgard was misty in the pre-dawn light. I liked the image that would help us create as we rode into Lady Rozynov's camp. I also liked the fact that we reached the camp long before anyone noticed us. But the heavy, cold mist made it feel like the entire frontier were holding its breath as it settled over all, making the veil between this life and the next seem thin.

"Stop! Who's there?" a grizzled voice called out as we walked past the first line of tents and banked campfires.

I was encouraged to see that the men stationed at the perimeter of the camp were mostly still asleep, and that they didn't seem particularly keen in their duties.

"I am Sai Rozynov," Sai addressed the man. We'd agreed that it would be best for Sai to take the lead until we'd been granted admittance to Lady Rozynov and Yiannis's inner

circle. “I am here with my brothers and sister, and with our friends.”

The guard who had scrambled to stand and block our way looked confused. He wore dirty, mismatched clothing, and was as unkempt as could be, which marked him as a wolf. “I haven’t been given orders to let anyone through,” he said.

“Have you been given orders to keep anyone out?” I asked, nudging my horse forward.

As I’d hoped, while the guard failed to recognize Sai, a man from a city, as a wolf, he recognized me at once.

“Magnus Gravlock,” he said, his eyes going wide. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to speak to Yiannis and Lady Rozynov,” I said, as if it were obvious. My hope was that mentioning Yiannis’s name first would mark me as a fellow wolf.

The guard shuffled in his place, scratched his chin through his matted and overgrown beard, and narrowed his eyes at me. “Nobody told me anything about Magnus Gravlock coming to speak to Yiannis,” he said.

“Are you a member of Yiannis’s inner circle, then?” I asked.

The guard didn’t grasp that I was mocking him. “No,” he said, as though the question were odd.

Peter made a sound beside me. I glanced to him, encouraged by his smiling face to be as bold as possible.

“You must take us to Yiannis and Lady Rozynov at once,” I said.

The guard shuffled again. “They’re not in the same place,” he said.

I found that interesting. It hinted that our foe did not have a united front.

I was just about to order the guard to take us to Yiannis first when Sai said, “Take us to Lady Rozynov, then. She’ll see us.”

I pursed my lips, trying not to be put out that Sai jumped before I did.

My momentary annoyance vanished as the guard shrugged and said, "Alright."

That was it. That was all it took for the eight of us to be led forward through the haphazard jumble of tents and the weary, visibly disheartened men who slumped or slept around guttering campfires.

It was clear to see at once that the supposed army around us was nothing more than a mass of men who were as tired of conflict as the rest of us. I could easily imagine that each one of them wanted nothing more than to slip away and return to whatever home they had. For many of them, that home was likely nothing more than a stand of trees or an abandoned cottage somewhere deep in the forest. Perhaps some would find their way to Novoberg and be amenable to living under Ox's rule.

No sooner had I contemplated those thoughts than we crossed into an area where the campfires and the men around them had a somewhat different character. The new breed of men were slightly better fed and their beards were scruff instead of thick growth. They wore nicer clothing in something vaguely resembling a uniform, but nearly every one of them looked as depressed and defeated as the wolves.

"King Sai," one of those men said, rising from the camp chair he sat on like he'd seen an angelic vision. "King Sai, you've returned."

"King Sai?" someone else echoed.

Another man rose, and another, and another. I caught my breath as the unexpected turn rippled out through the men of Hedeon who had been called to form an army.

"Your majesty," another of the Hedeon men cried out, nearly in tears. "Thank God, you've returned."

"Did you know this would happen?" Neil asked me as the buzz of whispers and thrum of excitement spread out the farther we walked.

“No, I did not,” I said, my tone almost wry.

“The king has returned,” someone else called as the movement around us intensified. “All hail, King Sai.”

I was grateful for the fact that few men echoed that call. As astounding and promising as it was that the men of Hedeon would suddenly recognize Sai as their king, after everything that had happened, the last thing we needed was for some sort of frenzy to begin before we reached Lady Rozynov.

The disturbance was enough, however, that by the time we reached what felt very much like the center of the camp, as the mist began to rise just enough to improve our lines of sight, but not so much that the otherworldly feeling vanished, the heart of the camp was already rushing about in alarm.

“Mother,” Sai called out to the much nicer and more elaborate tent in the center of the camp, dismounting. The rest of us dismounted as well and grouped together. “Mother, come out and face your children.”

“That just gave me chills,” Peter murmured to my side.

I turned and smiled at him. “Me as well, my love,” I said. “This is going to be interesting.”

Moments later, the flap of the tent was thrown aside, and Lady Rozynov marched out of the tent. She’d changed so much since the last time I’d seen her that I almost didn’t recognize her. I could tell from Jace’s and Sai’s quick intakes of breath that they barely recognized her either.

In short, Lady Rozynov was beautiful, and she was fierce. She had her long, silver-gray hair loose down her back. Her face was somehow more angular, hungrier, but it contained all of the power of a thousand kings. She stood with her back perfectly straight and her head held high. She wore a gown of white with a split skirt that revealed black trousers and thigh-high boots underneath, and instead of any sort of vest or jacket, she wore gleaming, golden armor. Even more impressive, she held a sword in her hand as if she were ready to use it.

“Magnus, you’re drooling,” Peter whispered, his grin cheeky.

“I am not,” I hissed back. “Women do *not* make me drool.”

But if Lady Rozynov had been a lord, it would have been another story entirely.

“How dare you call yourselves my children?” Lady Rozynov said, adjusting her grip on her sword, after studying each of her sons and daughter. “You abandoned me in my moment of greatest need.”

“Did Stepan abandon you as well?” Jace asked, making me wince. “Is that why you killed him?”

“Jace,” Sai spoke his name in warning.

“Stepan refused to see reason,” Lady Rozynov said, her voice rough and broken, hinting that she was broken as well, despite her appearance. “He...he got in the way.”

“Of your sword?” Jace asked, arms crossed.

“Jace!” Sai hissed at him. “You’re not helping.”

“And why should I help?” Jace fired back, his voice taking on the same strained and wrecked quality as his mother’s. “You turned your back on me, Mother. You looked at me and treated me like I was less than dirt, all because I love Gennadi.”

My brow went up. So we were having a Rozynov family reckoning instead of negotiating the future safety and prosperity of the frontier?

“You became something vile and unnatural,” Lady Rozynov hurled at Jace, her face contorted as though they’d been wrestling their way through the argument constantly for years instead of just revisiting it now.

“Like you’ve turned into something vile and unnatural for killing your own child and daughter-in-law?” Jace challenged her, stepping right in front of her.

“Jace, no,” Gennadi said in a hushed voice, moving with him as though they were tethered together.

“Stepan betrayed me,” Lady Rozynov said, nearly sobbing. Her emotional tone was in direct contrast to the power of her stance. “And Yulia refused to step aside. Stepan wanted to abandon everything, to hand our kingdom, your father’s city, over to that beast, General Rufus. He was ready to throw away everything I have given my life for.”

Again, I winced. For it struck me that I might have reacted similarly if I’d worked my whole life for my and Rurik’s vision, only to have Ziggy or Ella turn around and attempt to give everything back to my brother in the Old Realm.

“What use was it to kill him?” Jace demanded, even though Gennadi tugged at his belt in an attempt to have him step back. “Kostya is lost now anyhow. Rufus is dead, and King Igor rules over Cremona. He’s the son of a ruling duke, too. He’s no different from me or Sai. And he’s coming. His armies are already here, surrounding you, surrounding all of us. You were never going to be able to hold onto power in Hedeon anyhow, and now Stepan is dead because you could not accept it.”

“Jace!” Sai tried to chastise him again, though now his expression held the same sort of steel as Jace’s. Sai, too, saw the fruitlessness in everything his mother had done.

“Cyril promised me that no harm would come to Stepan,” Lady Rozynov said, breaking down entirely. “He told me that Stepan would be banished, not killed, and that he would help me to rise up as Queen of Kostya. We were supposed to set everything to right the way...the way Argus and I were supposed to....”

Her sword slipped from her grasp and she burst into a keening sob of grief that had the hair standing up on the back of my head. Her body crumpled, and Taisiya rushed forward to throw her arms around her mother and to keep her from falling.

I caught Peter and Neil exchanging a look of astonishment. I shared that look with them, reaching for their hands.

“Cyril killed Stepan and Yulia?” Sai asked, his frown dark.

Lady Rozynov nodded as she curled into her daughter and wept loudly.

“Was it on your order?” Jace asked, still unmoved and as cold as ice.

Lady Rozynov sucked in a breath and tensed. Everything about the way she peeked sideways at Jace, her expression pinched and pale with guilt, made the air in the misty clearing crackle. And then she nodded.

“Mother, how could you?” Arseny blurted, sobbing himself.

He tried to step forward, but Sai shot out an arm and held him back.

“How did Cyril die, then?” Sai asked.

“I...” Lady Rozynov struggled to stand on her own, but seemed unable to look any of her children in their eyes. “Yiannis volunteered to get rid of him for me.”

Her answer wasn't unexpected, but it increased the sensation of the hair standing up on the back of my neck.

“Yiannis,” Jace spit out the man's name. “How could you ally yourself with a wolf when you say you despise men who hate other men? How could you trust someone who kills men without impunity and who kidnaps and rapes young men and allows them to be savaged by others?”

Lady Rozynov had no answer for her son. She turned her face away, covered it with one hand, and wept as though her soul were leaving her body.

For a moment, nothing but the sound of her keening could be heard. It was heart-wrenching. I squeezed Peter's and Neil's hands, and when I turned to smile reassuringly at Neil—who had been moved to tears himself by Lady Rozynov's grief—I realized that a great many men stood around us. They watched their queen falling apart with the same grief, awe, and exhaustion that she embodied.

Every one of them, to a man, was done. The conflicts of the frontier had exhausted everyone. There was no more will

to fight or argue, no further energy to fuel hate or desperation. The last, sputtering flames that had enveloped us guttered and died.

So that was it. After everything we'd all endured and battled through, the old era of the frontier ended quietly, with weeping and grief. There would be no final battle, no clashing of swords and shouts of war. There was only a mother's agony at the loss of her children and a people's mourning as they quietly let go of the world they'd thought they'd been promised.

"Lady Rozynov," I said, letting go of my beloveds' hands and stepping towards her. "I must ask you to call off the siege of Klovisgard. Order your men to lay down their weapons and submit to the officers of Commander Kythria's army until such a time as King Igor is able to restore order to the united cities of the frontier. I believe you know as well as I that this would be best for everyone."

I wasn't certain the woman was capable of swimming through her grief, let alone issuing orders to the stunned and solemn men who gathered around the center of her camp, but somehow, she managed a weak, miserable nod.

"Sai, I suggest that you—"

My attempts to create order out of the dregs of the old frontier was cut short by a bloodcurdling cry behind me and to the left. I twisted to see what that cry was, as did Peter and Neil and the others.

In less than a moment, it was joined by other terrifying, hair-raising cries as the dark shadows of grizzled, desperate men leapt out behind the inner ring of Lady Rozynov's men. Seconds later, the sound of weapons being drawn and swords slashing and slicing echoed through the still-misty air.

"Yiannis," Jace hissed, whirling around to put Gennadi behind him.

So there was to be a battle after all. I tried to shift Peter and Neil behind me, as Jace had with Gennadi, so that I could scramble for the knife in my boot and defend them, but

somehow the two of them ended up in front of me, shoulder to shoulder, like a human shield.

“Death to the brick-worshippers!” one of the wolves cried out.

The shouting of Yiannis’s wolves intensified as everything around us went from subdued to savage in an instant. Lady Rozynov’s men were caught off-guard as much as we were, and not all of them had time to scramble for their weapons.

“Peter, Neil, here!” Jace called out.

They turned, as did I, to find Jace stripping the concealed swords from Taisiya’s skirts and tossing them towards us.

I was deeply proud of the grace and skill with which both of my husbands caught their weapons, and the agility with which they turned to face our foes. Everything was in dangerously tight quarters, so there was little to do but watch as the men around us writhed and grunted and shouted in pain as swords clashed and rang out in the morning light.

I twisted to find any sort of weapon I could to defend myself, but all I got for my efforts was Peter and Neil backing me towards Lady Rozynov and Taisiya—who had grabbed her mother’s shining sword from the grass, but who seemed to be using it to keep her mother from any surprise attack she might have been tempted to engage in.

“Stay back, Magnus,” Sai said as he and Jace moved forward on either side of me. “You’re too precious to lose.”

I couldn’t argue with that. They wouldn’t have let me in any case. Peter, Neil, Sai, and Jace formed a wall of protection separating me from the melee. I could still see what was happening around me, though.

I could see as a new wave of shouting arose and the sound of more swords being unsheathed split the air. The sound set my teeth on edge. But as soon as I realized that the new wave of fighting came from the men Kythria had planted within the camp to defend us, the reasons for my breath leaving my lungs changed entirely.

Yiannis's men were overwhelmed within minutes. I could see from the looks of surprise visible in glimpses and snatches as they were stabbed, shoved, and subdued that they did not expect to be challenged. They fell like branches in a storm.

The Kostya men didn't know what was going on. A few tried to attack the new enemy. Confusion caused them to lash out at anyone who came near them, but they paid the price for their instinctive reactions. Although I did note that Kythria's men seemed to know the difference between wolves and Kostya men, and they spared the latter.

"Hold!" a deep voice shouted above the others. "I have your leader!"

Those few words seemed to do exactly as they were intended to. The fighting died down within seconds. The mist had lifted enough that we were all able to see a man in armor, who was clearly one of Kythria's officers, standing slightly apart from the rest of the soldiers of both armies, and the remaining wolves. Not only that, he had Yiannis.

Yiannis was battered and bloody. The officer had him in a tight grip by his collar, a sword held to his throat. It was clear that Yiannis had already received what may very well have been a death blow. He was drawn and battered, and he wasn't struggling or fighting to get away, which, considering Yiannis, could only mean he knew he was vanquished.

The camp seemed to hold still for a moment, then, precisely as I had predicted would happen, the wolves turned the force of their fighting into every sort of attempt to flee. They ran as though hell itself were on their heels, and while a few made it past the innermost ring of Kostya men and Cremonan soldiers, most of them were cut down before they could run more than a few yards.

That left only Yiannis as he gurgled and twisted in the officer's grasp.

Sai marched forward swiftly, tightening his grip on the short sword he carried. "Dryden," he nodded to the officer holding Yiannis.

I was surprisingly relieved that they had, apparently, met before.

“I’m not certain what you want to do with this one,” the officer, Dryden said. “He’s the leader of the wild wolves, isn’t he? I’ve seen him before when—”

That was as far as Dryden got. Sai marched right up to Yiannis and thrust his sword with remarkable precision straight up between Yiannis’s legs. I was impressed with Sai’s knowledge of anatomy, because he managed to avoid Yiannis’s pelvic bones as he sliced straight through his groin and up into his guts.

The front of Yiannis’s trousers darkened with blood immediately. Yiannis’s eyes went wide for a moment before life left them entirely. He didn’t even have time to shout or make any sound other than a sick gurgle.

“That’s for Cedric,” Sai said in a cold voice. “And every other young man you and your wolves violated.”

He left his sword where it was and stepped back, then turned away, as if even looking at Yiannis’s corpse was beneath him.

“It’s over,” Sai announced to the rest of us, his voice deep and booming, like the leader he’d always tried his best to be. “The wild wolves are broken and Kostya has fallen. We have all learned our lessons and discovered who we are and where we belong. We will come together and live in peace as friends and neighbors on this frontier. I want no more fighting, and neither does anyone else. *It is done.*”

He glanced around at Kostyan men, Cremonan soldiers, and those of us from the Wolf River Kingdom, and even a few wild wolves who lay injured on the ground, as if we were all one. At last, his gaze fell on me, and he nodded once, with respect and gratitude, before moving to join his family.

The camp was silent. Dryden dropped Yiannis’s body and stepped away from it.

For a moment, no one moved or said a word. There were no words left to say.

My throat squeezed with emotion, and a feeling of something heavy and powerful descended on me. Everything, all of it, was done.

I couldn't breathe for a moment. I couldn't think or feel or react in any way at all.

The last obstacle standing in the way of everything Rurik and I had whispered about as we lay in each other's arms on the rooftop terrace in Royersford that long ago night, when we were young and in love and life was new, was gone. Everything standing in the way of what we'd dreamed of for our lives, the lives of our friends, and the lives of everyone on the frontier had been removed. The people of the frontier had exhausted themselves into peace, and I felt in my soul it would hold.

The new day had well and truly dawned...and Rurik wasn't there to see it.

The agony of that realization cut through the silence. Everything I'd done, I'd done for him, but he would not be there to share the victory with me.

I took in a long, sharp breath...then another...then another, gasping for life. Everything felt so real, so sharp and acute around me. Everything I'd done, everything I was, had been consummated. I'd achieved what we'd set out to do...and there was nothing left of Rurik to hold onto, no reason to cling, no business left unfinished, no promise left unfulfilled.

It was done.

He was gone.

I stepped back, uncertain of my balance, and glanced up to the sky, blinking rapidly as tears stung at my eyes. The mist had lifted almost completely, and there was nothing but the blue sky above me. The morning was cool and clear and beautiful...and so empty without him.

I'd never felt so alone.

"Don't leave me," I whispered to the vastness above me. "I'm not ready for you to go. I'm not ready."

“Magnus?” I heard Peter vaguely as I blinked up at the sky, gasping, searching, but not finding him. “Magnus, are you alright?”

I felt my knees buckle as though they were someone else’s, but I didn’t fall.

“We’ve got you, Magnus,” Neil murmured, his arms around me. “We’ve got you.”

I sobbed as the feeling of falling back to earth enveloped me. But there was no crash or thud as I hit the ground, just the two men that I loved more than life itself, as much as I’d loved Rurik—and still would, forever—shielding me with their bodies as the three of us held each other.

And the world went on around us.

I WASN’T certain how long we sat there. It was a terrible sign of weakness for the man who had recently been called the king of kings to weep at the end of the frontier’s troubles. No one disturbed us while I struggled through my moment of catharsis, my moment of loss.

I was vaguely aware of movement, of bodies being taken off, wounded being seen to, and Lady Rozynov and her children—all but Jace, who hovered with Gennadi near me, Peter, and Neil—as they went back into her tent.

Without words, I knew that Peter and Neil understood exactly where my emotion came from. I could tell they felt it as well. We were together in the liminal space between the old world and the new, paying our respects to the end and welcoming the beginning together.

Finally, after an indeterminate amount of time, Dryden softly asked, “Would you like somewhere more comfortable to sit, your majesty? We could arrange for a litter to take you back to Kythria’s camp.”

That was enough to shake me out of the stupor of my emotions.

“No,” I said with a heavy sigh, shaking my head. “I am perfectly capable of managing on my own.”

I tried to stretch my limbs and bring blood back to my body. Peter and Neil helped me to stand, and they brushed me off, as if I were some sort of phoenix rising from the ashes.

“You must forgive me, sir,” I said to Dryden with a sheepish smile. “I have worked for this peace for the greater part of my life. My emotions got the better of me in the moment.”

That was all the truth he needed to know.

Dryden bowed to me as if I were his own king. “I very much understand, your majesty,” he said.

I seriously doubted he did, but I was grateful for his understanding all the same.

“We really should go back to Kythria’s camp,” Neil said after Dryden moved on to organize moving the bodies of those who had been slain in the brief battle. “We need food and rest.”

I smiled slyly at him, knowing he meant that *I* needed rest and food.

“There is much yet to do before we can rest,” I said.

“Can’t someone else do it?” Peter asked as I started towards Lady Rozynov’s tent, bringing the two of them with me. I sent him a flat look, and he made a sound, then said, “You’re right. No one else can do it. No one else ever could.”

My smile turned tender, and I pulled him close for a quick kiss.

We were admitted to the tent right away. Taisiya stood by the flap and let us through before we had to ask. Inside, Lady Rozynov sat slumped in a camp chair. She’d removed her armor, and without it, her white gown billowed around her, diminishing her somehow.

She glanced up when she heard us enter and frowned slightly at the sight of me. “Come to finish the task you began?” she asked me, trying to sit straighter but failing, as if she didn’t have the energy for it. “Will you kill me yourself?”

“No,” I answered her, compassion in my voice. “It is not my place to pass any sort of judgment on you, Lady Rozynov. I am not your sovereign and I am not your kin.”

“But this is your world now, is it not?” she asked. “You are the grand victor of the frontier. It is your vision we will all bow to now.”

I sighed, disappointed that a new frontier that would bring so much good to so many could still be seen as wrong to some.

“My vision is that everyone, regardless of their beliefs or who they love or how they wish to shape their own future, should be happy, Lady Rozynov,” I said.

Lady Rozynov laughed weakly and humorlessly. “By setting yourself up on a throne above us all with your two husbands?” Her lip curled slightly as she glanced to Peter and Neil.

I drew in a small breath, understanding her mistake.

“I am not a king any longer, Lady Rozynov,” I said. “I handed over the crown of the Wolf River Kingdom to my friend, Ludvig. King Igor commands Cremona and the army that vanquished you today. Igor intends to unite most of the former cities under one kingdom and to rule it as the son of a former duke.”

That caused Lady Rozynov to sit up straight and blink. “You have not declared yourself high king over all?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I want nothing more than to return home to my babies and to be their father, and husband to my Neil and my Peter.”

She seemed incredulous. “But you could have it all. You could force us all to accept your wicked ways and lord it over the rest of us.”

“Why would I want that?” I asked. “A far better life awaits me at home.”

Lady Rozynov continued to stare at me, baffled. She wriggled uncomfortably in her chair for a moment, working her way into asking, “What do you plan to do with me, then?”

“As I said,” I told her as gently as I could. “Your fate is not in my hands. I believe that your children should decide what should be done with you.”

Tension shot through the Rozynov children. They exchanged glances, as if wondering which of them would have the ultimate say in their mother’s fate.

Eventually, they all looked to Sai.

Sai stood a little taller, his expression sober. He had more of a feel of a leader to him in that moment, as he faced his defeated and hunched mother, than he had at any time when he wore the crown.

“I believe you should be taken back to Hedeon and held securely until all of your children are present,” Sai said. “It wouldn’t be right for those of us here to make a decision when Vera and Alyona are absent.”

“I agree,” Arseny said, stepping forward from where he’d been standing near the central tent post. “I do think Mother’s fate should be decided by the seven—the six of us.” He swallowed hard, presumably as he remembered one of them was no more. “Do you think people will accept that?”

Sai nodded. “In this circumstance, yes, I believe they will.”

“Who’s going to escort her back to Hedeon?” Arseny asked.

The tension in the air shifted, and the focus of the conversation no longer concerned me, Peter, and Neil. It was up to the Rozynov’s to decide that part of the future.

I gestured subtly to Peter and Neil for us to leave, even though we’d only been there for a few moments. Once outside again, as I glanced around at the activity of the camp, my energy quickly drained in a different way from before.

“It seems as though there is nothing for us to do here, my loves,” I said, taking each of their hands. “We are not suited to removing the dead or wounded, and it is not truly our place to approach the gates of Klovisgard to tell them the war is over.”

“That would be fun, though,” Peter said with a flirtatious grin. “To be the one to announce the end of the siege to the people of Klovisgard?”

I laughed. “It would, but they are not our people. I’m not sure they would believe us.”

“We should go back to Kythria’s camp,” Neil said. It was what he’d said before, but he spoke as if he were only just having that thought. “That is the command center, so to speak,” he explained. “Ludvig will want to know what happened, and maybe we’ll have word from Igor, or even Jorgen and Hati.”

I grinned at Neil, then tugged him close for a kiss. My beloved certainly knew how to win my heart.

“I’ll go,” I told him, sending Peter a look as well. “I’ll step away from the center of things for now. But only for the two of you.”

Neil let out a breath of relief. Peter laughed and threw an arm around me so he could plant a sloppy kiss on my mouth.

My heart blossomed with the promise of all things new for them. How could I ever think I was alone when I had two such wonderful, beautiful souls with me?

EPILOGUE

Word of what had happened in Lady Rozynov's camp had already reached Kythria by the time Peter, Neil, and I rode back into his cluster of tents.

"They all just lay down their arms at the sight of you, eh?" Ludvig teased as he helped me to dismount.

I let out a tired laugh as my feet hit the ground. "Hardly. I'm not that frightening."

"Sometimes, Magnus, yes you are," Neil said with a wide-eyed look as he dismounted behind me.

"You didn't think Yiannis would just blend into the forest after his last chance for supremacy failed, did you?" Peter asked, moving to stand by my other side.

"No," Ludvig said, one eyebrow raised. "I would have liked to kill him myself, though. Sai has a lot to answer for."

"Sai deported himself like the hero he was always supposed to be," I said. "He was so commanding and so strong that, if I had not already set my heart on Igor becoming king of the united cities, I would have considered handing him back the crown of Kostya after all."

"That good, eh?" Feodor asked as he came over to join us. "I guess we're lucky he's on our side, then."

Sai was most definitely on our side. When he returned to Kythria's camp a few hours later, after my beloveds and I had refreshed ourselves with a small meal, cool, clear water that tasted like divine nectar, and something of a rest—if sitting in

camp chairs retelling the story of what had happened over and over could be considered a rest—he reaffirmed as much.

“There was talk of me becoming King of Kostya again after you left,” he told me as he joined us by one of the campfires, Jace and Gennadi with him. “I made it known in no uncertain terms that I would not return to Kostya. I am a citizen of the Wolf River Kingdom now, and you are the king I will serve.” He glanced to Ludvig with that remark.

“The Wolf River Kingdom will be honored to have you,” Ludvig said with a regal nod, resting a hand on Renz’s head as Renz knelt beside his chair, looking as exhausted as the rest of us.

Sai turned back to me and said, “I...I do like the idea of organizing some sort of peacekeeping force in the forest. Most of Yiannis’s men were killed, according to Dryden, but a few escaped. It is assumed there are more in the forest somewhere, too.”

“Didn’t Jakob and Mikal say something about the ones who were with Lorimer heading east?” Peter said.

“He did,” I nodded. I turned to Sai. “There will always be wild wolves in the forest. Therefore, there will always be a need for peacekeepers.”

“I will be honored to serve,” he said, then hesitated before adding, “And I would be honored if I could make a home in Gravlock, near the rest of my family.”

I felt I understood what he was asking and said, “You are very much welcome in my household until such a time as you would like to build a house of your own. For you and your pup as well.”

That caused Ludvig to sit up straighter. “What’s this about you finding a pup?” he asked.

What followed was a deeply embarrassed attempt on Sai’s part to explain how he planned to take Cedric under his wing officially. I did my best to hide my amusement over Sai’s newfound curiosity about things his mother would not approve of, but it wouldn’t have been kind to laugh outright.

A short time after that, Kythria's officer, Blasek, arrived in the camp with news of what was happening inside of Klovisgard.

"Our soldiers found their way out of the city through various means, and now they're assisting the army of Kostya in clearing the very same barricades that those men put on the gates to begin with," he said, laughing and shaking his head a bit over the whole thing.

"So Klovisgard wasn't really under siege after all?" Jace asked with a frown from where he sat with the rest of us as Gennadi and Renz served our midday meal.

"Oh, we were under siege, alright," Blasek said, sending Jace a wry look that I knew without having to check raised Jace's hackles. "There wasn't enough time for the siege to have any real effect, though. Food supplies are relatively plentiful within Klovisgard's walls because so much of its population decamped to Hedeon before the siege was more than a spark of an idea in Lady Rozynov's mind. The diseased animal corpses and things that they tried hurling over the wall landed in empty spaces. We'd all retreated deep into the heart of the city, and cleaning crews were able to remove the mess and burn it before any contagion had a chance of spreading."

I shook my head. Lady Rozynov's tactics were not wrong, but neither were they suited to the sort of siege she'd undertaken.

"And what of the people of Klovisgard?" I asked. "Are there any left?"

"Plenty," Blasek said with a shrug. "They were extraordinarily helpful. And I believe they will be grateful for Igor's leadership." He glanced to Kythria, then to Ludvig. "That was the one thing we heard over and over while inside the city. People have lamented the weakness of their leadership in the last few years. Many have looked south to the Wolf River Kingdom with longing, though they didn't feel they could express those sentiments aloud."

He said that last while looking at me. I found it extraordinarily difficult not to smile and preen a little. It was

gratifying to know that my efforts had been noticed by people outside of my own kingdom.

“What has become of Lady Rozynov?” Kythria asked with a frown.

We had yet to get around to discussing that—I hadn’t wanted to upset Jace or Sai, and I suspected Lady Rozynov was the reason Taisiya and Arseny hadn’t returned with them—so I sat a bit straighter and leaned forward as well.

Sai sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. “Since Arseny was the last governor of Klovisgard before Cyril replaced him with his own man, he’s taken charge of things again. He’s had Mother confined in the palace while we decide how to get her back to Hedeon.”

“It’s probably easiest to take her there by boat,” Jace added. “By the sound of things, there are plenty of boats waiting on the river that could carry us there whenever we’re ready.”

That piqued my interest as well.

“Perhaps we should accompany you to Hedeon,” I said. “And once we’re there, we should call for King Igor to sail to Hedeon to formally greet his new subjects.”

My suggestion was met with smiles and nods of agreement.

“If Hedeon is where we put this entire chapter of the frontier to bed, then we should all be there,” Ludvig said, nodding to Feodor.

That is precisely what happened. By mid-afternoon, our entire party from the Wolf River Kingdom made their way to Klovisgard’s docks to see what sort of boats were available to carry us the rest of the way to Hedeon. Igor’s boat was needed to sail back up the river to Novoberg and to bring him down to join us, but there were plenty of others waiting, and at least a dozen captains offered their services.

By nightfall, Peter, Neil, Jace, Gennadi, Sai, and myself were comfortably ensconced on one of the larger boats.

Ludvig, Renz, Feodor, Kythria, and Blasek commandeered a second boat.

It was actually pleasant to spend the night asleep on the water, with nothing but the sound of the river around us. Better still, we woke to a surprise in the morning. Not only had we docked at some point while we were asleep, a great many, unexpected boats were moored in Hedeon's marina along with us, including ones I recognized as the style of New Port and of the Northern Kingdom.

"It's about time you got here to explain what's going on," Jorgen greeted us once we finally debarked and made our way to Hedeon's palace.

"Yes," Vikhrov said, greeting us along with Jorgen and Hati. "Imagine our surprise when we stopped here on our way to Novoberg, only to be told that Hedeon no longer had a leader, and that half the men of the city had been marched off to fight against another Kostyan city!"

"There are no Kostyan cities now," Peter told the others, his enthusiasm for the changes on the frontier still undimmed. "King Igor is on his way to lay claim to all of the cities that were once Kostya so that he can unite the former cities of the frontier."

That had Jorgen stopping cold, which stopped the rest of us as well.

"He's not going to reinstitute the old ways of those cities, is he?" he asked. "Because I refuse to go backwards."

"And we're not giving up our kingdom," Hati added.

"You've no need to worry," I said. "Igor shares our vision for peace and harmony on the frontier. And he has the strength and charisma to convince any recalcitrant citizens of the cities that it is in their best interest to say goodbye to the past and to embrace the future that he offers them."

Jorgen still didn't appear convinced. "Is he one of ours?" he asked.

I peeked at Peter, who looked exceedingly proud of himself, then said, "He most certainly is."

Igor proved that himself the following day, when he arrived by boat with a small contingent of men...just as Dryden led most of Kythria's army through Hedeon's eastern city gates.

There was a small panic at the sight of so many unfamiliar soldiers, but as soon as the people of Hedeon saw that their own men marched interspersed with Kythria's, their fear turned to confusion, and the confusion changed quickly to utter bafflement.

"I got here as soon as I could," Igor said as he strode into the private parlor in Hedeon's palace where all of us were enjoying an informal discussion about what life on the frontier would look like going forward.

The fact that Igor was somewhat out of breath as he entered the room added to the delightful illusion that he had, perhaps, run all the way from Novoberg.

Better still, among the members of his party who entered the room as well were Orel and Leremy, Sebald and Avenel, Katrina, and Cedric. I watched with a poorly concealed grin of amusement as Sai jolted straight, then pushed himself out of his chair to cross the room and greet Cedric. That amusement turned to something far tenderer when I saw Cedric smile for the first time ever at the reunion with his master.

"Come join us," Ludvig said, standing and gesturing for Igor to take the chair that Sai had abandoned. "We were just about to call for lunch."

"Is there time?" Igor asked. "I feel as though I should meet with the leaders of the people of Hedeon right away to share my intentions with them. And then I should address as much of the population of the city as I can to let them know they will be treated fairly."

"You should be introduced to the people of Hedeon as their new king by someone attached to the history and leadership of this city," I said, glancing to the side, where Sai and Cedric stood.

Sai held Cedric's face gently and had leaned close to speak to him. Cedric nodded up at him with wide eyes. I noted that he looked far less vacant than he had before. Nothing could have filled me with more confidence that our future was a bright one than that. Healing was possible, and I felt that more people than just Cedric would be able to heal now.

When Sai realized we were all watching him, he tensed and let go of Cedric's face. He stood straighter and cleared his throat, then said, "I beg your pardon."

"No need to beg," Ludvig said, grinning with the same mischievousness that I felt. "Igor here was just saying he'd like to be introduced to the people of Hedeon as their new king, and Magnus suggested you do the introductions."

Sai blinked, and I watched as a wealth of emotion passed through his expression.

I understood it all. It was a monumental thing for a man who was raised to be the leader of the very people he was about to address to give them a new king from a different family line. Whatever reticence he felt over the task we were suggesting he perform vanished as he let out a breath and loosened from his tight stance.

"I would be honored to announce that you are king of the United Cities of the Frontier, your majesty," he said, nodding deferentially to Igor.

When he glanced my way, I nodded once to him, smiling. It was my way of telling him that he'd done well.

And he had done well. It was a rare and powerful thing for a man to accept that his true calling in life was not to be the leader his father had raised him to be, but to serve another leader with skill and effectiveness.

"I propose the civic leaders of Hedeon be brought to the palace with as much haste as possible to meet their new king," I said, sitting forward in my chair, but not standing. "And once that meeting is done, I suggest there be a grand, public announcement in the palace square this evening."

"I agree," Igor said.

That was all that was necessary to put the ball in motion. Between them, Sai and Sebald knew who among the notable citizens of Hedeon should be introduced to Igor first. They made a list, and runners were sent to fetch those men—and notably, a few women—to the palace.

Once those people were gathered in the great hall, Sai explained the unification of Kostya and Cremona, and introduced Igor to them as their new king.

“But we want you as our king,” one of the older nobles said after the announcement was made. “You are a man of Hedeon. This young whelp is not.”

“You are speaking to your king,” Sai said with more authority than when he’d worn the crown. “You will show him respect.”

Igor smiled and nodded to Sai, but remained wisely aloof.

“It’s encouraging to see that Igor knows when not to open his mouth as much as he knows what to say,” Peter leaned in to murmur to me as the three of us stood off to one side, watching the proceedings.

I laughed, low and quiet. “Something you would do well to remember, my dearest Peter,” I murmured in return.

“I thought you liked it when Peter opens his mouth,” Neil quipped from my other side. When I turned to him with a look of mock indignation, he shrugged impishly and said, “I know *I* do.”

The three of us were left in giggles as the official proceedings continued.

“With all due respect,” one of the older women who had been invited said, stepping boldly forward, “why should you not return as our ruler, King Sai?”

The room seemed to stand up straighter and pay attention.

“I tried my hand at being a king,” Sai said solemnly. “I failed at the task. I was never meant to be a king.”

“But you are the eldest son of the ruling duke,” another man called out.

“That does not make me a suitable king,” Sai said. “You all made your feelings towards me known when you allowed me to be chased out of my own city before,” he went on, strong and sure, but not as angry as he could have been. “I could not return to rule you after that. I would forever be watching my back, fearful that you would turn on me again, and every one of you would fall short in giving me the respect that is due to a king, because you would remember you have gotten the best of me before.”

I shared a surprised and impressed look with my husbands. Sai had hit the nail on the head.

“You will not disrespect King Igor,” Sai went on. “He will not allow it. He has the ineffable qualities that every king needs to command respect while caring for his people. You will obey him, and you will be grateful for his wisdom and strength.”

I smiled at Sai’s words. They could be taken either as a consolation, as if he was telling them they would love the blueberry tart that the palace chef made, or as a direct order.

None of the assembly had much to say after that. Igor stepped forward to say a few words to them. He explained his vision for the frontier—which was delightfully in accord with my vision—then allowed the nobles to ask questions.

He answered every one of them brilliantly and left very little room for misinterpretation or rebellion.

I was particularly fascinated by the final question, though.

“What has become of Lady Rozynov?” one of the women asked. “We all know what part she played in this startling turn of events. Is she to be executed?”

“She is not,” Igor said. That had me taking notice. Neil, Peter, and I hadn’t been part of the discussion about what to do with Lady Rozynov. Jace had been, and Vera and Alyona had been sent for and arrived only that morning, but I hadn’t heard what had been decided about the woman yet.

“Lady Rozynov is to be banished,” Igor announced. My eyebrows went up. “Lord Vikhrov has graciously offered New

Hope as a haven for her until such a time as passage can be arranged for her to travel to one of the islands far distant from our frontier.”

My brow went up even more, and I glanced to Ludvig. He had his hand on Renz’s shoulder, and he grinned proudly at his pup. I was certain that Renz, who was from the islands himself, had offered some sort of suggestion or supplied some sort of inspiration for the banishment.

All in all, I thought it was a fair way to deal with a traitoress.

As soon as the meeting was concluded, preparations were made for Igor to address his new people. We all enjoyed a small, discreet feast, during which Igor caught us up to speed on what had happened to bring him from Novoberg to Hedeon.

Once that was done, we all relocated to just outside the palace, where a tall dais had been set up near the palace gates so that Igor could address as many citizens of Hedeon as possible.

Peter, Neil, and I, along with all of the Rozynovs save Lady Rozynov, Kythria, Ludvig, Jorgen and Hati, and Vikhrov, stood on the dais with him. The view was magnificent.

I was surprised, though, to see how few people there were, even though the numbers were large. I had heard numbers and reports of the diminished population of Hedeon and the other cities, but seeing the sea of drawn, defeated faces, knowing that there should have been twice as many, was a bit of a shock.

We were the victors. We had bent the frontier to our will and achieved everything we’d set out to. But the faces looking back at us had the potential to be the vanquished. They were hungry, not just for food, but for peace and for rest. Their battle was still ongoing, but I hoped that Igor, as king, would be able to help them all succeed.

As if Igor could read my thoughts, he spoke.

“People of the frontier. I know that these last several years have been difficult. In such a short time, we have seen our lives as we knew them upended and devastated. Not a single one of us has been without loss, whether that is the loss of those we loved dearly, like my father, my brothers, and so many of yours, our homes and our livelihoods, or even the values we assumed would never change.

“But I stand before you today as new king for a new era. We have come to the end of a hard road, and it is my sincerest wish that we can all live together in peace and prosperity going forward. We will rebuild that which has been decimated, replant the trees and crops that have been cut down, and reinvigorate every city, every household, and every man and woman within the United Cities of the Frontier, and we will do it together.

“I pledge to you today to treat every citizen of our new frontier as if they are my lost brothers and sisters. I will listen to your concerns and act in the best way I know to improve your lives. I will work together with our trusted allies—” he gestured to me, Peter, Neil, and Ludvig on one side, then to Vikhrov, Jorgen, and Hati on the other, “—and we will combine our talents and our treasures to create a vision of the frontier where we all live as friends and neighbors.

“There will be no more wars,” he said with such authority that even I believed him. “Disputes will be handled in a combined court of the four kingdoms of the frontier. We will bind up each other’s wounds and provide whatever sort of aid each of us needs to ensure that all of us, the entire frontier, the people of the cities and the people of the forests, become productive, innovative, kind, and caring brothers and sisters, regardless of their birth or origin, or who they love.

“We will march boldly together into the future, and we will do it with power and grace so that everyone may achieve the dreams and desires of their hearts, for themselves, for their children, and for generations that have yet to be born. I promise this world to you as your king, now and for as long as I may live.”

I sucked in a breath, moved not only by the eloquence of Igor's words, but by the pure, gentle flakes of snow that began to fall as his speech reached its climax. They drifted down in the silent night sky, glittering in the light of the torches that had been set up around the dais and in that of the lanterns held by the people watching in reverent awe.

The snows had started, and it felt as if the heavens themselves were granting their blessing of peace on the reign of King Igor the First and promising that every word he spoke would come to fruition. The darkness of the past few years would be covered over in a new, pure whiteness, and when the winter was through, the frontier would spring to life again.

WE WOULD HAVE STAYED in Hedeon for a while longer, not just to discuss matters of importance pertaining to the frontier, but to spend time with our friends. The snows waited for no man, though, and from too much past experience, we knew that if we waited too long, it would take five times longer to reach home than if we were to set out at once.

And so, after only one more day spent in Hedeon, the Wolf River contingent set out through the forest towards home. We were able to make good time, since most of the supplies we'd brought with us from either Gravlock or New Hope that would have slowed us down had been left in Novoberg. We only had to camp out for one night in the frosty-white woods.

Midway through our second day of travel, Ludvig and Renz, Feodor, Orel and Leremy, Sebald and Avenel parted ways with us to head to New Hope, while Peter, Neil, and I, Jace and Gennadi, Sai and Cedric, Vera, and as a last-minute decision when we'd left Hedeon, Taisiya as well continued on to Gravlock.

As seemed to become something of a tradition with us, we arrived at the new city gates well after dark, as the snow began to thicken and our tolerance for the cold ended.

"King Magnus, is that you?" Alexei called from the ramparts as our shivering party made its way to the opening gate.

“Alexei!” I called back. “Have you taken good care of my city?”

Alexei laughed. “Of course,” he called back, then moved like he would come down the stairs to greet us. “It wouldn’t be Gravlock without you.”

It was such a relief to be home that I immediately transformed into an emotional nitwit. I hugged Alexei far too greedily as he met us just inside the city and talked too animatedly to him about everything that had happened in our absence. I began immediately to make plans for a town hall meeting to explain the changes on the frontier to the people of Gravlock, and if not for Peter and Neil whisking me on, I probably would have stayed out all night, making plans.

Of course, the moment I set foot in my own house again, every plan I could have possibly made went out the window.

We were met by the sound of Ella crying and Ziggy fussing. I couldn’t even bring myself to care what might have caused them so much upset, I just wanted to fly to them. Their cries came from upstairs, so I peeled out of my snow-caked travel coat, handed it carelessly off to Neil—who handed it and his own coat off to Gennadi—then took the steps two at a time to run to my babies.

“We’re home,” I announced to them as I burst into the nursery, Peter and Neil just behind me. “Dear, wonderful babies, we’re home.”

Annika and Nadia were tending to the children, but they were more than happy to hand Ziggy to me and Ella to Neil as we blundered our way into the room. They greeted us enthusiastically, but I hardly heard a word of it.

I burst into tears of joy so pure and so deep that it made a mess of me as I clutched my son to my breast. Ziggy had grown so much in the time we were away, but he seemed to know who I was all the same. He glanced up at me with an infant’s startled look, as if asking why I was weeping when I was happy.

I was so desperately happy. Peter and Neil, somehow holding Ella between them, clustered in closer to us so that our little family of five was pressed together, almost as one.

“I’ve missed you so much, babies,” Peter said, weeping as badly as I was. “I love you both. We won’t ever leave you again.”

I laughed in the midst of my tears and promised myself I would tease Peter—who had been so hesitant about fatherhood before—about those words later.

“Why don’t you lot head off to your room so that Annika can have a moment’s rest,” Nadia suggested as she strode past us to the doorway. “I’ve kept a fire burning in your grate to keep the room warm, since we didn’t know when you’d be returning. It should be comfortable in there. I’ll bring you up a tray of refreshments as well.”

“Thank you, Nadia, for everything,” I said from the heart.

It felt right to be in our bedroom, not just because it was the most intimate part of our home, but because Rurik’s painting was there. The swelling of emotion I’d felt the moment I knew our vision had been consummated returned to me once we were all there, seated on the bed with the babies between us, enjoying the first moment of peace we had as our own family, under Rurik’s watchful eyes, in so, so long.

“I’m looking forward to a long, quiet winter,” Peter said, leaning heavily against Neil’s side and glancing over his shoulder at Ziggy, who was now in Neil’s arms. “I don’t want to even think about traveling or politics until spring.”

“You say that now,” Neil teased him in a sing-song voice as he smiled at Ziggy, “but you’ll be pacing the halls in less than a month, I swear it.”

“I will not,” Peter protested. “And besides, there’s plenty to keep me busy this winter.”

He reached across Neil to stroke Ella’s head with his fingertips.

I held Ella, and I was almost speechless with the love I felt for her, for all of my family.

Almost speechless.

“We have so much to tell you, my darlings,” I said, glancing between the babies and smiling at my husbands. “We’ve worked so hard to create an entire world for you, and there is so much you need to know about it. I have tales to tell about people long gone and places so far away we may never reach them again. I have stories that will make you laugh, particularly at your papas, and ones that will make you cry.”

My voice caught on those words, and my throat closed up as I glanced up to Rurik’s eternally flirtatious smile in his painting.

“We will all look over you as you grow and learn and become the people you were born to be,” I said, my voice choked with emotion. “All of us.”

For I knew that my children would not just have the frontier they deserved to grow up in and fathers that would love them, most likely to a fault, but they would also have a very special guardian angel who would look over them, look over all of us, for the rest of our long and happy lives.



AND SO ENDS the saga of the end of the Old Kingdom and the beginning of the new frontier. After all that time, Magnus has finally made his and Rurik’s vision of a safe and prosperous world a reality.

I hope you’ve enjoyed coming on this journey with me! Who would have thought that the silly, sexy story I started writing at the beginning of the pandemic lockdown would have turned into one of the most important and heartfelt things in my life. I’ve even had Peter, Magnus, and Neil’s names tattooed on my arm, close to my heart.

So yeah, of course I can’t just leave these characters and this world for good, even though this is the end of the original journey. I definitely do plan to write more stories and a bunch of bonus content for this world. I’m not sure how I’ll present that yet, although I’m thinking of starting a Patreon to distribute them. So if you haven’t already, it would be a good

idea to join my FB group, [Merry Farmer Reader's Group – AKA Merry's Little Lambs](#), because that's where I'll post about everything else written in this world first!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I hope you have enjoyed *Victors and Vanquished*. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F>.

USA Today Bestselling author Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Justine and Peter. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



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