

CALLIE CHASE



THE
LOVER'S
LEAP

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*This book is dedicated to the loneliest apple in the apple
basket. Found family forever!*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

In this book, the main characters play backgammon, but you do not need to understand the game to follow the significance of the character's play. The title *The Lover's Leap* is a play on words, and refers to the actual "move" in the game where a player rolls 6-5 on the dice and moves one checker 11 spaces. I wrote the scenes so that even if you do not know how the game works, you can understand and hopefully enjoy the meaning that the moves have to Pali.

I survived the pandemic by playing games and writing. Whether I was screaming through video games or crying through card games (I never said I was good, only that I played!) I never staked money on the games. In this book, Pali sees a gaming tournament with a pot of winnings at the end as the solution to her specific problem, but I'd like to be respectful of those who have struggled with any form of addiction, including gaming. If this topic is uncomfortable for you, or if you or someone you love has an issue with gaming/gambling, please read with caution and seek the appropriate support from a qualified provider in your area.

As a last note, my beta readers questioned the old myth about silver tarnishing in vinegar... Please don't be confused. Pure silver *will* turn dark in vinegar! So if you're making a

counterfeit coin in a fantasy universe, the fakes with low silver content will NOT tarnish. The real thing will.

Thank you so much for taking this Leap with me!

Callie

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CONTENT NOTES

The Lover's Leap contains depictions of violence, sexual situations, reference to parental abuse of a child, and references to gambling which some readers may find uncomfortable or disturbing.

Although this is a work of fantasy, care has been taken by the author to ensure that violence is not gratuitous in any way. If you are a reader who is concerned about the content in this book, please refer to:

www.calliechase.com/content-notes

I have taken great care and hired professional editors and multiple beta readers over multiple drafts to ensure this book is free of errors. Should you find anything that you think is an error or typo, please contact me at team@calliechase.com and I will review it and respond personally to your inquiry.

Thank you for taking the extra time to reach out to me!

CHAPTER
ONE

The mask in my hands was not made by human craft. I trailed a finger over the unusual texture, the unnaturally smooth, almost slippery material. My belly twisted as I looked at the disembodied contours of the magic-born face.

The image captured there appeared so real, I itched to touch the girl and rouse her from dark dreams. She was perfectly formed and perfectly lifeless. Gruesome in the way that deep suffering was—vaguely repulsive and yet impossible to look away from. And the worst part?

This was a death mask, and the face suspended in eternal slumber was mine.

Looking at the features of the mask in my hands was like looking into my own grave. I marveled at the fine impressions of my lashes, feathery and light against my cheeks. My eyebrows, thick and dark, arched over expressionless closed eyes. The nose, identical to my father's and expertly shaped, had nostrils which slightly flared. As if the craftsman had captured the very moment I released my final breath.

But the airholes through which I might have breathed my last were perfectly sealed over. There was no way the girl who had endured the creation of this mask could still be alive. The time it would have taken for the compound to be applied and then to cure... Breathing air through the material would simply not have been possible. This mask should have been irrefutable proof that I had died.

And yet I stood in my quarters in my father's manor, sliding my fingertip through a slice that cut clean through the forehead of the mask. This had been the most convincing fraud my savings could purchase. Useless in its state of ruin, it was now an expensive trinket that would accomplish nothing. Except, perhaps, to prove that I'd been a fool to dabble in forbidden things.

Now my future was sealed like the eyelids of my mask. Closed forever.

Purchasing this mask had taken a month of planning. I'd ridden in the back of a cart on a surreptitious journey to the far side of Omrora led by an enormous guide: a man terrifyingly quiet but direct when he did speak.

"Do not ask questions." His whisper was refined but held a hint of cruelty.

Pitch-black and sheer, a hood covered his head and completely obscured his features and hair, yet allowed him, I assumed, to see through it. A plain cloak covered dark leather armor I could plainly hear in his heavy footfalls and stiff movements. Simple black gloves encased his hands so even the smallest details, like the tidiness of his nails, were hidden from my view.

"Get in. Do not attempt to leave until I come for you." His touch at the small of my back was light as he helped me step into the cart.

The transport he provided was nothing more than a wagon. A crude wheeled thing attached to two horses. One was dark and glossy as a midnight rain; the other was a satiny-smooth blood bay. The horses were flawless, lacking any distinguishing blemishes. Even if I saw them together, tied to the same cart, their reins in the gloved hands of the very same guide, I doubted I would be able to identify them—or my guide—by daylight in the square.

I was certain that was exactly my guide's intention. Yes, I'd paid an exorbitant cost for the item that would be crafted that night. But I only had access to this cart, this guide, and the dark place he intended to take me because I knew people who

believed I would take this secret to my grave. Betraying those I trusted and those who'd trusted me carried a price far too steep to pay.

Iron torches mounted on the cart kept the night-hunting vengersax, the winged daggers of the air, from pecking out our eyes and tongues for food. My guide had packed water and a small bit of bread and offered it as we departed the agreed-upon meeting place. He urged me to eat to ensure that the bumpy ride over uncleared terrain didn't upset my stomach. How he'd guessed I'd been unable to eat dinner—too nervous, too excited for the midnight journey ahead—I did not know. I assumed this was a trip he'd taken before. Perhaps with another woman just like me.

The icy night air raised the tiny hairs on my arms as I wrapped myself in a tight hug. I swallowed the water and bread, only momentarily wondering if the food was drugged or poisoned. Since the guide was to be paid his portion of the fee, separate from the amount that had already been paid to the craftsmen, upon delivery of the completed mask, I assumed he didn't plan to kill the woman who owed him a debt. So I trusted his counsel and ate and drank what he offered. Though my hands were so unsteady, so nervous with anticipation, I nearly spilled the water all over my lap.

“Keep your eyes closed,” the man whispered, once I assured him I was ready to depart. *“Wear this, and do not remove it.”*

Before I'd met the guide, I'd been told not to look at anything or anyone once we departed Omrora. I could not have done so even if I'd had the nerve. The layers of fabric that he handed me to wear, both head wrap and mask in one, obscured my sight so completely, he might have driven into the depths of the sea, and I'd have been none the wiser.

With my head covered and my heart feeling fully exposed, we left the safe shire where I'd been born and raised for... I knew not where. After a ride that lasted forever, and yet also ended too quickly, my guide drew the cart to a stop. I heard the rustling of his armor and cloak as he came around to help me.

Even though we'd stopped, I left the covering in place over my face.

"Wait for my lead, miss," he demanded, taking my hand.

My feet never touched the ground. I stood in the cart, nervously gripping his gloved hand, as he lifted me into his arms. In just a few smooth movements, he swept me from the cart and carried me like a bride being delivered over the threshold of my new home.

I nearly laughed at the irony. Becoming a bride was exactly what I sought to avoid. Was exactly what had driven me to fake my own death in the first place.

"No matter what you hear," he insisted, a tortured-sounding rasp in his voice, *"you must not react to the voices."*

The voices...

I'd been so concerned about escaping home to make this journey, I'd spent little time worrying about the risks there might be once we reached our destination. But I needn't have been concerned. My guide was firm of hand and confident in his steps, carrying me, a full-grown woman of twenty-three, down a flight of steps without so much as a groan of complaint.

I did not fully trust him and certainly did not feel safe in his arms as we descended into the depths of place I'd never been before and couldn't have identified if my life depended on it. In a way, my life *did* depend on me keeping this secret. Truly, I had no guess where we were. We might have traveled in circles and ended up in my father's backyard for all I knew... But somehow, I suspected we were nowhere near the Lombard estate.

If the smells of moss and soil were to be trusted, we'd traveled deep into the earth. And yet, I was not afraid. The promise of the freedom that awaited me was worth every bit of risk I'd taken to get there. I was ready, more than ready, for the rest of my life to begin.

Once the mask was complete, I planned to take a journey, fabricate a catastrophe, and purchase a small grave. I would

hire a messenger to send the mask back to Omrora in my place and deliver the false news of my demise to my parents. The mask would have been accepted by any and all as irrefutable proof that I had passed. No cause for the shire-reeve to investigate, no need for even my parents to question whether I might be saved. By the time my parents visited the place they believed housed my remains, assuming they ever did, I would be far, far away.

Unfindable.

Safe.

Free.

I'd exhausted every other option. This...this was the only way.

Had I simply run away, I would have been found. Hunted down by my father's associates. Only with something as powerful as a death mask could Palmeria Lombard be reborn and have a chance at a new life.

That had been my plan.

It should have been easy.

And yet sometimes luck simply runs out.

Weeks after that terrifying night when the mask was cast to my face using a combination of magic and craft, I arranged to meet my guide for delivery of the item. I was at the doorstep of a new future when destiny thwarted my plans. On the day I was to take possession of the mask, a messenger arrived in place of my guide. At the agreed-upon meeting place, I was told by a nervous-looking boy with an ill-fitting face wrap that there had been an unfortunate "event." He would not provide details other than to confirm that the mask had been damaged.

"My employer will replace the item, milady. It may take some time, you see. And we may have to charge you again if this one isn't able to be fixed. It's a mystery, you know, how this material works. We... He... Well, they..." The boy—definitely not the same man who'd carried me down a staircase into a lair not of human making—had a voice that

cracked as he struggled over his words. Perhaps not over what to say, but what he knew he must not reveal.

“Well, miss,” he rushed on, “I’d best be on my way. You have our apologies. My boss will discount a portion of his delivery fee on account of the delay.”

I stopped him before he could leave, unable to keep disappointment and terror from bursting through my chest.

“Give it to me,” I demanded. “Damaged or not, I wish to keep that which I’ve paid so dearly for.”

I could see his light-brown eyes through the crudely cut slits in the fabric that covered his face. He was young, quite a bit younger than me, and looked afraid.

“You w-want it?” he stammered, as if he’d been told exactly what to say and was unprepared for anything more. “But it’s worthless now. It will not work, milady. Surely there —”

“I’ll take it nonetheless. Thank you,” I added, softening my tone.

A moment’s confusion passed over what I could see of the boy’s eyes, but he did pull a crude linen sack from under his cloak. As he unlaced it, I offered him a quarter silver to give me the pouch as well. I couldn’t very well carry a mask of my own face—a mask that could not have been made without illegally using magic or, worse, illegally engaging with nonhuman creatures—openly through the square.

If I were caught in possession of such an object, I would not enjoy any favor because of my family’s name or business. There would be no trial, no inquiry. Not even the long position of trust my father held with the queen would protect me. The consequence of holding such an item would be simple: execution.

Since none but the guide and the creatures who’d made the mask knew it existed, as long as I kept the object hidden, I could keep peril away. Or so I hoped.

Palmeria Lombard, daughter of Lord Dennes and Lady Petra Lombard, conspiring with nonhumans and dealing in

dark magic. I stifled a chuckle despite the mortal danger I was in. My family was no stranger to secrets and scandal, but this? I had never planned to outdo my own parents, but it appeared they had in fact trained me well.

A chance at an honest life. That was what I wanted, and I'd had but one opportunity to purchase it. Instead of me dying that night in the lair deep below ground, somehow, my death mask had met its untimely end. And with it, my hope.

I tucked the forbidden item deep beneath my mattress. It would be several hours before the staff would turn down my bed, so I said a small prayer to the gods to protect it from discovery. Even though it was now useless, I couldn't bear to part with it. Giving it up meant I'd exhausted every strategy and had no further moves to play.

Except the stake of this game was my life. And I was not yet prepared to forfeit.



I PADDED down the cavernous stone staircase into the main hall of my father's manor. The torches lining the walls, their oak handles mounted into crown-shaped sconces, flickered as I rushed past. Tucked under one arm was my precious backgammon board. In my free hand, I carried a small pouch with my dice and checkers secured inside. My perfectly conditioned leather soles made scarcely a sound as I ran, but I was neither quick nor quiet enough to avoid my nemesis.

"Miiiiissssss Lommbard... Good evening." The gratingly familiar voice over-enunciated my name and brought the hairs on the back of my neck to standing. "I don't suppose you're heading to the crofter's residence...at this hour? Allow me to call an attendant to accompany you back to your quarters."

My father's butler looked tired, the edges of his wispy gray moustache slightly downturned. Butler Norwin always looked tired, as was fitting for a man who made a career of chasing away people's joy. His cheeks, spotted with age, puffed comically as he exhaled a long breath. His mouth opened

unnaturally wide as he smacked his lips—no doubt so he could savor the taste as he swallowed my hopes and dreams.

I groaned softly as I slowed my steps. “Good evening, Norwin. I am fine, thank you. I’ll not need attending, nor will I be returning to my quarters.” I’d naively hoped to escape quietly into the night, but the senior member of the Lombard household staff would prevent that as though it was his primary duty.

He paced the front hall at the base of the steps. “Miss, surely you realize the evening grows late. And you”—Norwin wrinkled one side of his mouth in distaste at the game in my hands— “appear to have plans with the crofter boy. I don’t suppose your parents...”

“The crofter boy,” I interrupted, jabbing a finger to emphasize my point, “is my...*friend*.”

I stopped short of calling him what he actually was—my half brother—since I heard Mother’s footsteps behind me. Though she moved lightly, the torches flickered as she took each wide step with the gravity of a descending goddess.

“Butler Norwin,” Lady Lombard said stiffly.

Even with my back to her, I could tell from the acid in her voice she was annoyed. She’d likely overheard me squabbling with Norwin and was unhappy at both my tone as well as what she expected me to say to the butler. There were many secrets kept from the staff in this household, and the true paternity of *the crofter boy* was one of them.

“Kindly refrain from keeping Miss Lombard any longer. If you’ve concluded your tasks for the evening, perhaps we should adjourn to my husband’s study and discuss the engagement announcement?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Norwin looked grievously disappointed that I’d won this match. He nodded deferentially at my mother, cocking his chin at an angle. “I expect Ms. Deylia has matters sorted in the kitchen, but you are quite correct. I should excuse myself to supervise that all is in order before the rest of the staff retire.”

The odious man scurried off toward the kitchen, while my mother stared at me, a slight press in her pretty lips. “Are you off to...play?” She bit out the last word as though she could scarcely stand to say it.

“I am,” I said, my chin lifted.

There was so much more I wanted to say in response. That I deserved to enjoy my last few weeks of freedom, spending time with the people in my family I actually cared about before I was essentially brokered into one of my father’s business deals. But my mother seemed tired of the usual sides we squared off on. I was not in the mood to play games with her tonight. And it appeared she felt the same.

Lady Petra Lombard folded her hands and lowered her eyes to avoid my glare. “You might check the sideboard in the main hall. Deylia picked the loveliest bouquet this afternoon.”

“Mother...” I shook my head, trying but not quite succeeding at summoning a smile. “I am family to Idony. I do not need to bring a gift when I visit her cottage.”

“Just, I suppose, as you do not require an invitation.” Her words were cutting, and beneath them, the unmistakable echo of bitterness.

My mother had always had a strained relationship with the woman who gave birth to my father’s firstborn. His true heir. Had history gone differently, my half brother would have been the true heir to the Lombard estate. But my parents and their conspiracies had changed all our destinies.

I do not believe Lady Petra Lombard was jealous of Idony, although my mother was certainly capable of the emotion and had proven as much countless times in the past. I believe she was sad. Perhaps resigned. The bond I shared with my half brother’s mother was more genuine than any I might ever hope to share with her. Had Idony been my mother, I would never have tried to fake my own death—not that anyone knew about that. Had Idony been my mother... Well, I truly cannot imagine what shape my life might have taken.

I smiled, a tight but sincere gesture, to let my mother know I was not being cruel. “Besides,” I reminded her, “The crofters grew the very flowers that Deylia picked. I do not think Irony would much appreciate them being plucked from the ground that gave them life just to be returned to her in my hand.”

My mother raised her brows and pressed her lips into a half smile. “Hmmm,” she murmured, meeting my eyes. “Well, then. Extend my regards to the crofter and his mother.” She rarely spoke Biko’s name, referring to him only by his role. Even though I had just done the same, somehow, coming from my mother, the term sounded like an insult. She smoothed the fine wimple around her hair and, holding her shoulders stiff and still as a stone carving, ascended the staircase. “Palmeria,” she added, turning her back to me, “do be cautious.”

“I always am,” I snapped.

I waited until she nearly reached the top before breaking into a full-speed run, holding my skirts in my hands. A pale silver moon and the many torches that lit up the grounds at night provided plenty of light. I didn’t stop until I slammed to a halt outside the crofter’s cottage. My head covering was askew, my hair damp with perspiration. My heart thundered in my chest from exertion as I peered through the bare window glass at the warm lights and loud noises coming from inside.

The crofter held arguably the most important position on an estate as large as ours, second in esteem only to running the household as Norwin did. While the butler managed the indoor staff, the crofter ran the farm operation that fed and employed hundreds of people who lived and worked on the Lombard land. In addition to managing the fields, the crofter raised the livestock that kept meat on our table and leather on my feet. Even brokered deals with merchants and traders.

My half brother took over the crofter role after his stepfather passed, and together, Biko and Idony, son and mother, used their gifts to transform our estate from one that survived to one that thrived. Even when most of the shire of Omrora suffered from blight or a season of weak sun, the Lombard land remained rich and fertile.

In many ways, the crofter was responsible for the survival of what amounted to a small village. The village where I'd been born, and where, if my parents' plans were not disrupted, I would spend my entire life. Trapped in a generational cycle of deceit, theft, and lies until the day that I passed from this place in body and spirit. It was a wonder I had not tried to fake my death far sooner.

Inside the cottage, my half brother was belting out a song, an odd rhyme that he'd probably made up thanks to a generous serving of ale. I grinned and pounded on the door before shoving my way inside. The cottage was unlocked, as I knew it would be.

The moment I passed the threshold, the song shifted.

"Pali! Pali! Get in here. Don't dally!"

I was hardly through the doorway when Biko, his chest-length curls hanging free over an unlaced tunic, thundered over to greet me. He gave me a dark, teasing look, and then his face broke into sunshine. He wrapped his arms around me, picked me up, and spun me in circles, causing the game board and my leather pouch to fly from my arms. Checkers and a pair of dice scattered across the rough planks of the floor with a crash.

"Biko!" Idony shook her head and laughed so hard, she grew red in the face. "Put the girl down. You're a brute."

She stood from a chair before the fire, where she'd sat weaving scraps of cloth into plaits. Her hair was as curly as her son's, the long, dark strands lightened by silvery gray. She swatted her son's shoulder and moved him out of the way.

"Pali, sweet Pali." She cupped my face in her hands, her eyes misting with tears. "It's been too long, girl. I've missed you."

It had been nearly two weeks since my last visit to the crofter's cottage; seeing my half brother and Idony now, my heart seemed to beat its first in all that time.

"I've missed you as well." I sighed, collapsing into her arms. I held her tight, squeezing my eyes shut and savoring the

rich scents of sweet grass and fresh lavender. “Am I interrupting? It sounded like Biko was putting on a show.”

Biko had a boot on the hearth, and he stared into the fire while he tapped out a beat with his palms against his thigh. “You just missed dinner. And no, you’re not interrupting. But we do have company. As long as you don’t mind this trencherman...” He jerked a thumb toward the table in the center of the kitchen.

“Trencherman?” I released Biko’s mum as my heart tumbled in my chest. There was only one man whom Biko would refer to so casually. One whom he would insult and tease just as easily as he would me. I swallowed hard and composed my face.

“Miss Pali.” My brother’s best friend, Syndrian Serlo, stood from his chair and bowed his head. “Good evening.”

The man wore a loose white tunic with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, revealing all manner of scars and cuts on his well-muscled forearms. While any blacksmith could produce a blade with iron and heat, as a master cutler, Syndrian finished tools and weapons into highly valued works of art...or war. He’d worked since his youngest years in his father’s guild shop and was not simply talented—he was one of the most skilled at his trade in the realm.

Workplace injuries were not uncommon for a highly skilled craftsman, but seeing the thin scars and healing marks on his hands never failed to evoke a strange desire in me. My fingers itched to feel the texture of his work-hardened skin, to listen to the stories of every mark’s formation. I stared at a new wrap on one of his fingers and let my eyes travel along his arms, to his defined chest, until I finally met his gaze.

His thoughtful eyes were on the smaller side and they crinkled closed when he laughed. Those eyes—a brilliant blue so bright, it was as though the gods had swept aside a tiny portion of the summer sky just for him—flashed as he watched me appraise him. And while I studied him, Syndrian took his time examining me.

His gaze locked on my lips.

I bit back a nervous smile and looked away.

He shuffled on his leather soles and I bit my lower lip to keep from babbling.

And the predictable game we played every time we saw each other was on.

Heavy stares that lingered too long. A shared fondness for certain words or phrases or jokes which led to private laughs. Through the years, an unspoken match had played out between us, interest and attraction sizzling like embers flaring from a fresh fire.

Maybe this wasn't attraction—at least not on his part. I'd never been quite certain. Was I more to him than Biko's little sister? A convenient fourth who balanced out the game at the table? A well-matched opponent when he tired of Biko's lack of focus and preference for song over strategy?

I pressed my teeth into my lips, struggling to utter even one comprehensible word in greeting. Like a player holding a winning hand, his face brightened but quickly shuttered, preventing me from reading his reaction. Was he laughing with me? At me?

His dark brows lifted, the dusting of scruff on his chin starkly contrasting with the pale blond hair on his head. If he'd grown all of it, his hair would have been voluminous. But he shaved the sides above his ears to the scalp, while keeping the top as long as my brother's. Tonight, his hair was fashioned with lengths of leather at intervals, like a horse's tail decorated for a pageant.

As we studied each other, time passed slowly, and I felt painfully aware of him waiting for me to make my move. By the gods, I was so flustered, the flutter in my chest so dizzying, I hadn't even said hello.

“Ah, uh...Syndrian.” Of course, the only thing I could manage to stammer was his name.

“Allow me to help, miss.” He broke our awkward stare first, flicking his eyes to the game pieces on the floor.

“Oh, no. Please, don’t bother. I can...” I bent to retrieve them, but Syndrian held up a hand.

“You’re dressed too fine to crawl on the floor.” He tossed a playful look at Idony. “Not that this floor isn’t clean enough to eat from, ma’am.”

He knelt, his enormous body moving gracefully to the floor. While my brother’s best friend crawled about gathering my scattered checkers, I forced myself to turn away to find the game board. I knew exactly where it had landed, but if I didn’t occupy myself, the sight of Syndrian on all fours, his extremely well-defined rear in the air, would distract me to a state of embarrassment. I picked up my polished wooden board as Idony made a thoughtful tsking sound.

“Would you mind if we use mine tonight, Pali? That board feels fussy to me.” My brother’s mum excused herself to retrieve her game from her bedroom.

Syndrian moved along the smooth plank floor, rescuing and then dusting each of my checkers with his large palm. He deposited them one by one into their leather sack, while I tried to look away. Restlessly dancing through the cottage, Biko burst into song, making up a strange, nonsensical rhyme. I warmed at his melody, unable to believe a man so wild and free had even half the same blood as me.

“Biko, if you had as much sense as you do talent,” I teased, desperate to focus on anything other than the intense pull of Syndrian’s body. “You’d be the wealthiest bard in the realm.”

“Far too hard, the life of a bard,” Biko crooned. “I like my land.” He puckered his lips and kissed the tips of two fingertips, then bent to tap the kiss against the floor. “And ale in my hand!”

I giggled at him and stole another peek at Syndrian. Only when I allowed myself to look did I notice he was standing beside me, patiently holding the leather bag with my checkers. His summertime eyes darkened as if they longed to share their secrets.

“Oh! I’m sorry. Thank you.” I snatched the pouch a little too roughly, careful to avoid contact with his fingers. I’d done that before and knew better now. A single touch of Syndrian’s skin against mine, and my concentration would scatter like those checkers on the floor. Maintaining my composure all night would be impossible if I brushed his hand; I’d come to the crofter’s cottage not to upset my already frazzled heart, but to soothe it.

“Here we are.” Idony returned to the kitchen with an ironspruce board smooth from years of use. “Shall we use my pieces as well?” she asked.

I nodded. With beloved company and the promise of a game at hand, I felt relaxed, at home, and ready to play.

“Hungry, Pali?” Biko walked to the far side of the cozy kitchen.

Bundles of fresh elderflower, parsley, and tarragon hung from the ceiling. Wooden dishes filled with ripe black berries still attached to fragile stems lined a shelf that my brother himself had designed and built. He picked a sweet pink apple and bit down, spraying juices from the corners of his mouth.

“Oh... Ohhh... These are good. From the southern orchard.” He motioned to his mother. “Mmm, that late-season sunlight!” He nodded appreciatively. “Syn, you gotta have one.” He grabbed another from the shelf and tossed it roughly at his friend.

I winced and half closed my eyes, expecting a mess of shattered fruit to be the next thing that hit the floor, but Syndrian lifted a hand and caught it easily. He slipped an eating knife from a sheath on his waist, then stepped over to the wash bucket, rinsed the knife, and set into slicing and coring the apple.

“Bread, man,” he grunted.

Biko tore off a corner of a loaf and tossed it. Syndrian caught it and set half the apple on the bit of broken bread like it was a plate. He pushed it toward me and nodded. “Unless you’d prefer the whole fruit, miss?”

Nerves at Syndrian's generosity and attention knotted uncomfortably in my belly. "No, thank you. Half is more than enough. Thank you."

"Stop thaaaaankin' him," Biko bellowed, half singing, half talking. "And start playing him! Pali against Syn first. I play the winner."

Syndrian snorted. "We might as well swap in a child to play in your place. One who's never seen a checker. I'd put two silvers on the child gammoning you in under ten rolls."

Biko whooped loudly and belched, then poured himself a mug of ale. "I'd put two silvers on that same child taking you down with two blows of a wooden dagger!"

"Son," Idony crooned, lifting a single brow to settle the good-natured banter. "Let's not assume Syndrian wants to play. We know that Pali does." She sat in a chair at their square table and motioned for me to sit across from her.

My hands grew clammy with nerves, but secretly, I was excited Syndrian was here and hoped he'd play me. I wasn't a performer like Biko—at least not in the same manner he was. While my brother loved to sing and make noise and certainly had the carefree soul of a man who saw play in every aspect of life, I was intensely focused. But we shared many qualities that, had our circumstances been different, would have marked us as siblings. Competitiveness, a drive for excellence in our work—although my work, the work of a woman whose future included running a household, could hardly be compared to the expansive duties expected of a crofter.

While Lady Lombard did not particularly appreciate the time I spent with my brother and the mother of her husband's illegitimate son, arrangements had been made over the years. Biko posed no threat to my father's land, title, or treasury. I never distracted them from their work, and they never called upon me at the manor.

My father had grown so weary of me seeking an opponent for my games after they'd dismissed my tutors, I'd been allowed to entertain myself in Idony's company, learning

everything from card games to my favorite of all—backgammon.

I'm certain my parents never dreamed that I'd find a second family and sincere joy in the hours I stole away from the Lombards miserable company. If they knew how deeply I loved Biko and Idony...I feared they would deny me that, too.

“Are you ready to play, sweet girl?” Idony reached across the table and took one of my hands in hers. She gave me a knowing look. “You can set aside your worries for a few rolls of the dice, can't you?”

“Whoa-ho, speaking of dice.” Biko dropped into the fourth chair, opposite Syndrian. My brother shook out his hair while Idony set the smooth black stones, each of a slightly different size and shape, out onto her side of the board.

While my checkers were highly refined waxed wood, each a perfectly symmetrical version of the others, Idony preferred to play with items found in nature. Dark sea stones she'd gathered during trips to the shore stood in for one set of checkers. The light-colored pieces, the side that I would play tonight, were made from bits of bone that Biko had shaped and smoothed over the years. The bone checkers were far more irregular than the rocks, but they had so much character. I loved to feel them between my fingers, as if the marrow of the animal still lived within and spoke to me, guiding me how best to move.

Idony's dice were made of ironspruce, just like the board—hard and heavy, impervious to the heat and warmth of the many hands that had held them over the years. Biko cupped the dice between his palms and pretended to shake them hard, then pantomimed rolling them across the board. Since he wasn't playing this game, he instead set them gently down and turned to me.

“Did you hear?” he asked. “There's a gaming tournament upcoming at Knuckles & Bones.”

“Now how would Pali know of a place like that?” Idony shivered, as if just the name of the place disturbed her gentle vitality.

“Perhaps she has not,” Biko said, getting up from his chair and clapping both hands on Syndrian’s shoulders. My brother shook him hard in a gesture of overly aggressive celebration. “But guess what fopdoodle has been asked to make all the dice that will be used in the tournament?”

I let myself look at Syndrian’s face and was met by an answering stare, as if he’d been waiting for my eyes to find his. Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I focused my attention back on setting my pieces. But I couldn’t resist complimenting him, even if it drew uncomfortable attention to me.

“That comes as no surprise,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. I felt as though the depths of my affection for him would come through my words if I poorly chose even one of them. “You’re a gifted craftsman, Syndrian. Congratulations.”

“Just a bit of side work,” Syndrian explained. I nearly lost track of his words listening to the playful, deep melody of his voice. “Every year there’s more blood spilled than coins traded in the tournament. There’s a pot at the end of each round, and a final prize much as a month’s wages for most of those who play. Accusations against the dice are common. One honest man with no ties to any of the players should make the fairest dice.” He grinned, his wide smile setting something ablaze in my chest. “If fewer fights break out, I’ll have earned my fee.”

“You’ll have earned your feeeeee,” Biko sang, watching as his mother rolled a single die between her palms. “And if there are more fights...you might just lose one of your pretty cutler’s hands.”

My throat felt painfully dry at the thought. “Is that true?” I asked, picking up the other die. “Is the work dangerous? Might you really...”

“Not at all, miss.” Syndrian glared at my brother. “Though the place is called Knuckles & Bones, it’s just a job. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

A look passed between my brother and his friend, but neither said more on the matter. The fire crackled, spitting a spark against the hearth’s iron grate. Idony rolled the single die across the board and landed a five.

“Hmmm,” Biko chattered, no doubt already calculating in his head the various starting moves based on a roll of five.

We began every game with the players each taking one die and rolling it. The higher of the two rolls was awarded the opening turn, but the winning player could only move the checkers according to the numbers already rolled.

I took a deep breath, feeling the familiar excitement of a particularly fortuitous dice roll. Idony’s five meant that no matter how my die landed, she’d be assured of making a point or, at the least, an aggressive opening move. There was only one number that could win the hand for me now.

I cupped the dice, shook them, and rolled.

“Pali!” Biko pounded his fists against the table, while Syndrian raised his brows and smiled. Idony nodded, as if she’d fully expected this result.

With Idony’s five on the board, I won the roll by throwing a six. I did not hesitate or worry over the choice. I swiftly moved the checker in the twenty-four position on the outer board eleven spaces toward my home.

“The death jump.” Biko shook his head, tsking loudly through a frown. “Splitting a point on the opening move...”

“The Lover’s Leap,” Idony corrected. “Pali prefers to play a running game. Yes, she’s exposed a blot, but the rewards might be so much greater. A confident and assertive move.”

My brother sniffed, dramatically concerned over our differing strategies.

Idony picked up both dice and shook them between her hands. “Three, one!” She did not gloat as she moved her checkers into a defensive position. “Bar point.”

“See? See?” Biko clapped his hands roughly, then broke out into song. “The lead, Pali, you will not keep, not when you open with the Lover’s Leap!”

I lifted my chin at him before sticking the tip of my tongue between my lips and pulling a face. Biko barked a laugh, while Syndrian huffed. His lips were pressed together as if to hold

back laughter, the hint of a dimple shadowing his cheek. His amused expression brought another rush of heat to my cheeks, and I instinctively made an even sillier face.

“Your roll, dear.” Idony handed me the dice, and I clasped them between my hands.

I composed myself, took a deep breath, and looked over the familiar shapes of each checker on the board. My mind relaxed, and I began to see possibilities. Which checkers might make points and with what combination of numbers on a roll. I thought through the options and counted the distance between checkers so I could make a quick decision once the dice landed.

I could feel the heat of Syndrian’s large form shift as he leaned his elbows on the table. Biko tapped a foot nervously on the floor. Idony fanned out her hair, the fire flickering shadows across her face. I rubbed the dice between my palms and held my hands before my chest as if in prayer. Then I rolled.

Six. Five. *Again.*

“Noooo! How? The gods have favored Pali with good fortune!”

Without hesitation, I moved my exposed checker to share the spot with the one I’d positioned aggressively on the opening roll. A second Lover’s Leap. That meant my one vulnerable checker was now safe. Securely paired and stable, at least until I decided to separate them.

Although my victory wasn’t yet certain, I couldn’t stop smiling. I had a very comfortable lead. Unless my luck or diligence shifted dramatically, all of my pieces stood a very good chance of running to home without ever being caught.

Syndrian said nothing, but his face practically cheered for me. He understood that I’d played a strategy others would not have. If his eyes hadn’t sufficiently conveyed that he appreciated my game, the curve of his lips would have. I licked my lips and then quickly looked away, biting back a proud smile.

I cupped the dice in my hand, an idea forming in my mind. Knuckles & Bones was a pub in the shire of Kyruna. One I'd visited with my parents when I was young, on one of my father's many business trips to the neighboring shire. The gaming tournament's hefty pot might not be enough to replace a death mask, but winning might fund another form of escape from my unwanted betrothal.

My mouth went suddenly dry as I realized my betrothal meant so much more than a grim future. A life of secrets and lies. A life as the lady of a manor that was little more than a house of cards—so very fragile and easily toppled.

Whatever idle fantasies I'd enjoyed over the years, once I was a married woman, nothing about my friendships would remain the same. Would my husband refuse me time with these people? People who were technically not family, but estate staff? Would my intended, this crony of my father's, deny me time with the crofter and his mother? People I loved more passionately than I dared admit? Would the secrets of Biko's paternity remain hidden, even if my father no longer resided as lord of the Lombard land?

A set of crystal-clear blue eyes beneath curious, narrowed brows met mine. A twitch of concern furrowed Syndrian's forehead. I had no doubt my worried thoughts were likewise exposed by my expression. But this time, I could not look away from him. My pulse thundered and the game faded away. The voice of Biko and the heavy scrape of his chair against the floor... Idony's lilting laughter as she scolded her son... The distracted response from Syndrian, who somehow managed to listen to their chatter while locked in an intense staring contest with me.

I swallowed hard, the realization like a lump of stale bread in my throat. Being bound to my parents' secrets was only one of the reasons I could not abide an arranged marriage. While I may once only have allowed myself to consider a future with my brother's best friend in my dreams, now that the reality was before me—scant weeks, if not days away—I knew. Knew deep in my soul that I could not willingly marry another. Not when only one could ever have my heart.

My death mask had failed, and I was nearly penniless. But there was a tournament and prize money in Kyruna. No matter the risks I would have to undertake to pursue another escape, with my heart and future on the line...

I was more than ready to take the leap.

CHAPTER
TWO

The good fortune that had carried me through winning three out of five of last night's games held into the next afternoon. A light breeze from the window tossed the loose hairs that slipped past the hood of my riding cloak, a warm yet practical design custom crafted by my father's tailor. My mother had several like it for accompanying my father on short journeys.

I'd chosen the one with the simplest design. Dark brown in color, with a deep hood and sleeves unadorned by any trim or edging. While I might stand out in my riding dress, I could not help that I did not own any breeches; my mother resolutely refused to even consider them. I hoped a simple cloak would help me blend in with my fellow patrons and gamblers as much as possible, assuming I was successful in even finding the Knuckles & Bones pub.

I had no idea what type of place to expect, but if gambling, tournaments, and the name of the place provided any hint about the clientele, I suspected a fine day dress and coat would have sent the wrong kind of message. I was not a helpless noble touring the darkest parts of the realm for entertainment. I did not plan to put coins down on any but the games I played. Minding my precious pennies meant I would not waste even a single half silver that I did not hope to win back.

While I couldn't change my wardrobe, I could be thoughtful about it, and so I donned a plain riding dress and styled my hair beneath a scarf in a simple plait. I hoped my

appearance wouldn't harm my efforts to be welcomed as a serious player.

Around my waist, I secured a leather scabbard with a small dagger. It wouldn't provide any protection from sea trolls or vengersax, but a show of confidence and a sharp weapon might deter rogues should I encounter any on the road. I carried in my hands a large leather pouch that contained my backgammon board, dice, and pieces, along with several quarter silvers and pennies.

I again buried my death mask deep beneath my mattress with a small prayer for the gods to keep it hidden. Then I strode downstairs, unwilling to wait for Norwin to meddle in my business. The butler was in the main hall, bent over inspecting the angle at which firewood had been stacked beside the hearth.

"I must have a word with that boy..." he muttered under his breath, bemoaning the lack of symmetry of the wood pile but not bothering to adjust it himself.

"Norwin," I barked unnecessarily loudly. I did everything I could to temper my delight when the man nearly lurched out of his shoes.

"By the gods!" He whirled around, a well-veined hand at his chest. "Miss Lombard. Excuse my surprise. I did not hear you—"

"I'm off to the village," I interrupted, before he could comment on my clothes, shoes, or anything else. "I'm rather disappointed in the finish on my checkers. I plan to visit the Chandler to see what may be done. If they can wax the pieces, I'll likely stay while they complete the work. I can't say exactly when I'll return, so I'll plan to take dinner in my room this evening."

"Miss Lombard, allow me to—"

Before he offered to send someone with me or, worse, in my place, I held up a hand and smiled.

"I suspect Letti would love to visit with her mother. I plan to ask her to ride with me, Norwin."

That was a lie. I had no plans to invite the stable hand along, since I had no plan whatsoever to ride into *our* village, here in the shire of Omrora. I did plan to ride into *a* village. The one I hoped to find in Kyruna. But my story could not possibly bring her any trouble, so I bid Norwin a fine afternoon, soothing my conscience as I turned on my heel and hurried off to the stable.

I strode across the grounds of the Lombard estate, breathing in the fresh air and savoring the sweet sensation of freedom. At this hour, the household staff was fully occupied with their duties. My mother would be managing the treasury in her sitting room. My father had departed Omrora with several attendants early this morning. Now that I was free of Norwin, my escape was nearly complete.

Once I arrived at the stable, Letti looked at my riding dress in confusion. “Miss Lombard?” She nodded and gave me a guarded smile. It was most unusual to find me in the stable dressed for an unscheduled ride in the middle of the day. “Good afternoon. How may I help?”

Letti’s mother was one of the finest farriers in Omrora. Letti had practically grown up astride a horse and handled everything from the daily care of our stable to selecting which horse was best suited to the work required of it. I had made the ride to Kyruna only a handful of times in the past with my parents, always comfortably situated in the back of a cart. I remembered enough about the path that I trusted I could find it on my own. There were few well-traveled roads that connected the shires, so if I did not stray from cleared paths, I was confident I would reach my destination. But I would need a horse.

At a brisk pace on horseback, I would likely take an hour to reach the outskirts of Kyruna, possibly longer. Finding Knuckles & Bones, securing a stall for the horse in a strange village... That all might require even more time than I’d expected, so I was anxious to depart.

I trusted that one of my father’s least favorite horses would not be greatly missed if my father returned before I did, so I

requested the plain, reliable mare. “Would you ready Rowan for a ride, please?”

Letti’s forehead wrinkled as she considered my request. “Rowan, miss?”

I nodded, offering no further explanation.

My father’s stable hand cocked her chin at me. “Aye, miss. I would, but Rowan’s suffering from a bit of tenderness. It’s her ankle, you see.” She blushed and wrung her hands nervously in front of her leather apron. Inside the wide front pocket, she carried various tools, but now she tucked her hands into it and rocked back on her heels.

“Tenderness?” I asked, growing concerned. “Is she well?”

Letti nodded. “I’ve been resting her. I don’t mean to cause Lord Lombard any concern by her. I trust she’ll be more than capable of a short ride.”

I peered around the stable and noticed only one horse in its stall. It was the end of the workday, so the strongest horses were still in the fields with Biko. The best riding horses would have gone out with my father’s party this morning. That meant Rowan and the three or four remaining horses should have been freely grazing my father’s fields. If the mare was in the stable, that likely meant Letti wished to restrict her movements.

“Letti,” I asked gently, “If Rowan is ill or needs more care than you’re comfortable providing...”

She shook her head vigorously. “Miss, please. I’m quite sensitive to your father’s position on expenditures for any animal he feels might not recover. If he were to know that Rowan is...” She met my eyes, a quiet plea on her face. “She just needs a bit of rest. The ankle *will* heal. Idony is treating her with an herbal tonic every night. I mention it only because today might not be the best day to take the mare off the estate. I assure you, she will be well soon enough. And I will ready another quickly if you’ll give me just a few moments.”

This was the first I’d heard that Idony was working with the horses. I likewise had no idea she was applying her skills

to the healing arts. But I was not at all surprised. If Letti feared that my father would not support an animal incapable of doing its work, admitting as much to Idony had truly been a last resort. I would not compound her fears with my clandestine business.

“I’ll gladly ride any you can make ready,” I assured her. “I too favor Rowan,” I admitted, with a sincere smile. “I prefer character and strength over perfection, both in people and animals.”

Letti blinked rapidly, her eyes shimmering with gratitude and a hint of tears. “Thank you, miss. Will Poet do?”

My heart sank, but I had not the heart to disappoint the girl. “Of course,” I said.

Poet was distinctive and normally reserved for Norwin or other attendants when they rode into the village. Between her unusual coat and light eyes, she attracted much admiration in the square. Exactly the type of attention our butler enjoyed. Where I was going, however, I would have much preferred Rowan, with her beautiful but completely unremarkable coat.

Letti quickly brought the girl in from the eastern grassland and was leading her through the stable toward me when I stopped her with a request. “I’d like a torch as well. Please, Letti.”

The stable hand did not speak, but her eyes widened at my request. I hoped the set of my chin discouraged questions.

“Of course, miss.” She hastened to outfit the horse with the necessary equipment.

“Well, hello, lovely,” I whispered, scratching my nails along the whorls of natural red that painted her otherwise drab white coat. Then I sighed a deep, measured breath.

With my request, I’d given away the fact that I expected to be out with Poet possibly past nightfall. While I hated to reveal any aspect of my plans to anyone who might later be pressed for information, I preferred to ride under a dark sky with at least some protection from the ravenous beaks of the vengersax. The vicious, bloodthirsty birds feared fire. As long

as I could maintain a torch on the ride back, even after leaving the light from the village lamps in Kyruna, I should be safe enough on the dark road back to Omrora.

When Letti returned, I noticed the mare was not only carrying a torch but a large cask of clean water.

“The water is for you, miss,” Letti said, without meeting my eyes. “From my own well supply. Should you grow thirsty while you’re out.”

I nodded my thanks and scolded myself for not having thought to pack water for the several hours I would be traveling on the road. I gave the girl a firm press of my hands as she handed me the reins. Allied in our shared secrets, I knew all I needed now was to ride. My future—a future that I might control and shape—awaited.



I REACHED Kyruna just as the afternoon sun began to settle in the western horizon. I had plenty of time before nightfall, so I rode Poet through the village, my hood pulled close over my face. Kyruna was nothing like I remembered from my visits as a child. Either that or the place had changed much over the years.

What I remembered as a quiet village—with all the typical shops and market carts, a small inn, and the office of the local shire-reeve—was now abuzz with people. Adults, teens, and even children passed quickly through the square, loudly talking and bargaining over goods for sale. Many people wore expensive-looking garments made from fine fabrics, but there was a sense of deception here, as though the clothes had been poorly or hastily constructed to give the impression of wealth but would easily fall apart. The villagers in doublets and fine shoes likewise appeared slightly off to me, like fish that had just begun to spoil—but only just. The working folk looked weary, as most did in every shire in the realm, but somehow also shifty and nervous.

There was a very palpable feeling of watching and being watched here. When I rode into my home village of Omrora, a shire easily as large if not larger than Kyruna, I would scarcely attract the notice of the merchants and shopkeepers. Even the other customers wandering between carts, chasing after children, or carrying goods to the stables were cordial but took no particular notice of me—or anyone else for that matter.

Here I felt the uncomfortable sensation of being looked at, of standing out as a stranger. Though perhaps her unusual markings were drawing eyes to the spotted mare and not to me. Riding on a horse of such rare coloring was not helping me blend in, so I ducked my head deeper into my hood and dismounted. I led Poet through the square, peeking at the names on signs and failing to find anything even remotely resembling this Knuckles & Bones place.

I desperately wanted to stop and ask my way, but even walking beside the horse, I drew curious looks. Stares that followed my movements just a little too closely.

“Come, girl.” I tugged on the reins and led Poet toward the office of the shire-reeve. But once I found it, that too was a dead end. The place looked deserted, as if the person who occupied the position hadn’t visited the office in quite some time. No notices were posted outside the front door, so I assumed there was no curfew or quarantine or other local regulations that a traveler passing through would need to be aware of. However, it struck me as incredibly odd that there was no noticeable presence in the office of the shire-reeve. Surely there had to be someplace where the villagers and businesses paid taxes? Recorded births and deaths?

My thoughts drifted to Syndrian. If he traveled this way regularly, perhaps he could shed some insight into the unusual feelings this shire evoked. As I thought of the man, my cheeks warmed, and I immediately shoved the image of his brilliant eyes and beautiful smile from my mind. I knew so little about him, other than what I’d learned over the years when our visits to the crofter overlapped. Exactly how he and Biko had become friends I did not know. But over the past thirteen years, seeing him at the cottage, playing games, passing

time... His presence added so much to the visits with Biko and Idony, whom I loved with all my heart. I felt a little pang of guilt admitting that when Syndrian wasn't visiting my brother, his absence disappointed me.

I shook my head and hurried on. Foolish thoughts of Syndrian would only distract me from my purpose here. Watching the direction in which the people around me traveled, I tried to make sense of where the villagers lived, where they traveled for entertainment after the close of business. But there seemed to be no natural flow of movement. Some people traveled north, others south. Some seemed to zigzag their way as if leaving the square, changing their minds, and then heading back. None of this made any sense to me.

Back in Omrora, the shire was organized around the village in a manner fairly easy to navigate, but this place was altogether different. And disconcerting.

A chill crept into the air as the sun dipped lower in the sky. Time was passing far too quickly. If I didn't find this tavern before sundown, I would be back on the road to Omrora at the most dangerous hour with nothing at all to show for my efforts. A boy of maybe ten years of age hurried past, a loaf of bread gripped under his arm and his chin lowered to his chest.

"Excuse me." I waved at him, finally giving in to the need to ask for help. I hoped I'd chosen the most harmless of those who might provide guidance. "Would you direct me to the public stable?"

The child widened his eyes, and I could have sworn I saw him look over his shoulder before shaking his head. I grimaced at his rejection, but a woman passing by stopped and, without saying a word, pointed to a path that led in the opposite direction from which I'd come.

I nodded in thanks to her, not fully understanding why people here seemed so...fearful. Strangers passing through Omrora were common, and I'd given directions and made conversation with travelers more times than I could count. Here, though, there seemed to be a dark presence of which

these people were constantly mindful. I twisted my lips as I realized this was not that much different than the pressure I lived under every day. Norwin, seeking governance over my every move. My father and mother, the guardians of many dark secrets. I felt suddenly very tired, weary of the lies and the pressure of constant scrutiny.

Instead of getting back on my horse and riding home, though, I hurried down the path the woman had marked and did finally land at a large public stable. I approached the stable hand, my fingers suddenly tight on Poet's reins and an odd sensation of caution overtaking me.

"Good evening, sir," I said. "May I inquire the cost to keep my mare?"

He sniffled aggressively, moving something very wet and deep within his bulbous nose. "Where ya headed?" He too scanned a look past my shoulders as he spoke.

On instinct, I looked behind me briefly, but the depth of my hood prevented me from seeing anything. The weather was growing cold, an unnerving damp in the air, and with it, my resolve to find this tavern shrunk to a tiny, tight thing in my chest. But I forced myself to think of my soon-to-be fiancé, a member of the Otleich family who I'd never even met, and tried to gather my courage.

I knew what destiny awaited me when I went home. I had to be brave enough to face any opponent, and certainly this strange little stableman, if it meant one last opportunity to escape.

"I hope to find a particular pub," I said. "A place that hosts a gaming tournament."

If my admission surprised him, the man did not reveal it. He simply cleared the phlegmy thing from his nose by pinching one nostril closed and blowing roughly until the contents landed in a viscous blob on the dirt in front of my shoes.

I never took my eyes from his face, instead lifting a brow in challenge. "Do you know of the place?" I pressed. "I

believe it's called—”

“I know it,” he said, cutting me off before I could say the name. He narrowed his eyes at me and looked from my mare to my cloak, as if appraising what answer he would give to one such as me. Unfortunately, I had no idea what he thought one such as me was. Was I an out-of-place noble? An easy target for a con or heist? I parted my cloak to reveal the dagger secured at my waist. His expression didn't change, but he did seem to notice my sad little weapon. “Half silver until the place closes,” he said, his voice rough. “Toss in an extra penny, and I'll tell you the way.”

“A half silver?” I echoed, not bothering to mask my indignation. “Sir, that's easily three times the price any decent stableman would charge anywhere else in the realm.”

“Well, yer not anywhere else,” he said, wiping what was left of the contents of his nose against the back of his hand. “And if ya wanna stable here, it's a half silver.”

“Good evening, then,” I said, turning around to leave. I'd walked maybe ten vigorous paces away when a voice cried out after me.

“Oy! Miss!”

I stopped but did not turn back.

He noisily cleared his throat, so I glared at him over my shoulder. This time, I tugged the hood back just enough that I could see his face. The late-afternoon sky was bright as the skin of the pink delight apples Biko grew in his orchard. A cluster of clouds, thick and dense, stretched lazily across the setting sun, like a house cat unfurling its limbs. I flared my nostrils slightly, picking up no immediate scent of rain. I turned to see the stableman motioning me back, but I did not move.

“I need come no closer if you plan to steal my coins,” I called.

The man soured and gestured vigorously. “Come, now, miss. I've room enough for yer mare.”

I walked back toward the stall, still ready to climb astride the horse and head home if this exchange did not go as planned. I could not overpay for the mare any more than I could toss coins into the sea. Even though I may have looked out of place here, I had as much right as any to investigate this pub, and I'd not part so easily with my limited funds.

The man nodded sheepishly and held out a hand. "Penny per hour," he said. "Two now. Pay the rest when you return."

I nodded and slipped my hand into the pouch for my coins.

"But don't go losing all yer coins in the games," he gruffed. "Or I keep the mare."

There was little risk of that happening, as I did not plan to even play tonight. But rather than respond to his warning, I offered him the pennies and passed along the reins.

"I don't expect to be more than an hour," I said. "If I leave a third penny, would you provide directions to my destination?"

At the man's clipped nod, I took another penny from my pouch and handed it over.

"You're not the type to give a woman false directions...are you, sir?" I studied his face and took comfort in his immediate response.

"I'm a businessman." He pouted. "Can't blame me fer trying to make a bit o' extra off a lady who's got it, can ya? But I'm not that sort, no, miss." He pointed to a plume of dark smoke drifting high into the air. "That's yer place. You can see the sign from here if ya squint."

While I hoped this stable hand was not the sort of *businessman* who would lead me down a path and follow to rob me or worse, I decided to trust the sincerity of his displeasure at my question. And while I couldn't quite, even squinting, read the words on the sign, I could discern what looked like a large tavern set back from the road. Smoke rising into the sky like that meant cooking, I assumed, so there might be food even if that was not the gaming house I sought. My stomach reminded me I'd likely miss dinner, and in my haste

to dress and leave the house, I'd eaten only a few bites of lunch.

“Thank you, sir. I'll be back shortly for the mare. My name is—”

He held both hands up, as if to physically brace himself from the impact of my words. “No names, miss. Please.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Up where yer going, 'tis the policy. No names. I'd prefer not to know it myself. Makes doing business a lot easier knowing as little as possible about the comings and goings of customers.” He pointed to my mare and then to me. “I'll not forget she's yours.” He looked nervous then, a sheen of sweat illuminating his wide balding head. “Just remember,” he said, sounding rough again. “Penny an hour.” Then he took my horse, still laden with the water cask and torch, and led her back into a stall.

No names... This place grew more unusual the longer I stayed, but I found no reason to dispute a system that clearly worked here. If I didn't share my name, there would be no evidence that I'd ever been to Kyrana. As long as I made it home safely. I tugged my hood back over my face and set my eyes on the smoke rising through the wild gray clouds.

I kept my face low as I walked, avoiding meeting the eyes of the people scurrying about their business. Nerves fluttered in my belly, but I did not feel afraid—I was excited. The scent of delicious roasted meats wafted on the air. The passing of horses and carts full of people and goods made the busy shire seem for a moment just like Omrora. But it wasn't home. And I didn't think this place, or a place like this, could ever feel like home. As badly as I wanted to escape my destiny, I was beginning to realize in this strange new shire how very difficult running away from home and being reborn might be.

But I was in no way deterred from my plan. I had an appetite for adventure, the kind of my own making. I would not remain a pawn in my parents' lives as long as I had any moves left to make.

Despite years of trying to have more children, including, I was certain, trying for a son who might more easily follow in my father's footsteps, my parents had given up hope that I might have siblings. Since they couldn't replace me with more malleable offspring, they fought me, pushing me like an unwilling checker against a fractured board. They controlled what I studied, who I spoke to. What entertainments I enjoyed. And now they would arrange a marriage between me and one of the many members of the Otleich crime family to ensure that my father's dark pacts stayed in place for another generation.

This tavern might be my last hope.

I hurried toward the unassuming structure. For a tavern, it was very large, as if it had been built for another purpose entirely but had found its calling after many troubled years. A chimney climbed through the simple peaked roof, spitting dark smoke into the sky. A slight echo of cheering voices carried through the walls. Out front, a carved wooden sign bearing the name Knuckles & Bones hung from a metal arm that swayed slightly with the wind. There wasn't a soul outside or walking into the place, and yet the window glass was bright with firelight.

I walked up to the door and tugged the handle, but it did not open. A small flap of wood at about my eye level was pulled aside. A pair of eyes peered out, though the door remained closed.

"What's yer business?" a voice demanded.

"I'm here for a drink and a game," I said.

The man behind the door glared at me. "And yer name?"

I pressed my lips together, unsure what to say. The odious stable hand had told me there were no names used here. Was that a lie? Something to discredit me or make me look a fool to those who ran this place? I considered saying I had no name, but at the last moment, I doubted myself.

"I'm..."

I'd uttered only the first sound when the small door shuttered closed with a violent bang.

"No!" I clenched my hands into fists and muttered under my breath. By the gods, it had been a test. A test that I'd failed. My heart thundered in my chest as I realized I'd not just blundered, I might have blown my entire strategy. The door was closed, and the sun would set within the hour. I'd ruined my one and only chance to get inside that pub.

I turned to walk back to the stable, grateful at least that I'd save a few pennies, when something inside me lured me back. I could not give up. Not without exhausting myself trying. I took a deep breath and then stormed up to the door. I yanked the handle hard, giving the thing a vicious shake. Once again, the door didn't budge. And once again, the tiny window opened and the voice behind it demanded my name.

"I have no name," I said as soon as he uttered the question.

"Ahhhh!" The voice sounded pleased. "Are ye a friend o'the place, then?"

I'd not been prepared for this sort of question, but I nodded. "Indeed, sir," I confirmed. "I'm a friend to this place and all those inside."

The small door slammed shut, and my heart froze as I waited. After the unlatching of a great noisy lock, the door swung open. A very old man, his shoulders severely stooped, peered up at me. He was at least a foot shorter than I was, truly not much taller than that ten-year-old boy I'd asked for directions. Although he might have been average height before age had bent his spine. He grinned up at me with a stiff-looking twist of his neck, each of his long narrow teeth separated by uncommonly wide spaces.

"Welcome in, *friend*." The way he emphasized the word made me certain this was a hint of some kind. "Keep your belongings close. Management ain't responsible for anything that happens in here."

Anything?

I dared not let the man see my concern, and I nodded, giving him a warm smile. “Of course,” I agreed, patting the dagger under my cloak. “Thank you, *friend*.”

He chuckled audibly, then fastened the lock and resumed his post on the backless wooden chair that kept his eyes level with his peek-through window.

Inside, the tavern was unlike anything I’d ever seen. To be fair, I’d only been in a pub a handful of times and never without Biko at my side, steering me toward a table and ordering ale for me with his booming, boisterous voice.

If I’d thought I felt the eyes of Kyruna on me in the square, here I felt practically invisible. The tavern was large, and in every corner, some game or activity consumed the attention of the group playing as well as several spectators passionately betting on and cheering for the outcome of the contest.

I wandered through the motley crowd of people, some finely dressed and many with hands still filthy from the day’s work. Folk dressed in formal, elegant clothes that looked custom-tailored, both played and watched. Some very poor players, their breeches thin with wear and tunics wrinkled and stained, counted their pennies together in corners.

There were two bars, one at each end of the tavern, and a roaring fire in a central fireplace. Tables and chairs filled the space, but most were moved into circles so that a single table could accommodate two or four players while a ring of watchers could either stand by or sit. I wandered between games as shouts pierced the air—some elated, which were followed by the clinking sounds of coins being traded. And some were angry, aggressive, followed by the pounding of fists and boots.

Women in identical dresses, the front panels cut scandalously low, sailed past feet and arms, tables and chairs, navigating the crowd with the ease of low-flying birds. They carried trays laden impossibly heavy with mugs or plates of food, and they shouted, “Behind!” or “Beside ya, friend!” in warning anytime someone got a little too close to their flight path.

I peeked at the games being played, trying to hold back a delighted smile. Through the smells of sweat and ale, filthy clothes and fine perfumes, something in me caught the excitement of the games. I listened to the dice players, seemingly betting over nothing more than the outcome of a roll. Games of bluff, games of chance—Knuckles & Bones had it all.

At one long table, players lined both sides and drank full mugs of ale as fast as they could. The player who found a coin at the bottom of his mug “lost,” and had to add a coin of a matching value to a large pot at the middle of the table. A serving girl stood by at each end of the table, holding a huge bucket of ale, ready to refill the mugs after the losing player deposited a penny. I couldn’t quite make sense of that game, but there was a flurry of mugs being passed about and quite a lot of shouting, so I expected the stakes were quite a bit higher than simply the loss of a coin.

In the far corner of the tavern, the wall was marked with a large X that looked carved into the wall. An offensively dirty man held a common axe in his hand. His instrument was not the fine work a craftsman like Syndrian might hone. This poor tool looked hardly suited to breaking branches into sticks for a campfire. But the player gripped it intently and stood behind a line marked in ash on the wooden floor.

A supervising player shouted, “Axe!” at the top of his voice, and with an unbelievable burst of strength, the man threw the thing at the wall. A chorus of booing followed his attempt, and the defeated man stomped toward the wall. He yanked his axe from where it had landed and grimaced as he sheathed the disgraced weapon at his waist. I assumed that meant he’d scored poorly, but was fascinated enough to keep watching.

A gentleman in a fine burgundy-colored doublet held up his hand as the group gathered around the game fell quiet. He unrolled a handsome leather sheath, which held a set of slim, highly polished throwing knives. The gentleman removed one by an ornate ring-shaped handle and closed his eyes, as if praying to the knife. Then, with a click of his heels and a brisk

step, he took his place behind the same line where the axe thrower had stood. The man closed his eyes, and with a cheeky grin, he flicked his wrist and landed his throwing knife in a place that must have been incredibly accurate or perhaps earned a good score, because the spectators burst into rowdy cheers.

I wandered through the place, studying the people and the games. Mugs of ale were spilled, delicious-smelling food was eaten and shared, but what interested me most was determining whether anyone was playing backgammon. I walked the entire tavern, noticing once I'd settled into the place that there was a steady flow of traffic in and out of the tavern, but not through the front door. The back door was unlocked, and it was through there that the "friends" of Knuckles & Bones passed.

I held the sack with my backgammon board in it and wandered the tables, scouting for a game I knew how to play. As I caught sight of a standard checkerboard, a vicious snarl erupted from one of the men hovering over it. He lurched to his feet and pointed at his opponent.

"That was a bloody cheat, *friend*. And all who watch here know it!"

The accused knocked back his chair and rose to his feet. Grime stained the crinkles at the corners of his eyes as he glared. "That's a godforsaken lie, *friend*. All here who watch know my words to be true."

In what seemed like an instant, the table was overturned, and the first man threw his body atop the opponent. The barrage of fists that followed was difficult to hear over the cheers and chanting of the crowd. Onlookers gathered in a circle, some standing back, some creeping closer as coins changed hands while bets were made on the outcome of the fight.

A sick feeling crept up my throat as I realized this was no good-natured brawl like I'd seen between Biko and Syndrian. The slaps and nudges that they so playfully beat upon each other lacked the rage and unrestrained force of what I was

seeing. Worse was hearing it. Even over the shouts of the crowd, I couldn't ignore the wet sounds of fists striking jaws, of hair being torn, and finally, awfully, a knife being drawn and slicing deep into the soft, flabby flesh of a man.

At the first spurt of blood, the crowd hushed again, only to grow violently loud with cheering. The bets were called in, and coins were exchanged as the victor of the fight staggered to his feet, sweat pouring from his stringy hair. The tip of his blade dripped blood. The man on the floor was motionless, his eyes staring up at the ceiling, while a dark pool puddled beneath his back.

Immediately, chaos erupted in the tavern. Four enormous men, larger than even my brother, shoved their way through the crowd, their boots thundering across the floor. Women shrieked, and players began running, some for the rear door and others toward the bar. A server dropped a tray loaded with full mugs and food, nearly falling as she stumbled through the mess on the floor.

One of the four enormous men—dressed in a vest of mail, a vile scowl on his face and a menacing-looking spiked flail in his fist—rushed toward me. I froze as the reality of what I was seeing seemed to slow the scene around me. I felt light-headed and hot, the stench of hot blood and spilled ale filling my nose. I swallowed against the flood of saliva in my mouth just as my arm was roughly grabbed. I tried to resist my captor, but I was pulled close to the man's face as his urgent whisper pressed against my ear.

“Come quickly now.”

He took my hand and dragged me past the scene and toward the rear door. I blinked in disbelief, hardly feeling the fingers laced through mine as I numbly followed the distinctive long blond ponytail of Syndrian Serlo.

CHAPTER
THREE

I stumbled through unfamiliar scrub on the path, my fingers laced through Syndrian's. The sun had already begun to set, sending dense purple clouds racing across the sky. The weather was changing quickly. A brisk wind tossed leaves and small twigs along our heels as we ran—not walked—away from Knuckles & Bones.

He led me wordlessly back in the direction of the stable, where I assumed he'd also kept a horse. But his fingers tightened on mine as three men dressed in black, hoods obscuring their faces, approached on galloping horses. There was nothing around us—no trees to duck behind, no crowd to blend into. Just a large man with unusual hair and a very out-of-place woman fleeing the scene of a violent fight. I remembered the eyes of the injured player staring blankly at the ceiling, and my knees wobbled. Perhaps the scene of a death. A murder.

A tug on my hand brought me chest to chest with Syndrian. He slipped one hand behind my neck and held my waist with the other.

“Look at me, miss,” he whispered. “Please. Just go along with it.”

I had no idea what I was supposed to go along with, but as the hooded riders came closer, Syndrian pressed his forehead against mine. My breath caught in my chest. I desperately wondered if he was going to kiss me, but his hand held the back of my head steadily, trapping the hood to hide my face. He closed his eyes and clutched me unbearably close, his lips

drawn tight and his hold on me firm. To the passing riders, we likely looked like a couple giving in to a moment of passion. The angle of my hood would shield them from seeing that we were not really kissing at all.

The pounding of my heart brought the blood to my cheeks and shallow, excited breaths between my lips. I leaned into Syndrian, lacing my hands behind him and gripping him with all my strength. He lowered his face slightly, nudging my nose with his as two riders galloped past. The third, however, slowed as it approached us. Syndrian moved his hips ever so slightly against mine, holding me closer and releasing a deliciously convincing sound of passion from between his parted lips.

Under any other circumstances, the heat and dizziness I felt at that sound would have been exquisite, exciting, but desperate to convince the third rider to pass us by, I kept quiet and tried to ignore the inappropriate response of my body to his. Heat seeped through my core, sparring with tight prickles of fear. I closed my eyes and drew my lower lip into my mouth, then bit down as I listened to the slowing hoofbeats as the rider approached.

Time seemed to stand still. The wind teased the hem of my riding dress, carrying with it the scent of the man who held me. Smoke and ash and a distinctly masculine fragrance like rich almond oil filled my senses. I drew in a heated, unsteady breath as something slow and sensuous glided through my belly, powerful desire outplaying my nerves.

The horse and rider stopped uncomfortably close. A snort of the air and the stamp of hooves against the dirt let me know we were being watched, examined. But just as quickly as he'd paused, the rider urged his horse on. Once he'd ridden off toward the rest of his party, Syndrian released me.

"Hurry," he whispered, lacing his hand through mine again and taking off at a run.

We reached the stable, and Syndrian nodded to the stableman, then tossed a quarter silver at him and wordlessly motioned for him to collect both horses. I could now pause to

collect my thoughts as images, vivid and violent, rushed through my mind. The strangled sounds of the fight. The heated stench of foul breath as the gamblers cheered on the violence. I shook my head to clear the memories, but when Syndrian suddenly released my hand, I noticed the absence of his touch. And noticed too how disappointingly empty I felt without it.

The stableman averted his eyes, looking down at his feet as a flood of people streamed down the path. I now understood Syndrian's speed and urgency. He'd had the foresight to leave before a rush of people fled the tavern. Had he anticipated the riders? Who were the hooded horsemen? Questions raced through my terrified mind.

"Hurry," Syndrian said in a low whisper. "We'll not want to be seen."

I mounted Poet after a quick check to ensure her torch and water were still in place. Syndrian climbed astride his horse, adjusting a spiked mace at his waist. He led us on a brisk ride in the opposite direction of the road leading back home, taking me deep into a wood with close-growing birch.

Once the growth was too dense to pass through on horseback, Syndrian dismounted. He led Poet and his gelding through the trees until we were hidden beneath a thick canopy of tall branches, the leaves at the ends lacing together like fingers interwoven in prayer. He reached for my hand and helped me down, then took my cask of water and handed it to me. I took a sip, then offered the same to him. He drank like a man who'd never tasted such sweet water.

"I'm finished," I said, shaking my head and urging him to take his fill. I regretted it as soon as I said the words though. Sipping from the same cask was the closest my lips would likely ever get to his, and now I'd missed my chance.

He nodded, stowed away the nearly empty container, and rubbed his hands over his eyes. "Lady Pali..."

"I have no name here," I reminded him, a weary half smile on my lips.

He shook his head and began pacing nervous circles. “How did you— You can’t...”

I lowered my chin and waited while he muttered, sounding furious and panicked. He rasped incomplete sentences under his breath, until finally, he strode before me and met my eyes, anguish on his face.

“Why? What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be...”

“The tournament,” I said. “I hoped to...”

I let the words die on my lips. I could not explain. No one yet knew of my impending betrothal. Only me, my parents, and Idony—and she’d sworn she would not share the information with Biko. At least, not yet. While my reasons for wanting to be here made sense to me, I couldn’t stand the thought of admitting to Syndrian what my plans were. What kind of dangerous game I was truly playing.

His bright blue eyes glittered, small points of fire in the descending twilight. “This is not the place for one like you.”

“One like me?” Indignation sharpened my words. “Nothing about me is as you may imagine,” I snapped.

“Is that so?” he huffed. He was beside me in an instant, lifting my chin with his fingers. “If you only knew the things I imagine about you.”

As if his admission surprised even him, he released me and stepped away, increasing the distance between us. My breath lodged in my chest as I puzzled over his words. Could it be that Syndrian Serlo felt something for me? The enigmatic cutler, my brother’s best friend. A man I knew so little about and yet somehow instinctively trusted. More than trusted... yearned for.

“We should return. It’s not safe here.” The coldness in his voice made me doubt any warmth I may have previously perceived in him.

“Not safe here in this wood?” I asked. “Or in Kyruna?”

“Both,” he said. “I’ll explain when we’re home. Please. Let’s go.”

As I mounted my mare, I realized Syndrian had not packed a torch. I wondered if that meant he'd not intended to return to Omrora tonight. I wondered if perhaps there was someone at the tavern or someone here in Kyruna he'd intended to stay with.

"You've no torch," I said quietly, settling onto Poet's back. The words hung between us like an accusation—an accusation I had no right to make.

He grunted, his long ponytail grazing his back as he nodded. "Aye."

"Whyever not?" I blurted, curiosity getting the better of me. "Were you planning to stay with someone?" As soon as the words passed my lips, I regretted speaking them.

Syndrian's penetrating gaze roamed my face, as if searching for the hidden question behind the one I'd asked. "Aye," he admitted. "But not in the way you might imagine."

"I am certain you don't have the first idea what I imagine." I echoed his words but refused to look at him. The sour taste of jealousy was unfamiliar on my tongue. Jealous of what or whom—and why I allowed myself to feel anything at all for my brother's cutler friend—I did not want to know.

"Will it be safe to ride back into the village? To light my torch by the public lamps?" I worried my lower lip with my teeth, embarrassed to admit another item I'd failed to pack in my haste to leave home was a fire striker.

"Absolutely not. We cannot go back the way we came." He shuddered, a powerful movement that shook the ponytail that rested on his shoulder. "I'll take care of your torch. I'll take care of you." He patted the sheath at his waist and then frantically clamped his hands around the perfectly worn leather. Muttering a stream of soft curses, he met my eyes, his chin set firm.

"My fire striker must have come loose as we fled the pub, or perhaps that stableman..."

A sinking realization raised the hairs on my arms, and I too, trembled. With no way to light my torch, we would be

exposed the entire ride back.

“The vengersax are thick between here and Omrora,” he confirmed, tapping his mace. “This might buy time for one of us to escape, but I don’t think we’d stand a chance against even two of them without a fire. If a flock were to come upon us...” He unwrapped his cloak from the back of his horse. He shrugged it over his broad shoulders and buried his distinctive hair deep inside the hood. He urged the beast close to me and held out a hand. “Give me the torch,” he said. “I’ve no time to waste.”

“What do you mean to do?” I asked, my palms clammy.

“I’ll ride quickly back into the village,” he vowed, gritting his teeth and again rubbing his face, anxiety plain on his expression. “Stay here. Stay hidden. It’s not safe for you—”

“What about those hooded riders?” I asked. “Do they work for the shire-reeve? Will they bring order to the...” I had no words for what I’d seen back there. A crime?

The chaotic crowd we’d fled could not have been managed by three riders. I was certain the haste in Syndrian’s actions meant he knew what we would have faced had we stayed behind. Those riders were not sent to restore order. They were likely guardians, or worse, on the payroll of the family whose influence and treasury controlled this place.

He barked a laugh and confirmed my suspicions. “No one works for the shire-reeve in these parts.” He motioned for my torch. “Please, Lady P—*miss*, please. I’ll ride ahead and light the torch. I will return as quickly as I am able. Do you have at least a quarter silver in your purse? If anything happens to me, you must ride southwest to the inn. They’ll have a room reserved under the word Sin.”

My body jolted at the implication. Had he reserved a room for the night so he could engage in sinful activity with someone here in Kyruna?

He shook his head as if reading my thoughts, or perhaps the horrified expression I was unable to keep from my face. “No one here knows the word is also conveniently short for

my name. Do *not* give your real name under any circumstances. I keep a room reserved at the inn in case my time at the pub runs late. The deposit I left will cover the stay, but they'll charge extra for every twig for the fire and every cup of water you drink. Watch your expenses there. Thieves are thick in Kyruna, and they will not hesitate to try and relieve you of every coin."

I had precious few coins for the taking. But more than that, spending a night alone in an inn, not knowing what had become of Syndrian... There was simply no way I could allow that to happen. He'd secured my safe escape from the tavern before I even understood I was in danger. If all we needed was fire for the torch before riding back to Omrora... A thrill seized my chest as I considered what I might do. A terrified, but exhilarating thrill as I contemplated doing something long forbidden.

"I would send you there now, but I fear with what happened..." He grimaced and roughly paced a small circle. "One small act of violence can set off...reactions." He shook his head and rolled his shoulders, as if bracing already for a fight. "No place in Kyruna will be stable tonight, but if we have no other option, make your way to the inn and lock the door. Secure it closed with any furniture you can move. I'll come for you in the morning once things settle down."

"You can't be serious," I insisted, shaking my head. I refused to consider any plan that would separate us. "What will you do? Sleep under the stars with a torch at your feet so you're not pecked to death? No, Syndrian. No."

"What do you mean no?" The tilt of his chin and the tightness in his knitted brows belied his confusion. "You cannot mean to ride home without a torch. I cannot abide—"

"I think I have another option. I just need a moment." I prodded Poet back the way we'd come, urging her deeper into the thick wood.

"Lady, please!" Syndrian followed, leaping from his horse.

Twilight was giving way to early evening, darkness seeping over the sky like wine spilled on table linen. I weighed

my options and a strategy formed quickly in my mind. I squinted and rubbed my forehead as I played through the risks. If I was able to light the torch quickly, I might arrive home in time to join my parents at the table for dinner. I would be far more successful discouraging questions about my afternoon adventure if I returned home in time to share the evening meal.

However, I wasn't certain I could light the torch at all, let alone quickly.

My hands trembled even considering what I was about to do. Precious minutes would be wasted if I tried and was unsuccessful. Every moment we stayed here, hidden among the trees, was time we could have spent lighting the torch in the village. At least that outcome was clear. We would find fire at the public lamps... Yet we might also find a crowd and chaos that would cause further delays...

The hooded riders would be looking for either justice or vengeance. Syndrian hadn't said as much, but if the Otleich family really did control Kyruna, I suspected the riders were agents of the family.

Those riders likely were the only means of enforcing the "law" here, which in this case would be little more than shire justice decreed by those in power. The kind of power wielded by my future husband's family.

Riding back to the village was a risk that promised uncertain rewards. Doing this myself, while uncertain as well, was the path I much preferred to take.

"I can do this." I spoke the words out loud, in part to soothe my own frazzled nerves, and partly to reassure Syndrian. He had no idea what I was capable of. No one did—including myself. Which was why I was all the more committed to trying.

Luck had been with me the past few hours, the past several days, in fact. Other than losing the death mask, I'd had nothing but winning hands in every game I'd played. This was no different. A game with life and death stakes that perhaps felt more immediate than what awaited me at home, but still... Whether I won big or lost it all, I had to try.

With Syndrian rubbing the dark stubble on his chin, obviously holding back his words, I climbed from Poet's back. After looping her reins around a sturdy low-hanging branch, I scanned the ground around my feet for the right kindling.

Syndrian followed close behind, his voice at my back. "Did you carry a fire striker?" he asked. "Allow me, miss. I can—"

I shook my head. "No, Syndrian. Please..."

I was about to do something I hadn't tried since I was thirteen years old. Well, if I were being honest with myself, I had tried this, but in secret. Always hidden away. Sometimes in the small village cabin my father did not know I'd discovered and visited when I could get away. Other times, in my rushed movements through the manor, as I flew past candles and lamps. And then always, almost always on the walks to the crofter's cottage, I used the lamps that illuminated the grounds to keep away the vengersax to practice.

Aside from the many places I worked my gifts in secret, the last time I'd ever been so bold, so careless as to be seen by anyone who understood was that day. When my father caught me. The memory flashed back to me, sudden and sharp like a blow to the face.

Norwin had been oblivious, too worked up over an accumulation of dust beneath a settee to notice that I stood in the doorway of the main hall. I'd scarcely touched my fingertips together, intending to play a harmless prank on the annoying butler, when a hand gripped the back of my hair so hard, my teeth rattled in my head. My father stood behind me in the main hall, witnessing my every move.

He released my hair and ordered me to my room. I, stunned and sobbing hot tears, ran to my quarters, Lord Lombard following close behind. I wanted to collapse in a fit of weeping and moaning, but I walked into my room with my chin lowered and shoulders back. I remained unnaturally quiet, as I knew my father would expect.

"*Our magic is dead.*" Lord Lombard seethed, bending so his face was a finger's breadth from mine. "If you ever attempt

to use yours again,” he said, his eyes vicious, “I will kill you myself, Palmeria. Do you understand? I will burn your body and every record that you ever existed will be wiped from this realm. I have that power. Over many, many people. Especially you.”

I nodded, tears drenching the front of my dress. My lips trembled, and my head throbbed from the force of my father’s pull on my hair. I couldn’t apologize, couldn’t speak. I knew what my father and mother had told me over the years. About the unholy curse of magic that bound us forever to secrecy. My father had buried his magic so deeply, he believed he had destroyed it. He insisted the only safe path was for everyone like us to do the same.

“Kill your abilities,” my father demanded. “Your fate is in your hands. I’ll not remind you again.” He left me alone then, and I launched myself into bed and buried my face in the pillows.

My mother came to my quarters just a few moments later, summoned no doubt by the sound of my miserable tears. Either that or perhaps sent by my father. One of his favorite phrases was, “Deal with her,” and he uttered it then like a curse.

Lady Lombard did deal with me, slamming my door so hard, the room seemed to tremor with the force.

She did not hug me but stood over my bed, her lips set in a resigned frown. She did not bend to smooth my hair or wipe my tears. Her face was a mask. Emotionless as death, she handed me a key.

“Our lives are possible because of very, very powerful people,” she said stiffly. “Many years before you were born, before that bastard son was conceived, your father made deals with those people to protect himself. To create a future for his family that would never have been possible otherwise. A future that would be denied to those who use magic. Are you listening, Palmeria?”

I sat upright and clutched the oddly shaped key in my hand. I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“We are forever bound to the work your father does with the Otleich family. This home, our clothes, the rich food on our table... We owe all of it to them. Without them, without the contracts your father has negotiated, we would not simply be cast out from all this... We would be killed. You understand this, yes?” Her voice was calm, so matter of fact as she explained how easily I could be scrubbed from Efimia, from the known universe. She echoed what my father had said, and I believed my parents meant every word.

There was a time, ages ago, when all beings of all types and origins lived openly. But history hadn't been kind to Tutovl. Or, perhaps because of Tutovl, history hadn't been kind to beings like my parents, like myself. I understood what my parents meant, even if I could not accept it. But in that moment, with my mother's icy stare seeping into my very soul, I simply nodded, uninterested in earning another insult or injury for my disobedience.

“Good.” Lady Lombard narrowed her eyes. “You will forget that you wield any power. To disobey the most basic rules of this realm means certain death for all of us. Me, your father, you. Not even your precious bastard brother and his mother would be spared.”

She leaned close to me, her pretty face hatefully cold.

“You're old enough now to know this. To understand what's at stake. To understand that the people your father works for would see us all burned. And not only them. The world is nothing more than a wicked estate. Be grateful for the place you have within it. Your circumstances could be far, far worse.”

She snapped her fingers, and a tiny flame ignited between her fingertips before fading without leaving even a trace of smoke behind.

I tried to hold my face expressionless, though my mouth nearly fell open. This was the first time I learned that my mother had magic too. I'd always been aware that my father had been born with unusual abilities, though he'd refused to

provide any details. He'd certainly never, ever shown me any display of power.

Lady Lombard pointed to the key. "That will unlock the family treasury. Contained within are contracts that document every arrangement that has brought us the unparalleled wealth we enjoy."

My mother held a finger in my face, scorn and distrust etched into her perfect features.

"Do not think you can ever escape your destiny. The secrets contained in our treasury will *not* bring us absolution for our crimes. And yes, I include you in that, dear daughter. Make no mistake. Lest you think someday you might be able to turn on your parents, hear this from mine own lips: There is no escaping the consequences of our actions. You can never turn us in to the queen and negotiate for yourself a life of freedom. There is no freedom in this life. There is only the degree to which we gild our cages." She swept her hand around the room. "And your father has managed to gild ours exceptionally well."

She turned her back to leave but then faced me once again. "Should anything happen to your father and I, that key will not absolve you. It will only help you take those responsible down with us. Because if we fall"—she drew in a deep breath, her eyes almost glowing with an unnatural light—"they all fall."

I had relived that day many, many times in my memory. But now, under a thick twilight growing heavy with clouds, Syndrian's bright eyes at my back, and so many different fears in my heart, I found myself in the unusual position of being able to openly defy my parents. To challenge them and test the consequences that I had for so many years had accepted. Dutifully, if not resentfully.

They cannot hurt me, not here.

Even as I prayed it, I did not know if that was true. I had no idea what abilities my father may have had...knew nothing of the world beyond my own fingers... And even those were sorely out of practice.

“Please,” Syndrian implored, following me. “We haven’t time—”

“Syndrian.” I breathed his name quietly as I gathered my courage. “If I could light the torch right here and spare us a trip to seek fire from the public lamps, would that be desirable?”

He swallowed hard, the knob in his throat moving against the dark bristles of growth there. “Yes.” He shrugged. “But I see not how...”

I walked up to him and set a hand on the chest of his cloak. “I need your trust,” I said softly. “As well as your discretion. Please, move away.”

His face twisted into a puzzled look. If he considered asking me further questions, he resisted. Perhaps he gave in to the constraints of time, rather than accepting any sort of trust in me. Either way, he nodded and turned his back to give me privacy.

I quickly knelt on the ground, my cloak a thin barrier between my tender knees and the prickles of grass and dirt. It had been so long since I’d done this, I was truthfully not certain how many tries it would take. And what the cost might be. If I toppled over in exhaustion, I hoped I would not fall directly on the fire I planned to set. But I would not know how far I might leap if I never rolled the dice.

I reached for several sticks and rubbed them together briskly, trying to create the slightest bit of heat between them.

“That won’t work,” Syndrian called, clearly listening to me working the twigs.

“Shhh, please!” I demanded. “I need to concentrate.”

He huffed a sigh but fell silent.

I continued to work the sticks, focusing all my energy on the small bit of heat the contact created. I’d never been taught to control my powers and truly understood very little about them. I’d once been able to manipulate fire—almost without effort. The day my father caught me, I’d been attempting to put out all the candles in the main hall from some distance,

hoping to plunge Norwin into darkness while he worked. A harmless prank that I did not know with certainty I was even capable of accomplishing. My father's abuse was intended to stop me from even trying.

But I was never the child my parents wanted. I had in fact practiced my magic for years before then in secret. Lighting candles or extinguishing one with my mind and hands was simple. Starting a fire from the tiniest source of heat? Should have been easy.

I said a quiet prayer of thanks to the gods, whispered to the twigs whose bark would bend to my subtle efforts, and then focused on coaxing the tiny bit of heat into flame. My arms were tiring, and my eyes stung from the intensity of my focus, but suddenly, the twigs began to smoke.

“Oh... By the gods...bring the torch!” I called, urgency in my voice.

By the time Syndrian handed me the torch from the back of my horse, both sticks were ablaze, rapidly burning like eerie woodland candles.

“I did it!” I crowed, shocked but also elated. “Quickly, please. Use these!”

Syndrian knelt beside me, concern etched into the crinkles around his eyes. “Well done,” he murmured, his voice low. He sounded as though he wished to say more, but he simply grabbed the torch and dropped the burning twigs to the ground. He stamped the fire out and helped me mount my horse. Then I held the torch while he mounted his.

“I'll carry that and lead the way,” he said, extending his hand to take the torch from me. His voice was guarded, uncertain. Whether he suspected I was exceptionally skilled at starting fires or there was something else worrying his thoughts, this clearly was not the time to discuss it.

I stared at the orange flames dancing within the iron cage of the torch. I had done that. I'd made that happen. The flames were real. As normal as any fire lit by any other means. Nothing marked it as magic. Nothing marked me as different.

I knew that as of this moment, I would never be the same. A wild sense of freedom raced through my body like a wildfire. I'd done something I'd been forbidden from even thinking about. And no one had died or been otherwise punished as a result. Syndrian studied my face as our eyes met in the hazy glow of the flames. While I may have looked elated, his features brought the reality of our circumstances to me.

“Stay close,” he urged, his brows lowered and his lips set. “We must make haste to Omrora.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

Syndrian insisted on accompanying me all the way to my family's estate. As we rode onto the property, I prodded my mare toward the stable, but Syndrian stopped me. "Lady Pali." He turned his horse, who I now knew was called Blade, in the opposite direction. "We should speak privately."

I knew he was correct, but I was concerned about Letti. She'd be expecting both me and Poet. "I must return the horse. My family may be waiting for me. Shall we meet at the crofter's cabin?"

He nodded and rode ahead. When I returned the mare to Letti, the stable hand confirmed what I'd suspected.

"Lady," she whispered, "your father pressed me for your whereabouts. I explained you had not shared where you wished to go but that you'd indicated you'd only have the mare out a short while. I trust that will not cause you harm?"

I nodded. "You did perfectly well." I gave Poet a grateful pat on the flank. "I appreciate your discretion," I said.

"And I yours, miss." She nodded and returned the mare to her stall.

I tucked the hood around my messy plait and followed the row of tall torches mounted into iron posts that illuminated the path to the crofter's cottage. When I arrived, Syndrian was waiting in the shadows, and he stepped beside me.

"Lady," he murmured, keeping his distance.

I chuckled. “Syndrian, you practically kissed me out there under the stars. After all these years, anyway, I think you can call me by my first name.”

He reached out and gripped my hand before I had the chance to knock. “Pali,” he breathed, my name sounding otherworldly and beautiful spoken in his voice. Somehow, without the formality of Lady or Miss before it, my name felt somehow intimate traveling between his lips.

With the excitement of the afternoon behind us and the uncertainty of what it all meant ahead, I gazed into his face.

“Do you wish to speak freely in front of Biko and his mother?” he asked. “We may ensnare them in trouble we would prefer not to share.”

I looked at his hand, his fingers on my skin. Here, at a place that felt like home, the contact felt more sensual, more personal, than the rough, cautious hold he’d had on me in Kyruna. With our safety momentarily assured, I removed his hand from my wrist and clasped his hand in both of mine.

“*This* is my true family,” I reminded him. “I would no sooner bring them to harm than I would myself. But if we wish to speak in private...” I shrugged. “There is no other place on my father’s property.”

He nodded, a rough, brisk movement as he seemed to consider our options. I looked into his eyes, the torchlights and pale moon casting shadows over his dark stubble and the full lines of his concerned frown. “All right, then.”

I released his hand, and he knocked roughly on the door. Idony opened it after what seemed like a half moment’s wait. Her eyes fell on Syndrian first, and she opened her mouth to welcome him but fell silent as she saw me standing behind him. She looked over his cloak and mine and what must have been tense expressions on our faces, because then she looked past me, as if looking for something. Without a word, she pulled the door open and hurried us inside with a purposeful wave.

“Come, come,” she murmured, touching Syndrian’s shoulder in welcome, and then closed the door firmly behind us.

Once I was inside, Idony took hold of both my shoulders and gazed into my face. With one hand, she brushed my hood back and smoothed the wild stray hairs back from my forehead. “Pali,” she said, sucking in a worried breath. “What happened?”

“I’m quite all right,” I said. “I found myself in a bit of trouble, but Syndrian was a more than capable guide.”

“Of course he was.” Idony nodded at him. “Come, sit. What do you need? Hot tea? Have you eaten?”

“I dunno about the lady,” Syndrian said, “but a quiet place to talk would be most appreciated.”

Speaking of quiet... The cottage was unusually still.

“Where is Biko?” I asked.

Idony flicked a glance at Syndrian, but seemed to avoid my eyes. “He’s still out,” she explained. “In the fields. I expected him back by now, but he has been taking a bit of extra time at night to patrol the orchards.”

I caught the hint of concern in her voice. “Patrol?” I asked. “Have there been problems? Threats on the estate?”

Idony’s face relaxed into a reassuring smile. “Oh, no, love. Nothing like that. Biko has been...going through some things. He needs a bit more time in the wild, that’s all. Outside under the stars. The estate and the land are just fine.”

Syndrian nodded, seeming to understand what Idony was not fully explaining to me.

“So...” She pulled up a chair at the table and motioned for me to sit. “You two wish to have a quiet conversation?” Her grin was motherly, knowing. As if she was delighted, but held back her feelings. “I’ve long wondered when you two might finally address what the rest of us have long observed.”

My cheeks flushed hot as I avoided looking at Syndrian. “I’m sorry?” I asked. “I don’t think I understand.”

He cleared his throat, and Idony poured us both some water. Syndrian drank the entire mug, thanked her, and then nodded at me. “Lady—er, *Pali* has an interest in the gaming tournament in Kyruna.”

Idony sniffled loudly and clasped her hands in front of her, her delight melting into a look of concern. “Ohhhh, my. Really? Whatever for?”

“I’ve been to Kyruna with my parents in the past,” I explained. “I was hoping to investigate the tavern and see if I might play.”

Idony looked as though she wanted to say more but pressed a single finger to her lips and studied my face. “Surely there are games to be played right here in Omrora?”

“None with a substantial prize to be won at the end,” I insisted.

Idony turned to me, disappointment plain in her voice. “So you seek the winnings.”

“I admit I was curious after hearing of it the other night.” I felt a momentary twinge of regret at making the admission to Idony. She would understand why I sought the winnings. But she would no doubt feel implicated in my need for a heftier purse.

“A woman of your means?” Syndrian roughly shoved the chair back and paced before the fire. “Why? Can you not go to Lord Lombard? I can’t believe the man would refuse his daughter anything she desired. Especially if it would keep her out of Kyruna.”

“You know nothing of my parents. Nothing of what they would and would not do.” Indignation I could not hold back thrust me up and out of my seat. “The trouble I am in is trouble of their creation,” I gritted. “If I’m to care for myself, the duty falls to me entirely.”

“Trouble?” he echoed, inclining his neck. His thick hair struck his back with a soft slap. “What kind of...”

Suddenly, Syndrian crossed the kitchen in enormous strides fueled by an anger the likes of which I’d never seen.

“What has happened? If harm has come to your honor, by the gods...” His nostrils flared, and his hands were gripped into fists so tight, my own hands ached.

“Syndrian, sit.” Idony rested a palm against his arm. “Let Pali explain.”

I shrugged. “There is very little I am able to share. I spent my personal savings on something I desperately needed. My treasury is now nearly spent, but my trouble far from resolved.”

“You need money?” Syndrian’s emotions seemed to swing from enraged on my behalf to enraged at me. “You would consort with murderers and criminals to replace a few pennies from a lady’s purse?”

I flew across the floor at him and jabbed an angry finger at his chest. “First of all, you have no right to suggest that I would travel across the shires seeking pennies for some trifle. Even if I had, that is my right. And it would be no business of yours.” I turned my back on him, surprised that his low opinion mattered so much to me.

The very idea that I had been irresponsible or that I would foolishly risk my safety was insulting, but the disappointment I felt in him surprised me. Why should I care so deeply about his opinions? A man who was nothing more to me than my brother’s best friend. I should not care, should not give it a moment’s attention—not when I had serious matters of my future to sort. That much was clear.

And yet the emotions that curled around my body like a drenched cloak felt suffocating. Irritation. Frustration. And many more which I would not name, not even to myself. All I knew was that I did not care for his reaction at all. I likewise cared little for my own prickly response.

I hardened my heart against the warmth I normally felt for the man, especially standing this close to him. Without turning to address him, I said over my shoulder, “My needs are my business. My concerns are of the utmost importance to me. And I will do as I please to see the matter satisfied.”

“Your needs...” he gruffed, but then looked at Idony as if remembering his place. “Excuse me. I don’t mean to lose my temper in your home.”

“I understand.” A wistful sadness overtook her features. She smoothed the wild curls back from her forehead and sighed. “Pali, I must know... You spent your savings and yet have nothing to show for it?”

She chose her words carefully, and for that I was grateful. “Yes,” I confirmed. “Your friend was able to guide me to the purchase, but...it was unable to be delivered.”

A growl from Syndrian had both Idony and I looking at him. “I care not for riddles,” he said. “Not when the lives of people I care about are at risk.”

People he cares about...?

I pressed my lips together and tried not to overthink his words. He clearly understood that Idony had conspired with me on the purchase that had emptied my savings, but I did not want anyone—certainly not Syndrian—to know that I’d spent my personal savings on a death mask. In the days since the damaged item had been returned to me, I’d not had a moment to tell Idony of it.

“I’m sorry you didn’t reach the outcome you sought,” she said, her voice deeply sorrowful. “In some ways. In others... Well, I place my trust in the fortune ordained by the gods.” She ran her palm along my cheek. “I’m going to the well,” she said. “I’d like some extra water for a bath tonight. I suggest the two of you speak freely while you’re able.”

She pulled on a cloak, then grabbed several buckets and a large metal rod which she balanced over her shoulders.

“Let me help.” Syndrian rushed to assist her, trying to take the balancing rod from her hands.

“No, love,” she said. “I’d like the time alone to think. The activity helps me focus my thoughts. Stay with Pali. Biko may return soon, so...” She looked near tears as she opened the rear door to the cottage. “Use this time together, my loves,” she said cryptically, addressing her words to both of us.

As soon as she left, Syndrian raked a hand along the top of his head, stopping to roughly scratch at the shaved side above his right ear. “By the gods, please, Pali. Tell me what trouble are you in that drives you to Kyruna? To gambling?”

His question was probing, insistent, but with something so raw and tender beneath it, my stomach sunk at the implication. Did he truly care? Was that possible? Or was he like my parents, and Norwin, and everyone except for Biko and Idony...just another person who would insist that I follow a prescribed set of rules and maintain my “position” in life?

“It’s no concern of yours,” I said firmly, braced for the worst from him.

But there was no defensiveness behind my words. As I searched the familiar face, the face that I’d watched over the years as he’d laughed at me, with me, I felt suddenly exposed and uncomfortably vulnerable. The troubled look on Syndrian’s face made me think he truly was fearful. That he was genuinely concerned over the circumstances I faced that had drawn me into a most complicated and dangerous game. The idea was as dizzying as it was dangerous. If I opened up, if I shared anything with him, then all my secrets and all my parents’ lies would release themselves from their deepest hiding spots. I was certain of it.

“Do you think you cannot trust me?” he asked, his face tight. “Do you think, after what we saw tonight, we are not already bound by secrets?”

I covered my face with my hands, visions of the bleeding man and the sounds of fists hitting flesh making me queasy. Syndrian was at my side, his movements quiet and quick.

“Pali.” The rough sound against my ears sent my frantic heart into a full gallop. “Tell me. Trust with me with everything. There is nothing I would not do for you if it were within my power...”

Standing this close to him, the firelight behind him outlining the muscles of his shoulders and back, I yearned to be touched by him again. To feel his sturdy hand on my waist,

my neck. To have his breath against my face as he rested his forehead against mine. His admission shattered me.

“Why?” I asked. “Why would you?”

As if reading my thoughts, he stepped closer. I swayed toward him, as if my body were asking in its own language for something I was unable to request in words. I looked into his face, fighting tears, fighting screams, fighting every instinct that kept me clinging to any sort of hope at all.

As I closed my eyes and rested my hands against his chest, I realized that I was tired. Tired of games with life-and-death stakes. Tired of being managed and manipulated. Simply tired of holding the weight of my own soul.

He wrapped his hands around mine and lowered his forehead to mine, like he had in the woods. But this time, no hood covered my face. We had no need to hide whatever impulse brought us together.

“You don’t know how long I’ve...” His voice shook, a low confession that seemed to pour from deep inside him. “Pali...”

I lifted my face, eyes still closed, seeking the feel of him under my hands, the press of him against my hips like in Kyruna. I was not certain how long I’d carried this spark of passion for Syndrian. How many years I’d sought his eyes over Idony’s table, sharing smile and an unmistakable feeling of closeness between us. How many times had I dreamed of feeling the muscles in his arms under my fingers, his hands around my waist.

My breaths came in tiny bursts through my lips as he whispered a question.

“The torch you lit in Kyruna. You had no fire striker. I...I fear giving voice to the question. But are you in trouble because of magic?”

The girlish fantasy that we were sharing something intimate, something real, shattered the moment he said the word *magic*. I stiffened but looked into his eyes as I answered with as much honesty as I could.

I nodded, not specifically admitting to the question of whether the magic had caused my current trouble. Certainly, magic had ruined my life from the day of my birth, although I knew that was not what he meant. But that was as much I would risk sharing with him for now. “If I am to have any hope of buying my way out of my...mess, I will need the winnings from that tournament.”

“Can you go to your parents? Pali, surely...”

“My parents...” I pulled away from him completely, frustration replacing the other, more complicated feelings. “No. The consequences would be grave. Not just grave. Fatal.”

I felt his hands on my shoulders then, a firm, unyielding pressure. I closed my eyes, wishing I could lose myself in the pleasure of his touch. But this man was not intended for me. My betrothal would soon be announced, and to hope or wish for anything other than escaping that fate and disappearing from Omrora was foolish. Reckless.

“I need to win that tournament,” I said, lifting my chin and turning to face him.

“You can never return to Kyruna,” he said, his face contorted. “And if you do, I will not be able to help you.”

“I expect nothing from you, Syndrian. I...I only wish...” The words would not come. I could not speak them. What I wanted did not matter. It never had. Giving voice to them would only make me foolish in his eyes. I may not have had a solution to my problems, but I could preserve the shreds of my dignity and salvage the bonds of friendship we still shared by keeping this too to myself.

“Kyruna is run by the Otleich family.” Syndrian’s dark eyebrows lowered, and his words passed through gritted teeth. “You cannot go back to that pub. You must not play in the tournament.”

Despite the affection I had for him, I could not abide another person—not one more person—telling me what I could and could not do.

“Why not?” I studied his lips as I asked the question, as if I could read the emotions behind his words, but he turned away from me.

If the direction, the order, had come from my father or mother, I would have lashed out. Resisted and rebelled. But coming from Syndrian... I somehow could not muster the anger required to fight him. I heard something behind his warning that my parents’ restrictions lacked. Something that sounded like genuine concern for me.

“A gorgeous, intelligent woman beating every player, winning the tournament pot...” Syndrian moved away from me and paced the cottage at a near-frantic speed. “You don’t want those people to know you exist. You’d walk out of there with a purse full of their coins. And then...” He stopped and straightened his shoulders, his chin raised, as if ready to defend me against an enemy only he fully understood. “No, Pali,” he said. “There must be another way.”

“I am certain there is no other way,” I said sadly, pressing my fingertips to my temples. “And it is unfortunately too late to keep me from the Otleiches.”

After the perilous journey, the vicious fight, and the resurrection of my magic from the place it had been buried... I felt light-headed. I wondered if the symptoms I was experiencing were the consequence of using magic. It made sense that the exertion of power carried a cost, but I was unsettled by what was happening to my body. The fatigue and the slight throb behind my eyes were new and unusual but not terrifying. Almost like the sourness of tasting something that I wasn’t quite certain I’d like but had swallowed for the sake of appearances.

My fine leather shoes were quiet on the braided rag rug as I stepped close to the fire. I stared into the flames, entranced with their vibrant dance.

“How?” Syndrian pressed. “How can it be too late? You didn’t play tonight, did you?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“I don’t understand.” His voice was tight like the knotted muscles of his forearms. Dense and ready to strike. I only wished his composed emotions could lash out in another direction. At the true darkness in my life.

“I have always known I am strange,” I admitted, lifting my hands before the fire. “I could stand before a fire and feel the flickering of flames in my blood. As if there was a connection between me and...”

I motioned toward the hearth, moving my hands in a circular motion. The flames followed ever so slightly.

“Fire,” I explained, shaking my head. I knew that what I was about to share would be impossible to believe. And if he did believe me, listening to me would be so dangerous, I was not sure that he would not leave. Perhaps it would be better for us both if he did. “I’ve not had time to truly understand or study my connection to it,” I explained with a shrug. “I just know there’s a strange and powerful stirring in me when I lift my hands and focus my mind.”

Syndrian stood beside me, almond oil and woodsmoke filling my nose. “That’s how you started the fire in the woods,” he murmured, exhaling a breath that sounded disappointed.

I nodded, clapping my hands while I studied the orange tendrils just to see what would happen. The flames leapt in time with my movements. I turned toward him. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I did not mean to put you at risk.”

The cottage was quiet except for the crackling in the fireplace, which made the heavy footfalls as Syndrian moved behind me echo loudly in my ears. My skin heated as I felt him loom behind me.

“There is no danger in Efimia I would not fight for you.” His words were so low, I nearly missed them.

“I appreciate your...concern for me. You’re very kind, Syndrian. You’re a great many things I realize now that I deeply appreciate.” A flush that competed with the warmth

emanating from the fire heated my cheeks. “But I can’t...you mustn’t...”

My words were jelly, wobbling and uncertain. I had no explanation, no defense. I had revealed to Syndrian that I wielded magic. Even if I suppressed it and denied it forevermore, he now knew one of the secrets that could destroy me. Destroy him.

“Forget that I said anything. Forget what you’ve seen...” The gravity of what I’d done struck me like a powerful wind. I shivered, crossing my arms over my chest tightly. “I’m sorry.”

A growl like a pang of hunger curled Syndrian’s lips and I felt him tremor behind me. “*Pali...*”

I turned to face him, but could not look in his eyes. Would not meet the sweetness and the sparkle contained there. His purity would only remind me of how truly tarnished I was. A woman from a family of thieves, liars. A woman bound to continue my family’s vile legacy.

“Never.” Syndrian’s voice curled over my ears like steam, hot and soothing. “Never apologize for what you are. Not to me.” He leaned closer, the soft fabric of his tunic so close to my face, I could see the dark shadow of his chest through the material.

He moved those large, work-worn hands to tip my chin.

“Pali,” he breathed my name, shuttering his eyes closed. “Promise me you’ll never go back to Kyruna. Abandon this tournament. The people there, they—”

I swallowed against the knot in my throat. He released my chin but I kept my face lifted to his. If I was going to endanger us both, I would not let there be half truth between us.

“There is no escaping the people you’ve mentioned,” I admitted. “I’m to be married into the Otleich family. My parents believe it is what’s best for my protection. And for theirs as well. They intend to announce my betrothal soon.”

His skin, ruddy beneath the dark stubble on his cheeks, paled. I noticed his hands clench slightly, and he blinked several times while glaring not at me, but I thought perhaps on

my behalf. “Is that your desire?” he demanded. “To marry an Otleich?”

No one had asked me what I wanted for my life. My parents told me time and again what I could not have. Could not do. Ought not to want. I sniffed hard and tried not to sound petulant. I did not expect anyone to feel sympathy for a woman who had enjoyed a life filled with comforts, luxuries, and ease.

“I say this without an ounce of disrespect,” I said quietly. “The roof over my head, the education—of my parents’ choosing, but I have it nonetheless—my clothing, sufficient meals... Every necessity of life has been provided to me in excess because of my parents’ sacrifices. But there is always a cost, a bill to be paid. In my case, the cost is freedom. Any sense of personal independence. What I desire for my life has never been a consideration. Not for my parents. And until recently, not even for me.”

“What do you want?” he pressed, drawing closer to me. He towered above me. Something between us flowed, thick and slow like honey on a cool morning.

My heartbeat sped up, my thoughts dragged, and every bit of my body from my fingers to toes craved him. Yearned for his closeness, his touch. I may have been able to make fire, but I could not control the heat he aroused in me. Those unstable embers felt more dangerous than any of the real peril we’d been in tonight.

“Pali.” His jaw tensed. “Do your parents know what the Otleiches are?” He looked like he was trying to choose which of his racing thoughts to speak aloud first. He shoved a hand along the top of his head, his endless blue eyes never leaving mine. “They are murderers. Extortionists. Thieves. And not the harmless trifling pickpockets you might keep watch for in the village. These are the most wicked kinds of people. You cannot marry into them. You...you simply cannot.” He stumbled over his words sounding as graceless as I felt.

I ran the tip of my tongue over my dry lips as the pop of a whorl of cedarwood drew my eyes back to the fire. I stared

into it, desperate for clarity. For answers. What would I choose if I were free to claim anything I desired? It crushed me to realize I did not know—was uncertain about the demands of my own mind and heart. For a woman who had spent countless hours of her life practicing strategy and considering the consequences of every possible move within the games I played, when it came to my own life, all my confidence abandoned me. I was unprepared—no, worse, completely untrained. And I was being thrust into a game which had only one rule: compliance.

I turned back to the alluring man beside me and admitted the truth. “I must do as my parents require,” I insisted. “I...In this, I truly have no choice.” Overcome by the need to touch him just this once, I shyly reached up and stroked his stubbled cheek. The prickle of hair against my fingertips was deliciously sharp, and sent tingles of pleasure through my body. I pressed my lips together and appealed to his sense of reason. “You work for them now, don’t you? You’re making dice for the tournament. Is that not a kind of marriage? Why do you do it, if you know what they are?”

I was pulling my fingers away from his face when he closed his eyes and took hold of my hands. He brought mine back to his face and held my palms against his skin, a shuddering breath shaking his chest. My blood heated as he rubbed my skin along his cheek, his jaw, until I could feel every puff of air from his lips against the tender flesh of my wrist. The abrasive stubble left behind a delicious, satisfying burn. Such odd contrasts for a man with so much strength. He moved gracefully, had held me with such tenderness, and yet the hand that gripped mine looked strong enough to splinter a block of wood.

“We both have our reasons,” he said cryptically. “My tether to the Otleich family is very thin,” he admitted. “Within my power to break...at almost any moment. There must be a way for you as well.”

I pulled away from his distracting touch and laced my hands together, wishing I had the courage to take what I really

wanted from Syndrian. Wishing I had the courage to admit it freely and fully, even just to myself.

“What did you attempt to buy?” he asked, breaking into the fog of my thoughts. “What purchase exhausted your savings?”

I shook my head. I could not tell him. I’d shared too much already. Revealing that I had magic was dangerous enough. If Syndrian were ever to tell anyone, to share what he knew... I’d be killed, but he would be made an example of.

For engaging with those who used magic, Syndrian would be punished severely. The queen or the shire-reeve permitted a slow agony for those accused of consorting with magic. He would be tortured, drawn, and quartered. Thrown to the violent justice of those who feared the monarchy and the local power systems even more than they feared magic and its many mysteries.

My naive heart could not imagine the horrors an angry mob of common folk might concoct. But I had seen and heard enough over the years to refuse to draw this man further into harm. I would not reveal what I’d done with the goblins and drag either of us closer to doom.

“Pali?” Syndrian stood before me, looking at odds with me, with my words... He leaned forward on the toes of his boots and roughly scrubbed a hand over his face, grimacing behind his palm. “By the gods... *Please*. I want to help. I’m a...friend.” He settled on the word after a moment’s thought.

A harsh laugh passed my lips. I didn’t mean to sound as though I were laughing at him. The entire situation was as nightmarish as it was foolish. I was a titled woman, a woman who only had to follow the rules her parents set out. If I could have just been what they wanted me to be, I would have enjoyed a lifetime of comfort. Luxury. Power. Ease that could fool my mind and heart into believing that I was free.

But there was no going back now. What I’d done—what I’d seen—made ignorance an impossible choice. That night, deep in the subterranean lair, when my guide had told me not to react to the voices, of course I followed his instructions. But

not reacting was not at all the same thing as not *listening*. I'd heard. Heard the voices of the creatures who made my mask. Felt claws in my hair that were most assuredly not human. Smelled the curious ingredients when they mixed and applied the sealant to my skin as they formed the mask. I could not tell Syndrian this. That I had consorted with goblins and played with death magic. And all the friends in the world couldn't change what I'd set in motion.

"I tried to buy a way out of Tutovl, Syndrian. Forever." That was all I could tell him. For his own good.

As if his heart overruled his good sense, he took me by the arms, his hands firm as he searched my face. "What would you have done? You meant to leave?" His voice was scarcely a whisper. Rough and desperate. "Pali, I thought maybe you... That we..."

I lifted my chin, curious excitement fighting its way past my fatigue. "You thought what, Syndrian? That we what?"

"I was a fool," he said, but he didn't release me. If anything, he moved closer. So slowly that I found my lips parting and my belly tightening with anticipation.

"I've never known you to be a fool," I murmured.

But if he was, I was the bigger fool. When I'd sought the company of the crofter and his mother, year after year, part of me always hoped to also encounter the solid, quiet presence of my brother's best friend. I far preferred this rugged cutler to whatever wealthy, cruel Otleich boy I was destined to marry. I could see that now, even if I'd never be able to admit it to anyone. Even if it had taken years of playing board games on opposite sides of a table from this man to admit it to myself. Syndrian was the prize I so desperately sought—kind, strong, caring, funny... Even if I found all those qualities in an Otleich, he would still never measure up to what I knew a man could be.

Syndrian's bright eyes narrowed, and that same confused, tortured expression covered his face. "What if I could take you away from all this?" he gritted out, his voice low and

desperate. “Free you from whatever binds you? Is it money? Debt? Whatever it is—”

I could hardly follow his words. He would rescue me? Take me away from darkness he’d not even begun to explore? I wished for a moment that I could be like my mother. Cold and decisive.

I never believed she’d married my father for love—not after he’d fathered an heir with another and then hidden the boy and his mother away. Of course, he’d not hidden them far. Idony and Biko had been right under all of our noses all these years. But what kind of a woman would marry into those circumstances? I believed she’d wanted the same things my parents sought by marrying me off: power, position, and security. If I were like Lady Lombard, I would not desperately seek absolution from my fate. If I were at all like my mother, I would have worked tirelessly to capitalize on my destiny.

And yet here I was, alone with a cutler, contemplating a future that I had no right to even dream of. More than comfort. Better than stability. A future based on truth.

What Syndrian’s offer implied was so very different than an arranged marriage...or was it? Could he care about me? Care enough to put his own safety and future in jeopardy so he might marry me? For how long and to what end? I shook my head. I could not entertain those kinds of thoughts. As much as I might have buried secret feelings about my brother’s friend since I was a teenager, he did not understand what he’d offered. A union under those conditions would never be what I wanted. I would not be a weight someone else had to carry.

I squeezed my eyes closed, hoping my lashes would hold back the threat of tears that stung behind my lids. I understood that what I felt for Syndrian could no longer be explained away as a girl’s crush. Was no longer a young woman’s fancy for a handsome lad who was nothing at all like the men controlling the life she hoped to escape.

And oh, how I longed to accept his offer. To lean into his willingness to rescue me and simply let myself be saved. But that was not who I was. It never had been and never would be.

Even if I could change my circumstances, I would not allow someone I cared about as much as I cared about Syndrian to be destroyed along the way. When I opened my eyes, I looked into the beautiful face of a man who was too good to drag into my complicated puzzle. Not this man. Not this way.

“Pali, please—”

“No. This is my burden.” I stopped Syndrian’s words with my fingertips. I touched his lips, his chin, his cheeks. Under my hands, his skin felt hot and soft, stubbled and smooth—everything I’d ever imagined he would be. “But I must know, whether I accept my fate or die fighting... May I be so bold as to kiss you?” I whispered, my nails lightly scratching the bristles on his chin.

His eyes widened in shock, and he pursed his lips as if to speak, but I shook my head.

“Only this once,” I rushed on, “then never again, I—I’m to be betrothed soon. But if I fail to escape my circumstances, I do not want my first taste of passion to be false. To be with someone I will not like and certainly could never love. I would like to have that memory of you, Syndrian. I will treasure it. If only this once.”

“By the gods... I...I want... I would...” He gritted out the words as though they caused him pain, and I nearly stepped back, ashamed of my request, but he hesitated not even a second before sliding a hand beneath my hair. He pulled me close, holding the back of my neck as he had in Kyrana, but this time, when his forehead touched mine, my heart raced so wildly, I feared he would hear it. Feared he would know that I longed for him in ways that even I did not understand. I was only thankful that he had not refused me, had not embarrassed me by turning away.

“Thank you.” My whisper was messy, too loud, gratitude and excitement and anticipation spilling into my chest.

I lifted on my toes and snaked my hands behind his back, giving in to the delicious pull that drew my hips close to his. The heat of him was so close, so thrillingly unfamiliar, and yet I arched into it, into *him*. I parted my lips and licked them,

unsure whether he would take the lead, or if he expected me to steal what I wanted from him and retreat with my precious memories. I inhaled deeply, partly to calm the racing thump of my heart, and partly to bury myself in the heady, delicious scent of him.

He grunted in response, a half-growl that resembled the erotic snarl he'd groaned against me back in Kyruna. My nipples grew hard as a jolt of excitement awakened every secret place in my body. He bent his head to my neck and breathed, drinking in the heat of me without actually touching my skin. Shaking so hard I feared he would pull away, I swallowed back the flutters of anxiety and anticipation and pressed my chest greedily against his. The soft length of his hair grazed my face as he lifted his nose from my neck.

"*Pali.*" He said my name again, and I never again wanted to hear him call me lady or miss. In this moment, I was his, and greedily, I longed to hear every endearment, every pleasure whispered along with my name.

"Syndrian..." Saying that felt different on my lips now, too. More than just a name, I called him to me, his name an erotic promise, a plea. "My sweet, beautiful..." I wanted to say more. To tell him every private thought, every sensual dream I'd ever had, but he was moving against me now. Holding my face with both hands, drawing me deliciously closer.

The tip of my nose nudged his jaw, and the aroma of him made my mouth water and the space between my thighs damp with a whole different sort of wetness. I wanted this, wanted him, in ways I'd never wanted anything else. My entire body seemed drawn against his, my limbs weak, and my mind a blur of pretty thoughts and fuzzy sensations. I closed my eyes and was tightening my hands against the solid muscles of his back when I heard the door shove open behind us.

"Whoa-hoooo!" Biko belted out, the sounds of water sloshing in pails drawing my eyes.

I quickly released my grip on the back of Syndrian's tunic, and he untangled his fingers from my hair. Icy cold fingers of

regret replaced the warm, dull buzz of our contact.

“Oh, no.” Idony sounded disappointed. She slapped Biko’s shoulder. “I told you we should have given them more time.”

Biko dropped the buckets of water and bent low to slide the balancing rod from his shoulders. “Muuuum,” he groaned dramatically. “I feel like I’ve been walking around with these buckets for days.” He rolled his eyes and tossed his hair over his shoulders. “It’s getting late, and you need your bath. Besides, I don’t think what we saw here was what you think we saw here.” He sidled between me and Syndrian and tossed a heavy arm over each of our shoulders.

Syndrian quickly composed his features and shook his head. “Indeed it was not,” he said. “I was counseling Lady Pali against the tournament in Kyruna.”

“Oof, your arm feels like a balancing rod, you brute.” I nudged my brother in the ribs, trying to keep the sharp disappointment out of my tone.

Biko dramatically lifted his brows and craned his neck to make a face at me. “Kyruna? That would be a thoroughly inadvisable mistake,” he said, imitating a formal accent like my father’s. I nudged him again, this time in the belly. “Sis,” he said, his face growing concerned. “Would you risk the travel and the sorts that frequent that place just for a game? Surely Mum and I are capable enough opponents.”

I flicked a glance at Idony, who looked truly grieved that she’d interrupted the moment I was sharing with Syndrian.

“No, of course not,” I said dismissively. “Syndrian provided excellent counsel against it.”

I slipped out from under Biko’s arm, pausing to dip my hand in the bucket of well water. I cupped a few drops and, curling my lips into a sly smile, splashed Biko square in the face. Far more than just a few drops of water flew at him. A generous handful of water nicely soaked Biko’s hair.

He coughed and sputtered dramatically, but that was just theatre.

“I’m sorry, brother,” I said, wiping droplets of water from his cheeks. “I didn’t realize you were so particular about your hairstyle!”

Biko gave me a rough hug, making certain to shake his wet curls all over my cloak. Syndrian turned away from us to add more wood to the fire.

“It’s late,” I said quietly once I pulled away from Biko, then strode toward the door. “I’d best return home.”

Biko cornered Syndrian, chattering loudly by the hearth. But the man whose hands had set my skin on fire watched me, his eyes unblinking and unusually dark. I gave him a prim smile, and an impersonal nod.

Idony laced an arm through mine. “You’ve missed your supper,” she said. “Would you like to stay? I can fix something for you. Biko will want a meal now that he’s home.”

I shook my head. “Thank you. I’ll take a plate in my room. I warned Norwin I would likely not return in time to eat with my parents.”

Worry creased the woman’s otherwise smooth forehead. “Are you going to be all right?” she asked, her voice low.

I nodded and gave her a hug. “Thank you for letting me speak privately with Syndrian. I’m sorry to have imposed.”

“This is your home, Pali. You’re family.” She looked both sad and apologetic as she helped me fasten my cloak over my hair. “You are never, ever in the way here. May the gods grant you peaceful rest tonight, love.”

I wished her the same but could not help looking back into the cottage as I walked out the door. My heart beat harder as I watched Syndrian joking with my brother, his intense stare never leaving my face. I nodded at him and blinked rapidly against the threat of tears. Maybe it was better this way. I’d pressed my luck tonight—too many times, in fact.

Perhaps it was better that *just this once* was never meant to be.

CHAPTER
FIVE

The next day, I had to be far more creative to escape Norwin.

“Miss Lombard.” He had his middle finger stuck to an eyebrow and the most pained look on his face; I nearly felt sorry for him. But only nearly.

I walked down the stone stairs, my day dress rustling softly as I walked. “Good morning, Norwin. Or I suppose it’s afternoon now, isn’t it?”

I covered my mouth and feigned a yawn, doing everything I could to give the impression that I had absolutely nothing to do. The truth was, I was in a terrible rush. I’d sent one of my mother’s attendants to the crofter’s cottage early this morning with my backgammon board and pouch of checkers. I’d carefully concealed within a bit of rag inside the purse all the coins that I had. I told the girl that since I was intent on playing the next few nights before I became too deeply entangled in matters related to the engagement, I planned to leave my board and checkers with the crofter. If the girl thought my request unusual, she certainly did not speak up. I’d suspected she was relieved to be sent away from laundry duty for some time in the fresh air.

I met the butler in the main hall where he continued to pinch his brow as though the overgrown thing were causing him as much distress as looking at it caused me. “Norwin,” I asked, “what’s put that troubled look on your face?”

“HMMMM,” he hummed through his nose. “Yes, well, I’m delighted to see you taking my concerns seriously, Miss Lombard. I am very much worried about the menu for your engagement celebration. You see, your father intends to take your future fiancé on a quail hunt, but…” He pinched a long strand of eyebrow hair between his knobby fingers while he puzzled over the issue. “I don’t see how I can be expected to prepare a menu featuring quail when we’re so close to the end of the season. I might ask the crofter to procure several birds at market—not, mind you, that I question Lord Lombard’s skills with the bow. But…”

“Norwin,” I interrupted, trying hard not to imagine braiding the overly long brow hairs together. Much as I would have liked to pat him on the shoulder or give him a friendly tap on the cheek, I simply wasn’t that strong a performer. Instead, I smiled and reminded him, “I have absolute faith in your decisions. As do my parents.”

He dropped the hand from his brow and looked like he didn’t know whether to bow or shake my hand. “Well, well, thank you, miss. In my many long years of service here—”

“I believe in you, Norwin!” I called and sauntered outside.

After leaving the manor, I forced myself to cross the grounds to the crofter’s cottage at an unhurried pace. The activity around the manor was typical for late afternoon. My mother was working with Guild Master Arynnda, a scrivener who had made a special trip to record some contract or other, as she did every few weeks. My father had again left early this morning for business outside the shire, so I decided this would be the perfect day to make another trip to Kyruna.

As I practiced a leisurely stroll across the grounds, I took in the people who made the Lombard estate their home, their work—their everything. Off past verdant rolling hills, the fields and orchards would be abuzz with activity. Biko’s farmers would be harvesting and preparing for the next season’s planting.

Our animals were left mostly to freely graze and roam along the grassland, but Biko insisted on having shelters with

ground ovens to warm the livestock through the winter. This time of year was especially busy, as he cleaned and stocked the ovens himself with a few trusted assistants. One of the aspects of Biko's temperament I most appreciated was his deep love of animals. In some ways, he was an animal himself—a wild, vibrant creature. My chest seized with a sudden rush of love for my brother.

Growing up, we'd never shared holidays or playtime. None of the activities I imagined siblings indulged in through the long, boring hours of childhood. I wondered how different our lives might have been if my father had married Idony and raised Biko as his heir. I chuckled imagining my father's horror at Biko's songs and fondness for the outdoors. The first time I met Biko had been outside in the fresh air, soil between his toes and sunshine lightening his hair.

I was ten years old. My tutor had fallen ill, so I'd been enjoying an unexpected day of isolation and lack of structure. My mother was working in her study, and my father was away. Norwin had been tasked with keeping track of me, but I promised him I would take my embroidery and work quietly under a tree in the garden. He'd seemed relieved I had a plan and assented to let me roam freely, not realizing that I'd never, ever been given unsupervised access to the grounds.

I had a small sack with some needlework but had, of course, no intention of working on it. I wandered far past the garden to the orchard, where I hid myself beneath the branches of my favorite Okera apple trees. The fall sunshine warmed my hair and face, comfortably so. Most of the trees had been harvested, but a few pieces of fruit, nibbled to the core by squirrels and other animals, had fallen to the ground, attracting ants and other tiny bugs.

I bent to inspect the movement of an enormous mountain of ants, marveling at the harmony and industry of the tiny things.

“Hoooo-ah! That's a big reward!” bellowed a voice at me from behind a tree.

“Excuse me?” I dropped the sack with my needlework and clutched at my dress, ready to run. My heartbeat sped up as an unfamiliar boy wound his way through the trees.

“That apple,” he said, pointing. “Big feast for the hardworking little buggers. Mmm-mmm yum-a-lummm.”

I stared at the bizarre tune coming from an even more bizarre-looking boy. His hair was wild and long, tangled and curly. His bare feet were dirty—filthy, even—and looked weathered by what must have been many, many days of walking without shoes. I’d never seen him before, but once he joined me by the ants, I did not feel afraid. I knew many of the people who lived and worked on the Lombard land had children. I simply had never met any of them before. And had certainly never imagined they roamed freely about and sang.

“I...I don’t understand,” I whispered, curiosity overcoming the prickles of nerves.

“Look,” he said, pointing. “These little critters work on this land just as much as any of us do.” He cocked his head at me and looked over my dress. “Maybe not you, miss.”

“Do you know me?” I asked, surprised. “I don’t know you.”

He grinned and held out a hand, the nails bitten down and tinged with dirt. “Of course, miss. Everyone who lives and works here knows the Lombards. You’re Miss Palmeria. I’m Biko. My parents are the crofters, Idony and Cyprian. Well, my father was the crofter. He recently passed.”

“I’m so very sorry to hear.” I knew little of the estate staff and business, beyond Ms. Deylia and Butler Norwin, but I had no reason to doubt the boy’s story. I shook his hand politely and frowned. “What do you mean these ants work?” In all my education, I’d learned to read, to write, and to pay far too much concern to styling my hair, washing my hands, and keeping my dresses clean. I’d never once inspected the earth or the creatures on it with any kind of understanding. “Do they have a purpose?”

“All living creatures have a purpose,” he said, excitement in his voice. “My father maintained ants specifically for these orchards. There are so many little things that would like to eat the apples intended for your table. This little militia prevents that from happening.”

I felt a flush of embarrassment when he said *your table*. Did that mean he’d never enjoyed the apples from the orchard? Was his table denied apples so that I might have more? I shifted uncomfortably in my dress while this Biko boy excitedly explained how the ants consumed the other pests that would otherwise damage the crops.

We talked for hours that day, and I only returned home as the sun began to slip behind the trees and my belly grumbled for dinner. But, of course, my mother took one look at my dress, damp with sweat, and my cheeks, slightly burned from so much time in the sun, and sent me to my room.

For two days, my mother confined me to my bedroom. I had no idea what I’d done wrong, other than spend the day outside exploring rather than embroidering. When Norwin silently delivered meals to my room, I searched his face for signs, for any insight into why I was being separated from the household. If he knew, he gave no indication, refusing to meet my eyes or speak. After two days of isolation, when my father returned to Omrora, my parents summoned me to their room. They explained the first of many secrets I would be obligated to keep from that day forward.

That was how I learned Biko was my brother—half brother. That my father and Biko’s mother had been engaged to be married, but once Idony conceived a child, she’d changed her mind. Refused to marry my father. Instead chose a young farmhand named Cyprian and raised Biko as their son.

At the time, none of that made sense to me, but my parents refused to answer questions. Simply told me that if I cared at all about our lives—Biko’s, my own, and my parents’—that I must never, ever reveal what I knew to anyone.

After that, my tutor was dismissed permanently. Norwin must have received the dressing-down of his life because after

that day, he made certain to keep his skinny nose in my daily activities. He'd not much faltered in that duty since.

I hurried along the path toward the crofter's cottage, replaying memories in my head. If my tutor had never fallen ill, I wondered if my parents would have ever told me about Biko. I could not imagine the person I would have become had I never learned so many truths from Idony's and Biko's own mouths over the many nights I'd spent in their gracious company.

My chest tightened as I considered my future. If I was able to flee Omrora, start a new life someplace where I would not be married off to a criminal who hid his deeds beneath expensive doublets and fine, false smiles, I would be free. That meant escaping what I hated about my life. But that also meant leaving the only people I'd ever truly loved.

My stomach fluttered as I considered all the people I would miss. Admitting to myself whose name was included on that list brought back thrilling memories of Syndrian's hands in my hair, of his hold on my waist.

I shoved aside the memory of sparkling blue eyes as I slipped into Idony's cottage. I could see through the window that she was close by. She worked just a short distance away in the garden, her hair tied beneath a loosely wrapped headscarf. She lifted a sprig of ramson flowers to her face and inhaled the white blooms. The wild-growing garlic plant normally didn't survive this late in the season, but everything seemed to thrive under Idony's loving touch. Plants, animals, and people. I watched her with appreciation and fascination that I'd never felt for my mother.

As if summoned by my intense stare, Idony lifted her face and peered against the rays of the sun toward the window. She raised a hand and waved, then gathered her basket of herbs and left the garden.

"Pali..." She joined me inside before tugging the scarf from her hair. She laced an arm around my waist, balancing the ramson-filled basket in one hand. "How are you? What brings you here in the middle of the afternoon?"

“I’m...I’m here to ask another favor.” I bit my lip, feeling horrible that every time I visited the crofter’s cabin, I wanted something. Company. A game. Affection. Today I needed something far more practical, but a rush of conscience made me feel ashamed.

“Anything, love.” Idony seemed entirely unconcerned as she dribbled scented oil on her hands and wiped them clean with a rag. “What do you need?”

I crossed the cottage and dropped into a chair, overcome by heavy emotion. “Why are you so good to me? You’ve always treated me as one of your own, and I’ve done nothing for you. I’m little more than a child who takes and takes every bit that you offer.”

The woman pressed her lips together before scooting a chair beside mine. She laced her fingers together and rested her hands in her lap. “You know Cyp and I were never able to have more children. I have always felt soul bonded to you. You are the daughter I could never have. The sibling Biko should have grown up with.”

She sighed, a soft breath passing between her lips on a hum. “You are kind and caring and funny. I couldn’t stop myself from loving you, even if I’d ever wanted such a ridiculous thing. That’s why I’ve long welcomed you into my heart and home. It is right that a child take what their parents offer.” She used the corner of her scarf to blot a light sheen of sweat from her face. “And you’ve not had parents who give you the things I have to share. The balance of Efimia, the natural world, depends on each of us giving what we can so that those who lack may find fullness.”

“I feel selfish, though, living in that manor of lies. My life is a façade,” I said quietly. “I steal love from another’s mother while mine...” I shrugged. “The Lombards are an ugly face beneath a pretty mask.”

“Hmmm.” She nodded. “But still, I find peace in the balance. I cannot control Petra or Dennes.” She chuckled at the mention of my father. “I never could. But I have an abundance of love and peace. So I share mine with you. I think

I would suffer if I had only Biko to love.” She reached across the space between us for my hands. “I think Biko would be smothered like an ember in a rainstorm if I had no one else to shower with my time and attention. You are a necessary part of our lives, Pali. There is no shame or selfishness in being who you are.”

I met her eyes, mine stinging with hot tears. “Did you ever regret refusing my father in marriage? Did you ever regret choosing your own spouse, your own path?”

“Ahhh,” she said, as if my questions and tears and unusual presence in the middle of the day only now made sense. “Oh, Pali. If you’d known your father when we were young... I admit I never loved him. But he was so handsome, the newly installed lord of this beautiful estate. When I caught his eye, I...” She shook her head. “I fell for his smile and his beautiful hair, truth be told.”

I grinned, having this heard this story hundreds of times over the past thirteen years. “I cannot picture my father wooing any woman. Especially not you. Although he does have pretty hair.”

Idony laughed. “We are indeed so very different. Even were back then. But that’s what made it fun.” She wiggled her brows at me. “For a while, at least. But when I learned I was carrying his child, I knew I couldn’t assume the position of lady. Could never spend my days managing a household.”

“Could never submit to the secrets that keep the Lombard treasury full,” I added, no shortage of resentment in my voice.

“Yes, that too.” She nodded. “I cared for your father, and I know he cared for me. But your mother is the right partner for him. She is the Lady Lombard that this enterprise requires.”

“And you’ve no regrets?” I asked. “It wasn’t strange living all these years so close to my father, each of you with a different spouse?”

“Not at all,” she said, the afternoon sun heating the cottage and bringing the fragrance of wild garlic to my nose. “I loved Cyprian. Ours was a true friendship. A marriage of kindness

and laughter. Some passion,” she said, nodding. “Not the kind of bone-melting passion that I shared with your father, though.”

“Ugh!” I groaned, covering my ears as I had every time Idony teased me about the short romance she’d shared with my father. But then I laughed. “I’m so grateful that you’ve spent your years here. Many others would not have been able to live in peace under these circumstances.”

Idony stood from the chair and began preparing water in a pot for tea. “You know why we’ve been able to do so. Partly by choice. Mostly by circumstance.”

I understood that all too well. While I had no idea what my father’s magic was, I knew it was something he’d likely passed down to Biko. I’d inherited my mother’s ability to manipulate fire. But to this day, I did not know anything about Biko’s gifts. I did not know if even he was aware that he possessed something that the queen of Tutovl herself had outlawed. Even as she also decreed that magic, which was very very real, not exist.

How something could not exist and yet also be forbidden... Such was the lot of those like me. Confusion, fear, hiding. No wonder my father had denied his gifts and my parents had insisted I deny mine—despite the cruelty of their methods, it was difficult to find fault with their motives.

As far as Biko was concerned, I’d always assumed that he too could manipulate fire or that he carried some other magic deep within him. Since we’d not been raised under the same roof, I assumed his magic—if he had any—was buried or dead, like my father’s. Perhaps the natural touch that Idony had with plants and animals was an expression of magic, something he’d inherited from her. He certainly was an exceptionally gifted crofter. As close as we’d been over the years, this...this gift that was both burden and curse...was not something we’d ever spoken about freely.

“And have you never sought another’s company?” I asked boldly, pushing past a bit of shyness to press for such private information. “You’ve been a widow now...”

“Thirteen years,” she supplied quickly. “Of course, I’ve had other lovers,” she teased. “Is that what’s on your mind?” Her expression turned thoughtful as she claimed the hot water for tea from the fire. “Pali, are you fearful of what’s to come with this engagement? Now that your plan to avoid marriage has not gone quite as expected?”

“Oh, no, by the gods...” I covered my mouth with a hand. “This is not about that...about intimate matters.” I flushed so hard, I could feel the blood ringing in my ears. Idony had seen me locked in a most sensual position with Syndrian last night. She must have thought I was here for advice about romance. “No, not...no...”

Idony chuckled and rescued me from my stumbling responses. “I have someone special now,” she admitted. “We’re not able to see each other as often as we might like, but I enjoy her company very much.”

“Her?” I echoed, inching my chair closer. “Who is it? I want to know everything! Does Biko know? What does he think? Is it serious?”

“Slow down.” She laughed. “It might be serious someday. We’ll see. You know Letti, do you not?”

I sucked in a loud breath and clapped my hands loudly. “Of course! The stable hand! No wonder you’ve been helping her with Rowan!”

Idony nodded. “Well, I would have helped the horse regardless, but yes. The stable hand. She’s quite a bit younger than me”—she stroked the long strands of gray in her hair—“but I find that like most good things, we balance each other.”

“And the passion?” I pried, shamelessly curious. “Is it the bone-melting type you spoke of?”

At my question, Idony took her turn blushing furiously. “It is,” she said, setting her attention toward steeping dried fruit and tea leaves in hot water. “We certainly enjoy each other’s company.”

I drew in a deep breath, happy that my friend, the mother I wished I'd had, was experiencing some portion of joy and happiness.

“Was this what you came to the cottage seeking, Pali? Are you curious about what's to come when you're...” She bit her lip. “Or do you still seek a way out of this arranged marriage?”

I nodded. “I plan to win that tournament money and fund my escape,” I said. “I see no other way. If I stole from my parents' treasury, they would set the shire-reeve after me and possibly the entirety of the Otleich family. I would never rest. I must find a way to replace the funds I lost and find a way to purchase another death mask. That's why I'm here.” I accepted the mug of tea that Idony passed me. “I hope you'll connect me to the guide. If you're able to do so again without drawing any risk upon yourself.”

“Oh, Pali.” Idony shook her head, real tears now brimming in her eyes. “I would, my love. I would. But I don't know that you'll ever be able to replace the mask.” She peered over her shoulder, looking out the windows and toward the door. I'd never seen her look so concerned for her safety. She drew her chair closer to mine and lowered her voice to a nearly inaudible whisper. “The man I introduced you to, the guide who took you to have the item made... He's someone I used to have a relationship with. He is married now, so we no longer meet in that way. But we've remained great friends and stay in touch. He's told me...”

She bit her lip, genuine fear reflected on her face as she reached for my hands.

“Pali, the creatures who made your mask have been massacred. They are all gone.”

CHAPTER
SIX

After hearing about the fate of the goblins who'd created my death mask, I returned to my room, a sour sickness burning my throat. My heart was wrecked. Not only for myself, of course. I was still living and breathing. Could still share playful laughter and secret smiles with Syndrian—for now. I could still smell the oil from the rind of a perfectly ripe lemon as Idony peeled and candied them into sweets. I was, despite my many complaints, still here.

I couldn't imagine the fate that had befallen the craftsmen. They were gone. The creatures who had so feverishly and yet gently worked to cast my face and give me a chance at a new life—all of them just *gone*. To learn they'd suffered a horrific end aroused not only deep fear, but anxiety and grief.

Idony had insisted she knew no details of what had happened, and I believed her. I did not know where the lair was located. If there was a way to find other goblins who might help repair or recreate the mask, only Idony's guide would have the connections or means to accomplish it. But at what cost? And would it be worth it? I prayed fervently to the gods that nothing I had done had contributed to the goblins' tragic end.

After visiting Idony, I numbly returned to the manor, my previous plans disappearing faster than points in a losing game of backgammon. Norwin idly noticed my return with an unusually disinterested wave. I went directly to my room and wept miserably on my bed.

I cried first for the creatures who had lost their lives. Their very existence was both denied and condemned by the crown. But they had been kind, industrious creatures. I'd experienced nothing short of consideration when I was among them for those few short hours. I hadn't been drugged or enchanted, as the specific cast of the mask required me to listen to instructions and to work with them, keeping my head still, holding my breath when instructed. I had heard them banter with one another, their dutiful words as they shared that task as well as many other projects while I reclined with my eyes sealed.

And now those creatures were gone.

After I cried for them, I cried for me.

Since my father was away on a trip, I did not leave my room at all over the next two days. I took meals in bed and wept freely or frantically paced my quarters, seeing no way out of my circumstances. I was truly stuck staring into my future with a sunken feeling worse than any I'd experienced before. There was nothing left to do. No winning roll. No last-minute strategy that could change the course. I had but to play out the moves and concede the loss with dignity.

I considered dragging myself to the crofter's cottage, to try and lift my spirits, but the thought of running into Syndrian there only brought a different kind of pain to my heart. The kind that I could not bear to think about. When I let myself think of what might have been, things that would never be, my tearful misery renewed like a river well-fed by many smaller streams.

Finally, on the third day of my self-confinement, there was a knock at my bedroom door.

"Palmeria?" My mother's expression was unusually worried. "Your father is due back tomorrow. I made inquiries after our family physician, but he's engaged in Kyruna and is not expected back this way for some time. I've called in the healer that the villagers use. I'd like you to see her."

My hair was a mess, and I'd not changed out of my nightclothes since I'd first put them on. I rolled over in bed

and nodded, no fight left in me. “Certainly, Mother.”

What harm could a healer do? If she could repair a broken heart, she might even have some use.

“Come in, please.” My mother stepped aside and urged a woman I’d never met before into my room. “I’ll have someone nearby should you require anything.”

The woman closed the door behind my mother. Once we were alone, she smiled at me. “Miss Palmeria,” she said softly, “may I examine you?”

I patted the bed next to me and sat up, not caring how I looked or what impression I made. “Please,” I said, my words slow and sad. “Call me *Pali*. Only people I can’t stand call me *Palmeria*.”

The expression on the woman’s face changed quickly. She looked a bit stunned, but then gentle understanding flooded her intense eyes. “Of course. I’m happy to call you *Pali*. My name is Odile.” She reached for my hands but not to shake them. She held both of mine in hers and squeezed.

“Your mother is concerned,” she said, her voice tentative. I’d already hinted at the sort of relationship I had with my mother, and the hesitation in Odile’s voice conveyed that she understood. “She believes that you’ve been overtaken by sickness. She doesn’t understand what happened or even quite when you fell ill. Can you tell me how you feel?”

I grimaced. “Don’t be mistaken,” I said sadly, “my mother’s sole concern is how my father will respond if he returns home and learns that I’ve been idle in bed for days.” I pulled my hands from the woman’s and covered my face as sobs shook my shoulders. “I am fine,” I said. “Or I should be. There’s nothing that pains me, other than my heart.”

Her reassuring hand smoothed my hair in long, gentle strokes. “Of course. You’re in pain,” she murmured. “You’re not the only one who takes to bed when circumstances become... How should I describe them? Overwhelming? Unmanageable?”

“I’m being weak,” I said, speaking my fears aloud. “Indulgent. I have problems, just like everyone else. But I have the luxury of being able to lie here and worry over them, and lie here I have.”

“Shh, shh,” she said. “Our hearts have ears, you know.”

I met her eyes, confused.

“Everything we say to ourselves, about our lives, our past, even our future, our hearts are listening. The brain is powerful, but the heart rules the soul.” She opened a large sack and pulled out several vials and tonics. “Why don’t you let my heart listen for a while? Give yours a rest.”

She poured well water from my bedside table into a large wooden mug with an iron handle. Then she withdrew a tiny, oddly shaped spoon from her bag.

“What is that?” I asked.

“A special medical instrument,” she explained. “Made especially for me by the village cutler. He makes all kinds of special instruments for me. Spoons especially for dispensing tonics. Even this mug.” She tapped the iron handle that twisted around a smooth wood-carved cup.

My mouth went dry at the mention of the cutler. As far as I knew, the Serlo family ran the only guild cutlery in Omrora. Perhaps she wasn’t from here, or she worked with another? I listened, rapt, as she explained.

“My parents got into a bit of trouble with the shire-reeve many years ago. My sister and I were cast out of our home and went through many years of near starvation and isolation. My sister was able to find work in a guild, but I had only ever learned healing. I’d learned that as a child from my mother.” Odile dropped a tonic onto the spoon and then stirred its contents into the water as she spoke. “I was allowed to continue my practice but only on the condition that I never charge for my work.” She chuckled. “I say condition as though it were a gentle request. There was nothing gentle about what happened. My future was decided via written decree from the shire-reeve. Irrevocable, permanent, and binding for as long as

I live not just in Omrora, but anywhere in the realm of Tutovl. I am not permitted to charge for the work I've dedicated my life to perfecting."

Odile held the mug out to me and urged me to drink. I accepted it and tried to discreetly sniff it so that I didn't insult her. Before I drank, I couldn't help but ask, "How were you to survive if you could not charge for your services?" Then I chanced a tentative sip.

"The kindness of many strangers, for one," she explained. "Drink, it will not taste badly, and it will not make you feel worse, I'm certain of that," she urged. "Syndrian made my tools and never charged a penny. The midwife, Molle Noll, would bring laboring women to my cabin and make sure we all had plenty to eat." She smiled gently. "The laboring women never needed as much bread and cheese as Molle brought. And some of the vendors in town—Matthea, especially—would save any ugly bits of bread and give them to my sister." She chuckled. "Of course my sister shared the bread with me. People can be surprisingly caring."

My heart was racing, and for the first time in days, I was able to stave off tears because I was curious. Intensely curious. Was this woman someone special to Syndrian? Was he perhaps taking care of her, since she could not do so for herself? My mind spun, trying to remember every detail Syndrian had mentioned about his life, but he was very, very close-lipped about his work and his family. About many things, it seemed. I knew he had siblings, but not how many, what ages. My sadness renewed as I realized how little I truly knew about the man. Other than his kindness, his humor, the way he made me feel—I might not know him at all.

I took another sip of the beverage, which tasted surprisingly sweet, and looked at the rich blankets that covered my lap. "Why would the cutler make instruments for you?" I asked, trying not to emphasize my interest in her connection to *the cutler*. Yet, I had to know. "Is he your..."

Odile sealed up her tonic and dug a hand into another large purse. "Syndrian?" she asked, raising a brow. "Oh no. I have no one special like that in my life. Syndrian is one of the best,"

she said, nodding her head. “He has helped so many people, often for no greater reason than because he could. I live with my sister and her husband and a large extended family of sorts...” She laughed again. “This story is going to get complicated. But I will keep it simple. My sister’s husband has a brother, Neo. Syndrian helped Neo’s wife, just after they were married, when she was certain Neo was in grave danger.”

“If not for Syndrian...” Her voice shifted as she pulled a cluster of dried flowers from her sack. She shivered and closed her eyes. “If Brex hadn’t followed her instincts, her husband would likely have been tortured and killed. Syndrian was the one to believe her and to help her rescue her beloved.” She poured a palm’s worth of the yellow buds, their tiny brown stems still attached, into a small wooden bowl.

“But he’s not...yours?” I asked again. Feeling embarrassed, I rushed on to say, “I don’t mean to pry, it’s just —”

“Oh no, quite all right. I enjoy the conversation.” She set a gentle hand on my lap. “Most of the people I see are very sick. Too sick in fact to engage in any meaningful small talk. What ails you might be relieved by just this sort of company, and I do not mind it a bit. In fact, I quite enjoy it.” She checked the pot that hung in my room for water. “Is this fresh?” she asked. “I’d like to make tea.”

I nodded and leaned back, sipping the drink she’d brought. She set the pot to hang over the fire and then returned for the yellow buds.

“I don’t have anyone special at the moment,” she said. “But Syndrian is a good friend. His brother, in fact, drives my cart when he’s able.”

“Really?” I sat up straighter, intensely curious about this. “Which brother? Syndrian never speaks much of his family. Or of his private life at all for that matter.”

“His younger brother, Flynn, is my driver,” Odile said. “He’s but a teen, and quite a handful at that. But I adore him. So do all the children at my house. In fact, just about everyone who knows Flynn adores the boy.”

I finished the drink she'd given me and was feeling more alert and alive than I had in days. "Children?" I echoed. "Are they yours?"

Odile laughed and shook her head, her pale blonde hair tied back in braids. "Ooh! I would love children someday, but for now I am simply housemother of sorts. Neo's wife—the one I mentioned—she was a foundling. Brex worked in a foundling home that sadly was lost to a fire. She brought along a few of her charges to live with us after she married Neo."

"What an exciting life!" I exclaimed, hardly able to picture it. "How many children? Are they all related to one another?"

The healer collected the hot water from the fire. Then she picked a few flower buds, dropped those into the mug, and poured hot water over them. "I'll tell you all about the children. But while I prepare this, why don't you tell me about Syndrian? I wasn't aware that you knew him. Then you know he's quite beautiful as well as quite kind."

There was no judgment in her tone. No curiosity, even. But the simple question brought my misery back, so I leaned against my pillows and sighed. "He is my brother's best friend," I said simply. "I've known him for maybe thirteen years? As long as I've known I had a brother." After the words left my lips, I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand. "I...Oh, Odile, I misspoke. I..."

I felt sincerely sick now. I'd been so caught up in idle chatter, in indulgent thoughts of Syndrian and lighter things than the heavy weight of my life, I'd said something I never, ever should have. I reached for her arm and pleaded with her. "I...I have put my family in grave danger by even—"

"Shhhh." Odile took both of my hands again and squeezed. "First, my dear, you have nothing to worry about. Your every secret is safe with me. As far as anyone in the realm knows, I was never here. But beyond that..." She looked me directly in the eyes, her gaze honest and sincere. "I've heard many a sickbed confession." She chuckled. "You can only imagine how many clients have recovered and regretted things they said while delirious with fever."

“Are you certain?” I whispered, peering at the door. For all I knew, Lady Lombard herself was posted right outside.

“Let me see,” Odile said. “I believe you were talking about a certain cutler we both know, but I don’t seem to recall how you know him.”

I heaved a deep sigh and fell back against the pillows. “Thank you,” I said, torn with regret. I wondered whether I should share with Odile the depth of my worries when I noticed she’d followed my eyes to the door.

“I think I understand why you’ve been so sick,” she said, lifting the back of her hand to check the temperature of my forehead. She leaned close and lowered her voice. “Even the prettiest lives can be intensely lonely,” she said. “Would you like to get up and dress? It might do your mother good to see you up and about.”

I sighed again but tossed back the covers and climbed out of bed.

“I’m going to leave you with these.” She motioned to the buds before I ducked behind my privacy screen to change into a dress. “Drink a tea steeped in just a few every day until they are gone. If you need more, I’ll gladly return for a visit.”

“What are they?” I asked, joining her by the bedside. My hair was wild, so I grabbed a brush to untangle it, but she shook her head and took the instrument from me.

She stood behind me and brushed my hair, smoothing it in gentle strokes. Not even my mother had treated my head with such a soothing touch when I was a child. I breathed deeply, the warm tea and medicines filling my belly and bringing a sense of wholeness back to my heart.

“Oh, that? Simple garden chamomile,” she said with a smile. “It probably grows wild in your fields.” She bent her face so I could see her grin. “But don’t tell your mother that, or she might not think you need me and my special brew next time.”

I laughed then, relaxing into a genuine smile for the first time in days. “And the tonic? What was in the water?”

Odile set my brush on the bedside table and gave me a wry frown. “Well, now you’re going to think I’m a complete fraud,” she said. “The tonic was concentrated ironpine sap with a tiny bit of honey. I dry the sap in the sun and then make a little bolus with honey. Nothing fancy, but you do feel better, do you not?”

I nodded, the smile still on my face. “Thank you,” I said. “And we really cannot pay you? Nothing at all for your time or your supplies? That doesn’t seem right.”

“You can repay me by walking me outside,” she said, gathering her things. “Your mother will be convinced I’m a brilliant healer if you’re well enough now to leave this room. And,” she added, touching a hand to my cheek, “try to get up tomorrow. Remember to speak kindly to your heart. It’s always listening.”

I nodded and slipped into my shoes. I laced my arm through hers and leaned close to her ear. “Thank you,” I said. “You are indeed a gifted healer. Even if I only required some kindness. And tea.”

She flushed, and together we took the stone steps down into the main hall.

“Miss Lombard! Are you well? You’ve had me worried into a state of sickness myself.” Butler Norwin was standing at the bottom of the steps looking in fact quite unwell. As I walked closer, I realized that was just the man’s normal coloring. After not seeing his sallow face for a few days, I’d forgotten how typically unpleasant his normal appearance was. “Miss Lestalinn.” Norwin nodded at Odile. “How is your sister?”

I looked from the butler to Odile. “How do you know the healer’s sister?” I asked.

“My younger sister used to be a guild scrivener,” Odile explained. “Not the one I mentioned. Brex is my sister by marriage, and Gia by blood. Gia retired her position when she married. Gia is quite well, thank you, Norwin. I’ll let her know we visited today.”

“Is Miss Lombard able to—”

Odile cut him off. “Yes, Norwin. Miss Lombard is making a full recovery. I’ve advised a little exertion and fresh air. She’ll walk just a short way with me. I’ll have my apprentice walk her back if she grows tired.”

I stifled a smile. She truly did know the man if she knew enough to cut him off.

“Hmmpmph.” The butler snorted. “That Serlo boy. I remember when he was a guild scrivener too. I suppose driving carts is work more suited to the likes of him.”

I caught the nastiness in his tone, but Odile did not even flinch.

“Yes,” she said brightly. “I like working with Flynnie very much. Good day, Norwin. Please let Lady Lombard know that I’m on my way out but am happy to return should she ever feel I might be useful.”

“I’ll be back, Norwin!” I called cheerily, following Odile into the sun.

The sunshine felt strange on my face, and I closed my eyes, taking in the warmth after so many days lying in my dark room. “Odile,” I asked, turning to her. “Do you heal horses? Our stable hand has a mare with a slight injury. I wonder if...”

The words died on my lips. A young boy with a flop of reddish-brown hair and the same crinkles at the corners of his eyes as Syndrian stood from his seat on a cart just a short distance away. We walked toward him, but the boy stared at me, his eyes huge and his mouth gaping open. If Odile noticed, she didn’t say anything about his unusual expression. She was going on about the horse, asking if I knew about the injury, if it was from a wound or simply from overuse.

I couldn’t answer, though, because as we drew close to the cart, I couldn’t shake the oddest sensation. I was certain I knew the driver somehow—although that seemed impossible. The boy leapt from the cart and walked slowly toward us, tugging at his hair and looking around as if seeking someone he could ask for help.

“Why don’t I stop by the stable before I leave?” Odile said. “I can tell you bit more about the children...”

“That’s quite all right,” I said, wanting to end the conversation and sort out exactly what was so strange about this boy. “I’ll send for you again if the mare doesn’t improve. Thank you, Odile.”

“All right, then,” she said, waving a hand. “Flynnie! Flynn, I’d like you to meet someone.”

The boy nodded, then yanked a hand from his hair and roughly thrust it out at me. Before Odile could say a word, he started running on. “Lady Pali, I mean, wow, I... It’s great to finally meet you.”

I shook the boy’s hand, wondering how he knew to call me *Pali* when Odile had not known. “How do you know my nickname?” I asked. Deep down I was hoping that maybe his brother had spoken of me at home, mentioned something about me. But the more the boy talked, the more I was certain that was not the case.

“I, uh, can’t say I knew that, miss. Lucky guess, I suppose. I’m a nickname guy. I’m fond of using nicknames, so... Right, then. Are you ready, Odile? We should, ah, get going back.” He spoke so quickly, I could hardly believe his lips kept up. He moved restlessly, like he was stuck in place and wanted to break into a run.

Odile looked at the boy with the same puzzled expression I was certain I had on my face. “All right, Flynnie.” She turned to me and opened her arms. “Be well, dear girl. Send for me anytime.” She gave me a smile and a long hug, then climbed into the cart.

“Bye, Lady Pali! Be, ah, well...” Flynn’s voice cracked as he bid me farewell, and it was then that I heard it. I knew exactly who Flynn was, how he knew me, and why he was so jittery and uncomfortable.

Flynn Serlo was the boy who’d delivered the ruined death mask to me.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

I didn't bother with a cloak or even telling Norwin that I was leaving. Once Flynn and Odile departed, I ran to the stable and begged Letti for a horse. Poet was available, so—despite my attire and the condition of my hair—I climbed astride and prepared to depart for the village.

“Miss!” Letti called. “Please, at least take this.”

She held her own cloak out to me. The garment had clearly been carefully tended to over the years. Patches lovingly reinforced the elbows which had worn thin from repeated wear, and the hem, while frayed in places, also showed signs of numerous repairs. The condition of the cloak bore witness to how dearly she treasured the item. Speckled with hay and stinking of horse, the cloak might contribute to my unkempt appearance, but it was a generous gift indeed. One I sincerely cherished.

“If you ride without covering your head at least...” Letti bit her lip. “You’ll catch your death, miss.”

“I will treat it gently and will return it as soon as I’m able.” I accepted the cloak, threw it over my shoulders and loose hair, and gave the girl a hug of heartfelt thanks.

I rode Poet as quickly as she could safely canter into the village. There I asked the stable hand for directions to the cutlery. The gentleman knew my father, and while he looked at me with frank concern on his face, he accepted Poet and agreed to add the fee to keep Poet to my family’s account.

I momentarily regretted my impulsive behavior. If I'd *not* been known by my family's name...what might have been my fate? I had not a penny on me. Without funds of any sort, I would have had no option to stable the mare. I realized the comfort of my position with a creeping feeling of dread. When I closely considered the many ways in which I'd acted the role of a spoiled young lady of the Lombard family, I grew deeply disappointed in myself.

Now, however, was not the moment for deep consideration of my position in life. There would be time for that once I was free of the Lombard name for good. But that would never happen if I did not have answers. Answers about the goblins and how I might find them and repair the wrecked mask. Grateful enough for the stable hand's agreement, I rushed off into the square.

The afternoon was growing late, and already many of the shops were closing. Merchants' carts were bare of their goods, and tired-looking people covered their heads and their stalls as they readied for their journeys home. I tried to brush bits of hay from the borrowed cloak as I hurried through the busy square, searching every sign I traveled past for Serlo's Cutlery.

When I found the place, something in my chest released, and with a relieved sigh, I shoved through the door. The shop was busy despite the lateness of the hour. The noise inside was overwhelming, the high-pitched clinking of metals echoing through the shop. There were several fires in different hearths, and people of various ages worked bellows, sweat soaking their pulled-back hair. Red-hot instruments were dipped into buckets, the hiss of water cooling metal adding to the noise and the steaming heat of the place.

"Excuse me?" I called over the din. "Excuse me, please?"

A surly-looking man hovered over a woman who was intensely focused on placement of something against a flat bit of metal. The man lifted his chin and looked me over, then called, "You needin' a cutler, miss? We're a specialty shop 'ere."

I recognized the dismissive tone in his voice as the very same one my parents used when they were addressing someone they perceived to be of inferior status. Someone without the money that we had. I rankled when they put on airs, although in this moment, when I'd just enjoyed the benefits of my parents' "status" at the public stable, I could hardly think myself all that much different than they were. By my appearance alone, I could hardly blame the man for assuming I was in the wrong place. But the judgment in his voice provoked my rebellious spirit. No one deserved to be spoken to as though they did not matter. As though they did not deserve courteous attention—no matter their means.

I lifted my chin and raised my voice. "I have come seeking one cutler specifically, sir. Would you kindly let Syndrian Serlo know he has a visitor?"

My haughty tone did not seem to sit well with the cutler. He cocked his head at me, then bit out, "This 'ere's a business, miss. Ain't visiting hours. Be off with you, now." Then, without the slightest display of interest, he returned his attention to the work he was supervising.

I might have been humble in appearance, but I was not ashamed and would not be easily dismissed. Even if I were not a Lombard, the man had no right to behave with such disinterest. What if I had a full purse and sought a skilled cutler for a job? I felt I had no choice, not only for myself but also for others in humble circumstances, but to speak up. I would not be tossed aside.

"I have business here," I said loudly, "and will not be discouraged whether or not you provide aid." I strode through the shop, searching for the flash of a striking ponytail. "Syndrian!" I shouted. "Syndrian Serlo, are you here?"

"Oh, fer the love o' the gods." The grizzled man wiped his hands on the front of a leather apron and scrubbed a hand with very dirty-looking fingers across his face. "He ain't 'ere, girlie. Would ya just—"

Just then, a door at the back of the shop opened, and my throat went dry. A furious-looking Syndrian strode through the

shop, glaring at everyone he passed. “What’s all the shoutin’ about in here, eh, Pop? Did we forget this is a respectable place of business?” He paused beside the man who just moments ago had said Syndrian wasn’t here.

“Before ya go tellin’ me how to run me own shop, ya might want to talk to this one, *son*.” The man’s voice was deadly low, with no trace of affection as he addressed Syndrian.

I realized with shock that the man had to be Syndrian’s father. He bore very little resemblance, though. Instead of vibrant eyes, the elder cutler’s eyes were squinty and brown... though perhaps there were a few of Syndrian’s crinkles around the corners. However, the older man’s eyes looked jaded, angry, and lacking in any humor. His hair did remind me of Flynn’s, though: long, reddish-brown, and poking out past a dingy leather cap. When the man gruffly tugged his cap from his head and raked his calloused hand through its length, I could definitely see the family resemblance.

Syndrian looked past his father to me, and his face immediately became an impassive mask. He nodded at me. “Afternoon, miss.” He turned back to the grump who owned the place. “I’m leaving,” he barked. “I’ll see you at home, *Pop*.”

As he wove his way through the cutlers working at various stations, he bid the workers goodbye and even clapped a few on their backs. I noticed he received warm farewells from all, but the mood in the shop had grown very tense. Stiff glances passed from father to son, as the employees seemed hesitant to arouse the anger of the elder Serlo. As if even speaking to Syndrian meant they were siding with him in a quarrel that had smoldered over many, many years.

When he approached me, Syndrian looked over my loose, messy hair and hay-stained cloak, his expression shifting into one of concern. He rushed to my side, not slowing down or greeting me. His hand was light on my elbow, his body close to mine. He led me out of the shop, throwing a look over his shoulder as we left. Once we stood outside in the square, he stopped. “Are you hurt? Are you all right?”

He searched my face and form as if expecting to find blood, but I nodded. “Syndrian, I—”

“We can’t talk here.” He peered around us, at the working people and children and carts. The steady flow of life in the village passed close by in a noisy living wave.

“I know a place,” I said quietly. “It may be available.” I squeezed my eyes shut and said a prayer to the gods that my father was truly out of town and not holed up in the cottage he kept in the village. He was rarely honest about his movements and travel itinerary, even with my mother. He could have been in Kyruna, steps away here in Omrora, or in the neighboring realm of Drammen for all anyone knew. The truth, like everything else about the Lombards, never fully aligned with what my father presented.

“Take me,” he said, his hand firm on my elbow. “Where is your horse?”

“We can walk,” I said. “I stabled the horse, but the place is close.”

I led him on a short walk back through the village to a very humble cottage, indistinguishable from those around it. I peered around to ensure no one was watching and that no neighbors were close by to spot me yet again sneaking into a place where I very much did not belong.

Once I was satisfied that the road around us was clear, I rested my face against the window glass. Although I could not see inside, the cottage looked dark, which meant there was no fire, no candles...and no Lord Lombard.

I turned to the man I’d dragged here, an apology on my lips. I had no idea what I’d find inside this time. I only hoped there was nothing that would embarrass me or reveal more of my family’s secrets. “Syndrian, I...” I looked up at the man beside me, drawing a deep breath to slow my skittish heartbeat.

He lowered his dark brows and hovered a hand at my back. “Is it locked?” he asked. “I’ll have no trouble picking our way in.”

“Really?” My anxiety gave way to humor as I realized he was offering to break into my father’s cottage. “You do have a little larceny in you.”

Syndrian’s shoulders relaxed, and he laughed.

“At times, more than a bit.” He lowered his head and tried to see past me, squinting at the dark windows. Strips of light-colored fabric obscured the glass from the inside, so he shook his head. “Can’t tell if the place is occupied.” He looked at me, a slightly puzzled-looking frown marring his face. “How do you know of this place?” he asked. “Is it safe?”

I sighed. “There’s no fire, which means my father is not here. It’s his place, and he’d not hesitate to throw me into the river if he knew I’d dared to visit.” I shoved open the door, which was, as I’d expected, unlocked. “But sometimes, the risk is indeed worth the reward. Come inside.”

With a last look over my shoulder to make certain we hadn’t been seen, I hurried past and held the door open for Syndrian. He ducked his head and stared past me as if searching for threats in the shadowy corners, then followed me inside. I left the door open to inspect the place with the little daylight that remained. I huffed a sigh of relief at the scene before us.

A simple hay mattress was neatly covered by a coarse wool blanket. Empty wooden buckets and clean-looking mugs were stacked on the well-swept hearth, and the iron grate used to keep back the fire leaned against the crude stones. A few logs were stacked near the small fireplace, identical to those built into other cottages in this part of the shire. The small table beside the fireplace was likewise barren, and two chairs, hard and unadorned, were tucked neatly under the table. There was no dust on the furniture, which meant my father’s village maid had visited recently.

As soon as I closed the door behind us, the cottage was engulfed in darkness. Dim rays of daylight strained through the linen fabric covering the windows, making it difficult to see much beyond Syndrian’s intense blue stare.

“What happened?” We were scarcely past the door when he reached for my cloak and shoved the hood away from my face. He looked over my hair again, raw worry visible in his expression despite the lack of light. He reached for my face and cupped my chin. “Are you hurt, Pali? Are you in danger?”

“I am...I’m quite a bit better now,” I admitted. “I’ve been... I...” Standing before him, the urgency of finding him—of investigating his brother’s connection to the goblins and my escape plan—disappeared, lost like a vivid dream upon waking. I closed my eyes, trying to locate the focus that had driven me to the village, but all I could think about was him. This man, this cutler.

I opened my eyes and breathed in the almond-oil scent of him. “I...I’m...” I stammered again, unable to piece together even a single word of explanation.

“By the gods, what would drive you to seek me out this way? In the middle of the day at the guild shop, no less?” His shoulders relaxed and he seemed a bit less concerned that I was unwell. His distress gave way to chuckles. “Tongues’ll be wagging for weeks over this.”

“Was that your father?” I asked, curious about the man.

He nodded. “Aye. You may’ve noticed we’re not exactly close.”

“I can relate to that,” I said softly. “I’m sorry, though. Do you get on any better with your mother?”

Syndrian slid his hand from my chin to his. He stroked his stubble and sighed. The cottage was cool, the rasp of our breaths as we spoke puffing in light mists between us. The heat of him drew me like the sun’s pull on a flower. I wanted to unfurl my layers and bask in the rays of his beauty, of his sensual power. Even in the dark, his eyes, his hair, his kindness seemed to give off their own sort of light.

“Did you drag me from the shop and set my father’s guild on fire with rumors just to query my relationship with my parents?” There was a tease in his voice, but I noticed he avoided answering the question.

“No, I...” Suddenly, whatever I’d wanted when I took off in such a rush to find him no longer mattered. He was here, with me. And he’d come when I sought him, followed me even into a dank cabin in the corner of a village without a moment’s hesitation. “Have I brought trouble upon you?” I asked, suddenly painfully aware I’d made yet another impulsive decision. “I regret if I acted rashly, and—”

His hands circled my waist, and I weakened. My lips parted, and a delicious, familiar heat flooded my body.

“I am yours to seek,” he whispered. “No matter what trouble follows. No matter what you might desire.”

His words unlocked a storm of sensation in my chest. Desperate longing, shyness, curiosity—everything inside me was a spilled mess, and I hardly knew how to sort the pieces.

“What I desire...” I echoed, knowing before my body even moved what my soul sought. “I want that kiss.” My whisper was rough and uncertain as I reached to cup his face. “*Please.*” I cradled Syndrian’s rough cheeks, my palms scraping the delicious prickles of his scruff.

“That’s what you want?” He leaned forward, accepting my invitation...almost. His lips parted, sweet breaths feathering the loose hairs on my face. “You’re intended for someone else, Pali Lombard,” he reminded me.

I nodded, my pulse thundering in my chest. My knees threatened to give out, and I steadied myself by leaning back against the solid door behind me. “For now,” I said. “Unless I find a way out.”

He shook his head. “I told you. There is no escaping them. Once the Otleich family has you...” He leaned forward and teased the tip of my nose with his. His fingertips explored my chin, his lips hovering so close that the slightest lift of my toes would bring us together. “You belong to them.”

“I belong to no one.” The pout underlying my voice made me feel so young, so needy, but I had no shame. My limbs were liquid, my vision was a blur, and everything inside me was desperate to taste him. To feel those plush lips and the

rough stubble of his chin against me. My nipples pebbled, and I arched my back, trying to close the very tiny distance between us. “No,” I said, correcting myself. “That is not true. I belong to one. Just one.”

He leaned his hips closer in response, his hard belly pinning me in place. Our breathing was paired. The only sounds in the dark, abandoned cottage were my shredded attempts to control my panting and his sensual snarl.

“Pali,” he crooned my name, sounding nothing like what I’d heard over the years as we’d teased and played. Gone was the formal, deferential, teasing older brother’s best friend. My name on Syndrian’s lips was a brand marking not just me, but my name and my soul, as his. “If we do this, I will not let you go. I won’t give up what’s mine to those thieves.”

“So then take me from them.” My brazen challenge hung between us. I looked into his eyes, flares of passion emboldening my words. “But please...not because you want to rescue Biko’s little sister. Because you want me for yourself. If you do.”

I suffered a moment’s insecurity as I dropped my head back against the door. I was wretched, dressed in a cloak that stunk of horse, with unkempt hair and a wrinkled dress. I feared I’d assumed too much. Thought too highly of the tempting looks Syndrian and I had traded year after year. I’d wanted a kiss, a taste of this man, but now I was asking him to claim me? To make certain, no matter who my father tried to marry me off to, that I would never belong to anyone but him? It was a futile request. One I knew he couldn’t abide. Neither one of us had control over this game. We were little more than checkers being moved on a board by an impossibly powerful hand.

“*If* I want you?” He leaned a little more weight against me, and my body responded, never having felt this delicious, thrilling kind of contact before. While I’d long studied his thick thighs and sturdy arms, having those legs pressed to mine, those arms caging me against the door... I’d never imagined, couldn’t have possibly dreamed, the way this connection felt.

I shifted my hips greedily, the pressure of him leaving me aching. The thunder of my heartbeat in my chest was a minor distraction compared to the liquid heat that throbbed between my legs. Forbidden, yes, but this felt...perfect. *He* felt perfect. Right. I could not imagine anyone else—not an Otleich, not a prince, no one—whose thighs and shoulders and hair and lips could turn my insides to jelly. Whose humor and kindness and creativity could earn not only my trust but admiration.

“I have wanted you since the first time I set eyes on you,” he breathed. His nose touched mine again. Our faces were so close, I could only see his light lashes as he blinked those sky-blue eyes. “Well”—he chuckled—“maybe not when we were both teens. Certainly not in the ways I do now. But there has been no one for me except you. Not then, not now.”

He lifted my chin with a finger, his other arm over my shoulder, his hand splayed against the planks of the door. “You’re clever,” he whispered, bringing his lips close to my ear. His soft breath raised the tiny hairs on my arms and brought a needy purr to my throat. “And you’re funny, when you’re not playing a game.”

“Hmm? Whatever do you mean?” I queried lazily, the mention of games breaking through the erotic haze.

I felt his lips against my neck then, and I gasped, drawing rough breaths as I focused every bit of attention I could muster on his next move.

“You’re mean when you play,” he teased. I could feel the curve of his smile against my skin. “You’re so competitive. Demanding. Intense. I imagine that’s what you’re like with everything you’re passionate about.”

He was correct in that. I’d been a child who stormed about, moaned, and complained mercilessly whenever I lost a game. But I also hated being petulant; I’d been forced to improve my playing so I would not be provoked to bad tempers.

“I am very passionate about backgammon,” I said, my voice carrying on a heated exhale. “And many other things. Like my freedom.”

“Mmm-mmm.” Syndrian trailed his fingertips from my chin down to my throat, his tender attention setting my skin ablaze. “Anything else, Pali? What do you want so passionately that you would ride into the square like the demons of Ástleysi were on your heels?”

At the mention of my haste, I remembered exactly why I’d sought out Syndrian. Yes, I wanted this, wanted him. But all the desire in the world would not matter if I did not find the answers I sought.

With his fingers at my collar and his nose buried deep in my hair, I said nearly without thinking, “Goblins. That’s what I’d wanted. And your brother Flynn’s connection to them.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

I heard Syndrian's breath stall in his chest, the sweet, sensuous heat against my ears extinguished like a fire in a sudden rain. His fingertips froze at my collar, and his entire body went rigid.

"What did you say?" he rasped, his voice so filled with shock that guilt instantly replaced the sensuous fever his presence had fueled in my limbs.

I grabbed the hand that had stroked my neck and met his eyes. "My question is a matter of life and death. Some have died, and my own life is in question. I need to understand."

He released me as suddenly as if he'd shoved me aside. His hips lifted from mine. His face disentangled from the wild strands of my hair. Syndrian narrowed his eyes and glared in disbelief as he backed away from me.

My body tipped forward, immediately missing him. I yearned for his hardness. His strength. I swayed on my heels and gathered my wits. As much as my body wanted him, my mind demanded information.

"What," he repeated, slowly, with a measure of controlled anger I'd never heard in his voice before. "did you say?"

I swallowed hard and looked down at my clutched hands. "Flynn," I repeated. "I need to understand Flynn's connection to the goblins. I need to—"

Before I could utter another sound, Syndrian was upon me again, his enormous form against mine, his palm holding my

chin steady. “Do not say that word. By the gods, it’s lethal to even think it!”

His frustration was obvious now, and a rush of sour saliva filled my mouth.

“I understand the risks.” My whisper was equally harsh, with an added edge of defensiveness. “You’ve no right to stop me from inquiring!”

“Pali.” He whispered my name not with the sensual affection of a lover. He scolded me as though I were nothing more than an ignorant child. “If you value anyone, including yourself, you will never, ever say what you just said again. Do you have so little regard for the safety of those around you? For yourself?”

At his biting words, I flung his hand from my face and slipped away from him, stumbling toward the empty hearth. “How dare you.” I seethed. “You speak as if you have an inkling of what I’m up against! I assure you, Syndrian, you do not.”

He closed his eyes momentarily, as if gathering his strength. Or his patience. Suddenly, I realized I did not want this. I did not want to be the object of some misplaced injury, some misunderstanding about who I was and what I had intended. I’d come seeking answers, but I never truly wanted to hurt Flynn. I could have run to my brother, to Idony. Could have made many choices, but I chose to find this man. Syndrian. The one person I would truly lose once my betrothal was announced.

Syndrian looked over his shoulder at the door, his face determined. Determined to leave. I could not let him go without clearing this mess between us.

“Let me explain,” I implored. “I mean your brother no harm.”

“You cannot speak as you do without dangerous consequences. The queen has spies everywhere, Pali. The way you talk...and tease...” His blue glare was winter’s coldest

ice, slicing through my heart with the sharp precision of an axe.

Oh, how I understood the consequences of my words, my actions...by the gods, my most hidden, private thoughts. What my soul demanded was so much more than to satisfy some idle curiosity. I had not lied when I insisted I wanted Syndrian's kiss. I had wanted it and still longed for it. More than ever, even now, when my heart was certain I'd ruined any chance I had for it.

With only the touch of his lips to my ear, his whispers against my skin, Syndrian made me loathe my intended. A man whose name I still did not know. One kiss from Syndrian, and my entire world would come undone. I was certain of that.

I shivered and hugged my arms before reminding myself that I had done nothing wrong.

"I asked a question," I insisted, fear and confusion clouding my judgment. "I had no intention of hurting anyone, and I am certainly not toying with anyone! Least of all you."

Syndrian peered at the covered windows, his scowl reminding me that the cottage walls were thin. And that even the neighbors here could be spies. I broke into a cold sweat as I realized this cottage of my father's could be surrounded by those who knew him, who worked for him. By the gods... perhaps I was a naive fool.

I lowered my voice, trying to strengthen the wobble that cracked my voice. "I learned there was a massacre of the creatures," I admitted, choosing to replace the word *goblin*, just in case. "And I so desperately fear I may, in some part, be to blame. I wanted to ask your brother what he knows. Partly to absolve myself, I suppose, if such a thing were possible."

"So you came for me to get to Flynn? To get information about matters that no one, absolutely no one in this realm should speak of?" He gripped the doorknob with one hand and rubbed his forehead with the other as though in great pain. "We should not be here. No good can come of this conversation. We'd best depart."

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “You’re twisting my words! That’s not at all what I did or what I meant. Syndrian, please!”

I rushed toward him and grabbed his arm. He looked down at my hand, raw pain etched onto his face. His eyes shimmered with deep sadness. Disappointment. He aimed those emotions at me like a dagger.

“Go, if you don’t care to listen.” I lifted my chin but avoided looking at him. My heart could not bear the pain in his face. Could hardly bear my own. “You’ve already judged me childish and selfish. I had no idea you could feel that way about me.”

I steadied the trembling of my lips, refusing to reveal the depth of grief his low opinion aroused.

“But if you do view me that way, then I too have misjudged you. I thought you were more understanding. That you saw the woman behind the Lombard name. Beyond the wealth and the... Lies. My family’s legacy of lies.” I shook my head. “I sincerely believed you knew the real me. But I will not fight to change the impression left by thirteen years of friendship. Thirteen years of feelings—at least on my part—destroyed because of one lapse in judgment in one conversation. Leave me, the fool that I am, and go with my regrets.”

I released him, hating everything about how this day had developed. About what I had said. About how I had behaved. About how quickly everything connected to my family could turn sour and spoil.

“You have every right to be angry,” I said simply. “Before everything tuns, before you walk away for good, please know this. And believe it, as I do not believe I could mean anything more than I mean. I am truly sorry, Syndrian. For so many things.”

I pictured the mask and the pub and the fire I’d set in the woods. I’d done so much to endanger him already. Ruin. That’s where this path would end. Why could I not accept it and change course? What stubborn, insistent vitality within me could not be broken? I realized with resignation that perhaps

my selfishness would be my undoing. I could live with that—the consequences that followed my actions. My mistakes.

But I would not allow harm to come to any whom I cared about. And if I had accepted nothing else over the past few days, I knew now that I cared for Syndrian Serlo. Deeply. I could not stop him from leaving. Would not drag anyone else into the mess that I was creating.

The afternoon grew late. I would need to return home before my mother sent attendants to look for me. Before she interrogated Letti or blamed someone else for my impulsive behavior. I had done enough harm for one day. I was just grateful that Odile had left chamomile in my room. Nothing save several more days of tears would even begin to ease the ache in my heart. I stood there, trapped in an endless loop of blame and regret, waiting for him to leave. Just waiting.

Syndrian hung his head and closed his eyes, dragging his feet across the cabin floor as though his boots were weighed heavy with stones. He moved past me without touching me and roughly dropped into one of the hard chairs. He rubbed his face with both hands and huffed a deep sigh.

The sounds of the villagers calling for children and dragging carts nearby drifted through the walls. I closed my eyes and wished, as I had so many times before, that my life were simpler. That I had a family that loved me, pets I could cherish, friends I could confide in. I was truly a fool if I thought I could ever create a life like that for myself. I'd not been born to it, nor born for it. The gods had delivered a destiny to which I simply refused to concede. How much more pain could I withstand as I fought for more?

“Pali.” His long ponytail fell over one shoulder, and when he finally raised his face, his bright eyes looked more composed. Less broken. “I need to know everything. No secrets between us. Do you agree?”

“I don't want to make things worse,” I admitted, sniffing and rubbing my nose with the heel of my hand. “I...I...don't want to tell you the truth, and yet I cannot deprive you of it, if that's what *you* want.”

“Sit with me, please.” A hint of warmth returned to his voice.

Without meeting his eyes, I joined him at the table. I took the seat opposite his, like so many times before. But there was no game board between us now. Only a deadly game of truth, lies, and secrets.

“Start at the beginning,” he said. He leaned forward, his sleeves rolled to his elbows. He laced his fingers together and set his strong, scarred forearms in front of his chest. “Tell me as much as you know.”

I nodded and leaned slightly forward, smoothing my hair from my face. “My father has arranged my marriage. I am to wed one of his associates, an Otleich. I know not whom, nor do I know when. My father told me very clearly that the marriage will solidify a critical arrangement between the Lombards and the Otleiches.” I waved a hand around. “This is one of my father’s many...” I shrugged. “Hideouts, I suppose. He rarely conducts business at the manor. But he is very, very deeply connected to the Otleich family, and he is very, very much aware of what they are. And what they do.”

I lowered my lids in disgrace. It was one thing to live with the knowledge of what my father did to earn his wealth. To enjoy the fruits of those poisonous vines. But admitting all this, especially to Syndrian, felt especially shameful.

I worried a splinter of wood on the table with a nail. “I gathered every penny of my personal savings and sought to buy a way out.”

He nodded. “What did you purchase?”

I wished I could have hidden my face in my hands, but I would not hide from what I had done any longer. He’d already heard that I’d had contact with goblins. How could I now withhold what I’d done? Even if I, in some part, was responsible for the death of the goblins, I would not deny my role in it.

“I purchased a death mask,” I said, my voice scarcely a whisper. “Made by goblin craft.”

Syndrian shoved back from the table so roughly, his chair toppled backward and landed legs up. “Pali!” With one hand, he worried an eyebrow; with the other, he leaned onto the table. “What, by the gods, were you going to do with it?”

I bit my lower lip to distract myself from the impulse to break into wretched sobs and fall apart. “I intended to fake my own death. Send my parents the mask and start a new life. One where I was not bound to generations of secrets. Bound to a loveless marriage that was nothing more than a cover for my father’s highly organized crimes.”

He whirled on a heel, his hair slapping roughly against his broad back. The sun was setting, and the cabin grew so dark, I was only able to see the contrast of his light hair as it moved. He paced the cabin from end to end, muttering fervently under his breath.

“And what happened?” he demanded. “Where’s this mask now?”

I shook my head. “Ruined. I not know how. All I do know is that a boy delivered it to me with the terrible news that it had been damaged. I took it anyway, since I paid for it, though I have no hope of repairing it without access to more like those who made it. And, I’ll most certainly need more money than the few coins I have left in my personal treasury. That’s how I first met your brother.”

I paused to see if Syndrian would deny that Flynn was the boy I’d met, but he did not. He, curiously, did not look angry. Rapt and intensely focused, yes, but the pain of earlier was absent from his eyes.

“I learned just recently from the one who connected me to the...*creatures*...that they have all been killed. There is no hope to recover or repair what I have. Not by returning to where I went before.”

I explained that I had taken to my bed for several days, overcome with grief.

“Not only for myself,” I rushed to add. “Lest you think I am purely heartless and thoroughly selfish.” I described the

guide who had brought me that night to the sanctum, carrying me in his arms into the lair. “I know not who that man was, but today, my mother called a healer from the village.”

“Odile,” he said, closing his eyes.

I nodded. “Her driver is a young man whose very distinctive voice I recognized. That’s when I knew he was the one who returned the damaged mask to me. Your brother.”

“Flynnie.” Syndrian fell silent as he paced the room faster and faster. Finally, as if wearing himself out, he slowed.

I waited, watching as he stopped beside me. He hovered over me, and I leaned back in the chair to meet his eyes.

“Is there more?” he rasped. “Why marry you off to an Otleich now? Is there some significance in the timing?”

I shrugged. “I believe my father intends to move closer to the capital. He’s called it a retirement of sorts, but he is rarely honest about anything. I suspect there is a business motivation. Otherwise, why put me and my new husband in charge of the Lombard estate when my father could maintain his position?”

“The Otleiches are behind this,” he mused. “They want something from your father, and I am sure this marriage is the easiest way to force his cooperation. To keep him close as well as loyal.”

I covered my face with my hands and shivered. “It shames me to think of my father controlled by criminals. Using me as a playing piece in some horrifying match. Am I worth so little?”

“Quite the opposite,” he mused. “They will protect you.” He surprised me by plucking a bit of straw from the tangled mess of my hair. “Your father knows that one of the safest ways to work with them is from within. You’re more in danger now than you will be once you’re one of them.”

I shook my head and locked my fingers together. “I don’t care for safety if I’m to be trapped for the rest of my life. I do not want to marry an Otleich. I cannot abide becoming the lady of the manor where I’ve grown up a prisoner, with bonds

in adulthood that will feel even more restrictive. I cannot become my mother.”

I covered my face with my hands and imagined the lights at the crofter’s cabin. The merry sounds of Biko singing. Of Idony rolling dice and baking bread. Of Syndrian’s quiet, strong presence so close and yet forever closed off to me. How could my heart survive knowing he was within reach and yet I could not see him? A soft sob choked my throat, and I squinted my eyes shut.

“Pali.” He knelt beside my chair.

The cabin grew cold as the sun disappeared in the horizon. I shivered and sighed, my lips leaving a tiny puff of steam in the chilly air. While I stared at the rough floor, I imagined all the meetings my father had held here. All the dirty deals and clandestine business that had been transacted here. I wondered if someday I would be expected to participate in the business, whatever the Otleich enterprise really was. I thought about the hole that had been sliced through the forehead of my mask and trembled.

“Do you think I’m the cause of what happened to those creatures?” I whispered. “Did someone find out about the mask and hurt the goblins? Is that even possible?”

“It is possible,” he said, “but that is not what happened.” He reached for one of my hands, still kneeling beside me on the floor. He laced his fingers through mine. “It is my turn to share what I can without endangering you. Pali, those creatures, the ones who crafted your mask... They worked with many unsavory types. I know what happened to them. And I know for certain it had nothing to do with you.”

“How can you be sure?” I stared at our linked hands. His were scarred and muscular, the knuckles dusted with the same dark hair that grew on his face. “I never meant for anyone to be hurt. I only wanted a way out. A way to finally be free.”

“None of us are truly free, Pali,” he said. “Not here in Tutovl.”

“Then I intend to leave,” I said. “I’ll move to Drammen or...anyplace. There must be some place in all of Efimia where people live freely. Where an honest day’s work provides reasonable pay. Where the crown and the government don’t rule by control and fear of those things that anyone with any sense would admit are true.”

I lowered my chin, and tears dripped from my face.

“I don’t want to be afraid of my magic. I don’t want to be controlled by the secrets anymore, Syndrian. I cannot leave my sleeping quarters without a half dozen people knowing where I go, what I intend to do. I want to disappear, just so I don’t have to be kept track of. I loved having that mask made if for no other reason than when I was down in that workshop, it was like I truly vanished. For those few moments, I felt free.”

“Tutovl would be a darker place without you,” he said roughly, his fingers tightening on mine. “No place I’d want to be.”

I did not know how to respond to that, so I just followed my body’s guidance and leaned forward. I rested my forehead against his.

“You’re certain I did nothing to cause the deaths of—”

“No,” he reassured me. “Pali, this realm is darker than you know. Those creatures crossed someone who had ties to a vampire. A very desperate vampire who led spies of the queen right to their lair. That or...” He sighed. “Pali, it’s possible the Otleich family killed them.”

I yanked my head away from his and stared into his face, my shock and disbelief making the room spin. “Murder?” I whispered. “They are capable of murder?”

“What do you think their business is, Pali? If your father’s in deep with the lot of them, his wealth isn’t just built on raiding and the gods only know what. There’s lending and credit, enforcement of contracts... Violence is more powerful than money itself. Maybe even more powerful than magic.”

If any part of me had thought to marry as my father intended, now that I understood how dark the Otleich world

could be...I was changing my mind in a hurry. "They are no different from the queen, then," I whispered, realizing with a shudder that Lord Lombard was no better than any of them.

Was my own father allied with murderers? I grew all the more resolute in my belief.

"The queen denies that creatures like me exist. It's because of her that none of us can live freely, openly. Because of her, those creatures worked in secret and their lives were ended in a dark transaction that will never see the light of justice. My own father is part of that?" I bit down on my lower lip. "I *am* connected to those deaths. Just not in the way I imagined."

"No. Don't say that. You are innocent." Sydrian stood, pulling me with him. He slid a hand behind my neck and drew my face close. "We are all just pawns in a game we did not design, Pali. You, me, even your father. I would not be surprised if his choices were made not out of a desire to do evil but a lack of options for doing good."

I shook my head. "I cannot believe that. Would you excuse him? For what he's done with his life? For what he intends to do with mine?"

"I would neither defend nor excuse him," he said. "I know only how I might bend my conscience if my family's survival were in peril."

Something troubled in his voice drew my eyes to his. "What lengths would you go to?" I asked. I licked my dry lips. "Would you make dice for criminals if it meant..."

He stole the words from my throat by nuzzling my nose with his. "Don't dig too deeply, Pali," he whispered. "You are already far more entangled than you realize."

I reached for the length of ponytail that rested on his shoulder and teased the end of his thick hair between my fingers. "Not nearly as entangled as I would like to be."

"Pali," he gruffed, taking my entire face in his hands. "If you want this, if you want me...there will be no going back."

"I play aggressively when fortune favors me," I reminded him, my rapid breaths lifting my chest until my breasts, buried

beneath the cloak that stank of horse and hay, strained toward him.

“This is a dangerous game.” His breath matched mine, the sweet puffs teasing my face. Loose hairs that had fallen from his ponytail teased my cheeks. “You’re promised to an Otleich.”

“Promises are broken every day. By people of far fewer morals than either of us has.” I pushed my luck by trailing my fingers along his lower lip. “Syndrian, if you feel anything for me—”

He stole the words from my mouth with a ravenous growl. He lifted my face and hovered his lips a hair’s breadth from mine. “Pali...Pali...”

I waited, my eyes closed, my lips parted. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, and every bit of my body buzzed like a overexcited insect in an orchard. Frantic impulses to grab him and touch him nearly overtook my composure. I licked my lips slowly, then nudged my hips forward until my body aligned tightly with his. I circled his waist with my hands, and stretched my fingertips to explore the hard planes of his back.

“You feel so...” I had no words, and yet all I wanted to do was speak, babbling to give voice to my every thought. “You are stunning, Syndrian,” I said reverently. “Beautiful and—”

The first touch of his lips against mine stole my voice. Soft, like the brush of a butterfly’s wings, his lips fluttered and then he pulled back. It was over so quickly, I wasn’t certain what we’d shared was even a kiss. I whined, low in my throat, and lifted my head. I wanted more—not a taste, not a tease. I wanted what I knew he could give.

“More,” I begged, crushing my hips against his. “Syndrian, please...”

As if he felt the same way, awakened to an insistent passion, he covered my lips with his.

I became aware of every movement, every texture, every sound. The way his stubble scraped against my chin, sharp but not painful. I would never forget this moment, and I focused

on every smell and sound as though this would be the last beautiful memory I'd ever make.

The damp air that chilled my toes was replaced by sensual heat where our bodies met. The vague scent of dust in the air competing with the warm almond oil that infused my senses when I stroked his hair between my fingers.

His kiss was gentle, restrained, like he was exploring the ridges and contours of my lips again and again, as if he too could hardly believe even if only for this moment I was his. I closed my eyes, willing all of the universe to fade away and leave us in this perfect, sweet cocoon.

He covered my lips and raked his hands through my hair, gently holding my face to his. He pulled back and then returned to plant teasing kisses on each lip before sucking my lower into his mouth. I gasped at the wet heat and pressure of his lips and teeth against my tender flesh.

The grumble of his voice low in his throat as his lips met mine again, and again.

I pulled my face back, not realizing I'd been holding my breath, and he grunted, "Should I stop?"

"Gods, no, please..." I didn't wait for him to continue and claimed his lips with mine. "Never stop," I begged.

He buried one hand deeper in my hair while his other hand gripped my hip, dangerously close to my rear end. I wished I could tear off the cloak and feel his hands on my dress, on my skin. Even the thought made my knees weak with need. I could hardly support my own weight, so I leaned into him, following his lead.

"Open to me." He spoke the words against my mouth, and for a minute, I was lost. I would open anything—my heart, my soul, by the gods, even my dress. He only had to ask. I froze, though, uncertain what he wanted. How to give him what I was so very ready to share. "Your mouth." He chuckled. "I want to taste you."

I happily did as he asked. His tongue tangled with mine as he deepened the kiss. Stars exploded behind my eyes and the

space between my thighs grew wet and hot. I gasped at the glorious sensations, raking my hands down the muscles of his back until I shyly met the waist of his breeches.

He teased my swollen lips with the tip of his tongue, nipping and licking and tasting me, while I let my weak hands drift lower, lower until I cupped the curve of his behind in both hands. I couldn't control the sounds I made as we feasted upon each other. Gasps and moans filled the cabin, and I writhed my hips mercilessly against his, the demanding throb in my center driving me closer and closer to him. I did not know what I wanted, only that my body was in charge, and I, for once, did not have to think. Could only feel. And the feeling was blissful.

I pressed against him, as he lowered his lips to my neck.

“Pali.” His voice was ragged, thick and slow, but at least he had the ability to form words. All I could do was grunt and sigh, wordless sounds flowing past my parted lips as I gave in to every thrilling sensation.

He unlaced the front of my cloak and kissed my forehead, his lips hot and gentle against my skin.

“Pali, I want to...”

Anything. I am yours.

I could not speak, would not release his rear end unless pried away by a force of nature. I hummed my consent, my eyes closed and my heart wide open. I did not know what I'd agreed to, but I was certain I would never regret a moment of my time with him. Before I could think or worry or plan, the fireplace flared to life. Thick orange flames sprung from nothing, illuminating the cabin in its glow.

Syndrian released me roughly, grabbing the dagger at his waist and securing me behind him.

“Who's there!” he barked just as the door to the cabin shoved open. “Show yourself!”

Darkness had settled on Omrora. The fire illuminated the cabin and I peered around Syndrian's form to make out a familiar silhouette standing in the doorway. Her head was

covered by an extremely fine cloak and her features were bathed in darkness, but I would have known the haughty shoulders and folded hands anywhere.

“Mother,” I gasped, moving in front of Syndrian as if I should protect him.

“Lady Lombard,” Syndrian said.

My mother held up a hand and slammed the door closed behind her. She peered around the cabin, taking in the hay mattress, my unkempt hair, and Syndrian’s messy ponytail. She sniffed hard, her nostrils flaring, and motioned for us to sit. Syndrian nodded at me, and we each quietly dropped into a chair.

Lady Lombard paced the length of the cabin, while Syndrian and I fell silent. My lips stung from the prickly stubble on Syndrian’s chin, my skin feeling deliciously raw. I sucked my lower lip into my mouth to taste him there. My body was still flooded with heat, and rather than shame or defensiveness, all I felt was resentment at the interruption.

“You lit the fire from outside,” I said quietly, desperate to break the silence.

My mother was beside me in an instant, raising her hand as if to slap me. I flinched, bracing for a blow, but to my surprise, she simply moved her hand sharply from left to right, up and down, staring wildly into the fire as it danced at her direction.

“It has been so, so long,” she purred, sounding almost happy. Almost. She pointed at Syndrian and jabbed in the air, the flames following so far, they nearly leapt from the fireplace. He sat motionless, his face expressionless. “You never saw this, cutler.”

I bristled at her use of his trade rather than his name. “Mother, you know this is Syndrian Serlo. He is Biko’s best friend.”

“And, it would seem, a very good friend to you, Palmeria.” She crossed her arms and cocked her chin, a sly grin on her face. “I mean no disrespect, *Syndrian*.” She said his name as

though it were beneath her, but then she stalked over to the mattress and knelt to inspect it.

“Mother, by the gods, we never—we didn’t—”

She held a hand up again, then shook her head. “Oh, darling, I know that.” She stood and drew a deep breath. “I was, however, unaware you had such a *friend* in Syndrian.”

“Lady Lombard, please allow me to explain.” Syndrian stood from the chair, his head lowered.

“Young man, all I want to know is whether you intend to fight for my daughter. You know she is to be betrothed to one of the members of the Otleich family? I trust you’re well aware of their...criminal reputation.”

“I’m aware, ma’am.” He nodded. His blue eyes blazed as he looked at me, the intense confusion there mirroring my own. “Both that Pali is to be married off and what that family is about.”

I stood up then and drew Letti’s cloak close around me, my mother’s words ringing in my ears. Fight for me? “Mother,” I asked, “what do you mean by this visit? Why are you here?”

Lady Lombard sniffed and wrinkled her nose. “By the gods, Palmeria. Whose cloak is that? Ugh, never mind that now. Have it cleaned the moment we’re home.”

“How did you know to find me here? What are you doing here?” My voice was quiet, but I was desperate to understand. “What do you mean by asking whether Syndrian intends to fight for me?”

She strode slowly through the small cabin, touching the furniture and inspecting her fingers as if lifting traces of dirt from the impeccably clean furnishings. “When you took off in a rush and did not return after the healer girl left, I asked Letti which horse you’d taken. Given the state of your clothes and hair, I assumed you’d come into the village. Where else would you have gone by horse? You had no purse or weapons, as far as a quick search of your room revealed.”

Everything began to spin as I realized what I’d done. I’d left my room and rushed off without securing any of my

belongings. I swallowed hard and tried to keep myself from giving anything away, but the breaths came too quickly, and I felt light-headed.

“Mother...” I gripped the back of the chair, and Syndrian’s brows lowered as he rushed to stand beside me.

“Are you all right?” He offered me his arm.

I took it, equal parts relieved for the support and excited at his touch. “I...I...” I looked at my mother, whose expression was that of someone who knew she held the winning hand. “Tell me,” I whispered. “Why are you here?”

“Did you know that I was in love with an Otleich when I was young?” she asked. She paced the cabin floor, her fine shoes creating a dull echo against the rough floor. “That’s how I ended up married to your father. I was in love with Emeric Otleich, eldest son of Lord Wilmot Otleich.”

As my mother shared the names of the people in her past, Syndrian jolted almost imperceptibly, but she noticed.

“Ahh,” she cooed. “You do know the family. Then perhaps you work with them in some capacity?”

“I’m just a cutler, ma’am. I work only for my father’s guild shop.” Syndrian’s response was curt, but there was unreleased fury in his voice.

“Of course you don’t,” she agreed, glaring at him. “None of us who do are foolish enough to admit to it.” She turned her attention back to me.

The fire that my mother had set blazed hot, and the room grew warm. Sweat trickled down the sides of Syndrian’s forehead. I nearly slipped the stinking cloak off but decided to leave it in place. I had no idea what my mother had planned for me, but moving suddenly and surprising her seemed unwise.

“Emeric was a beautiful boy.” She sighed, fluttering her eyes closed. “But his father had plans for him. Marriage was not in the cards. At least not back then.” She opened her eyes and motioned to a chair. “If the two of you plan to stand, may I?”

Syndrian met my eyes and then quickly released me to pull out a chair for my mother.

“Thank you, Syndrian,” she said, drawing out his name as if tasting each syllable. “Your father has been up to his eyeballs in the Otleiches’ businesses since he was a boy. When he made the mistake of pursuing a foolish young girl who worked on the land that Wilmot Otleich gave him...” She tsked through pursed lips. “Your father has always had an uncommon abundance of luck. Not wits, mind you. Oh, my husband is certainly not clever. Had he been, he’d have never bedded a member of the household. Thankfully, Wilmot Otleich never knew your father had sired a bastard son. Dennes did right by them, though. He made arrangements for Idony and that crofter boy. And then he went to Wilmot Otleich with a proposal.”

I was growing weak with anxiety, wondering just what my mother wanted. She’d not scolded me for being alone with Syndrian. She’d not told me how she’d found me. Or even how she knew of a place I thought was a secret known only by my father. My heart thudded in my chest, the blood racing through my body so loudly, I could almost hear it in my ears, crashing like waves.

“Mother,” I said, trying to move her along to the point. “I don’t understand. What does any of this have to do with...”

She held up a hand, and my eyes darted to the fire, but instead she pulled my death mask from beneath her fine cloak. My hand flew to my mouth, and Syndrian hissed a quiet curse under his breath.

“I’m getting there, dear, but I can see you’re impatient.” She looked the mask over, stroking the features of its face. Of my face. She’d never once shown that kind of attention to me, her child. Watching her, I might even have believed that she loved me. Or at least the girl whose face looked so eerie, so still. “You did this?” she asked.

I nodded, staring down at my hands. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you help?” she demanded, arching a brow at Syndrian.

“No,” I blurted, unwilling to tangle him in a plot he had nothing to do with. “When you arrived, I was explaining to him what happened. How I obtained the item. And how it was damaged, which is why I will be unable to use it.”

My mother nodded, and I almost thought I saw a tear in her eye. But I did not see emotion there—if she felt any emotion, it certainly was not sadness. She poked her finger through the perforation between my brows and pulled, tearing the mask in half.

I sucked in a breath, but kept silent as my token, my magic artifact, was rendered even more useless. I’d kept it as a reminder of what I might yet do, how I might yet save myself, but now, it was truly ruined.

“This was the length you would have gone to?” my mother asked, her voice even, devoid of any emotion. “To escape marrying an Otleich, you would do this?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nearly croaked the words.

She sighed and nodded, then stood and casually tossed the mask in the fire. I tried not to cry out as the flames flared vibrant purple, then blue. Then the mask curled in on itself, burning and melting until it was unrecognizably charred. And then, it was well and truly gone. My mother turned away from the fire and held her elbow out to me.

“Syndrian,” she said gently. “I would ask that you take your leave. I plan to burn this place to the ground, and I think it would be safer if you were nowhere nearby when it happens.”

“Ma’am?” Syndrian looked torn. “I won’t leave Pali. If she is in trouble, then I offer myself to accept the consequences in her stead.”

He squared his shoulders and waited.

“Cutler, you can drop all this.” My mother waved her hand again, the orange flames flaring red, casting a dark column of smoke into the chimney. She turned to me. “We’ll discuss this at home. What you need to know now is that I was in love with Emeric Otleich. I kept his secrets. I knew his heart.” My

mother sucked her lower lip into her mouth and fluttered her eyes shut momentarily. “When your father needed a wife to run his estate and provide a legitimate heir to cover up the nasty little affair he’d had, guess who stepped in?”

She laughed, a cold, empty sound.

“The Otleiches gave me to your father. And now your father intends to give you to them. Specifically, to Emeric.” She spat the words bitterly. “Your father plans to marry you off to the boy I once loved.”

I jolted. “He’s decided? When?” My mind whirled. “And wouldn’t Emeric be...”

“More than twenty years your senior,” Syndrian supplied, clenching his jaw muscles.

Lady Lombard looked at me, a hint of maternal warmth on her face. “You want out of your arranged marriage, my dear daughter, and I want out of mine.” She motioned to Syndrian. “Please, cutler, go now. You’ll see my daughter again. This cabin isn’t the only thing I plan to burn to the ground.”

Syndrian nodded at me, his eyes bright. “You’ll be all right?” he asked. “Just say the word and I will stay.”

My mother sighed and waved her hand. “Release him, Palmeria, please. You’re my own flesh and blood. I’m here to help you out of this mess.” She lifted a brow at Syndrian. “And maybe help you both get what you desire.”

I didn’t know what my mother intended, but I swallowed hard and addressed Syndrian. “I will be all right,” I vowed. “You should leave us.”

He glared at my mother, as if he did not wish to abandon me to her trust, which made my heart swell and my lips quirk into a smile. He nodded at me, pulled open the door, and with a guarded look back at us, slipped out into the night.

“Come, Daughter,” Lady Lombard said, offering me her elbow. “I feel like playing with fire.”

CHAPTER
NINE

If my mother's discovery of the death mask, of me in my father's cottage, or even of me in Syndrian's arms seemed like the prelude to a warm mother-daughter bonding moment... Well, I had no expectation of such a thing. And Lady Lombard did not disappoint.

We rode home in silence, my mother leading the way on her mare. I followed on Poet, my chin low, lost to my worries. I couldn't shake my curiosity over whether the cabin was ablaze back in the village. If the neighboring cabins would be compromised or worse. I couldn't imagine my mother burning down one structure and ruining the homes, and even the lives, of countless others as a consequence. Finally, unable to bear the silence and the stiffness of my mother's back any longer, I blurted out a question.

"Mother, should we have stayed? To make sure no other cabins were—"

Lady Lombard drew her horse to a halt and threw a disdainful look over her shoulder. Gracefully holding a torch in one hand, she nudged her mare to turn and face me. We were alone on the path to the Lombard estate, but she peered behind me and around us before speaking. "I am not a murderer." Her words were quiet, deliberate. "While deadly outcomes are often necessary in our family's line of work, I do not take innocent lives for sport."

She urged her horse close so the mare's muzzle bumped Poet's. "I contained the destruction to only one cabin. Your conscience may remain clear." The dark glare on her perfect

features bored into my heart as she added, “Of burning your father’s cottage, at least.”

Then she prodded her horse to canter, forcing me to keep pace on Poet. I’d not packed a torch, so unless I relished being left under the night sky, an enticing snack for the vengersax, I would follow her.

My mother remained rigid and quiet as we rode the horses to the stable. Letti extinguished our traveling torch and accepted the cloak I handed her, but my mother raised a hand to intervene.

“Did I not tell you to have that garment cleaned, Palmeria?”

“Yes, you did, Mother.” I met the girl’s eyes and pressed my lips into what I hoped she could see was a wordless apology. She handed me back the cloak, and I nodded.

Mother and I walked back to the manor, where we were immediately met by Norwin.

“Good evening, Lady Lombard, Miss Lombard. Shall I have dinner served? Tea, perhaps?”

“Norwin, have this cleaned and returned to the stable hand.” My mother didn’t look at me as she spoke. At her instruction, I handed Norwin the cloak.

He looked at it as though it were crawling with maggots but accepted the garment without comment.

“My daughter will take dinner in her room,” my mother instructed, and then she set a foot on the stone stairs.

“And yourself, milady?” Norwin groused. “Shall I bring a meal?”

My mother did not respond, just held up a hand as if to silence him and continued her walk upstairs. I waited, avoiding Norwin’s curious looks, until my mother was fully out of sight. Then I shrugged at the butler and headed up to my room. The torches that lit the staircase flickered ominously, and for the first time, I wondered if they were responding to my mother as she passed them...and not just the movements

of her dress. My mind began racing, and I hurried off to my quarters.

But when I reached my room, my mother was waiting for me inside. “Close the door.” She strolled to my bedside table and looked over the flower buds that Odile had left behind. “What happened with the healer?” she asked, a coldness in her voice. “What drove you to leave for the village in such a state?”

I shook my head. “Nothing, Mother. She...she had nothing to do with it.” My mother had summoned Odile, which meant she clearly knew how to find her. I could not bear the thought of Odile suffering as a result of my hasty actions today.

“Hmmm...” She paced my room, heading toward the fireplace. “And the item...the one I disposed of in the cottage fire. How long have you had it?” Lady Lombard, with the slightest shift of her chin, looked back and narrowed her eyes at me.

I saw no way out of telling her the truth. My future was cast. I had nothing to lose now that the mask itself was gone. Even if she meant to implicate those who had aided me, she had no proof the thing had ever existed. I saw no harm in answering.

“A very short time,” I admitted. “But as you saw, it was delivered to me in an unusable condition.”

“And yet you kept it.” As my mother walked, her rustling skirts stirred the rather stale air of my room. Her distinct scent—a combination of exotic perfume from my father and the slight hint of something sour and pungent, like vinegar—filled my nose. “I cannot help but wonder why you would bring such an item here, into our home. Endangering your family, yourself. Even the lives of the innocent people who work on this land. You always struck me as far more considerate than that, Palmeria.”

My heart raced, and a light sweat beaded at my neck. She was correct, of course. Keeping the mask had been foolish. Selfish. “I...I never intended to put anyone else at risk. I simply hoped I might...”

“You hoped to find a way to repair it and use it. As you had originally intended. Of that, I am certain. My daughter is nothing if not persistent. Some would say stubborn. Even reckless.”

The tension in my throat grew as my mouth went suddenly dry. I wrung my hands together nervously, trying to think ten steps ahead of my mother. Would she blame Syndrian? Think he'd conspired with me to create the mask? Or perhaps that my persistence in using it was fueled by some illicit arrangement with the cutler? I could not allow her to think that, not even for a moment. “Syndrian knew nothing of it,” I insisted, trying to keep my voice calm. “He had no part in my scheme, Mother. You must believe that.”

She was silent, pacing back and forth in front of the fire. “You think so very poorly of your mother, Palmeria.” She sighed, keeping her shoulders rigid and her chin up. “Not that I blame you. I never wanted children. And certainly not with your father. But once you were conceived, I did my best to raise you.” She faced me, a moment's softness transforming her normally stony composure. “Despite what you may think of me, I do love you. I always have, Palmeria.”

I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. “And I love you, Mother.”

She snorted. “I would not judge you harshly if you did not. I'm not...” She moved a hand to her throat, and I watched, entranced, as the fire moved in time with her fingers. Though I had a connection to the element, my mother's connection seemed far deeper. “I'm not like other mothers. Feisty and messy and warm.” She said the words as though they were distasteful. As if mothers with those qualities—like Idony, for example—were beneath her.

She walked toward me and rested her hands on my shoulders. I flinched at the contact, and my mother saw it. She withdrew her hands and nodded, as if she'd been scolded and yet somehow agreed that she'd deserved it.

“I was the type of mother I believed you needed,” she said, clasping her hands together. “Someone who would teach you

strength. Dignity. And, above all, discretion. Although”—she chuckled, the rare show of humor unsettling me—“I can see your natural passion overrules any training you’ve received.” She walked to a chair in my reading nook and took a seat. “Join me, please? Norwin will have dinner sent up shortly, and I’d like to speak freely. While we can.”

I hurried to sit beside her. “Mother, I...I feel as though I have so much to apologize for.”

“Sneaking off to your father’s private cabin to consort with a...gentleman friend. Dabbling in forbidden things. Wasting your savings. Running into the village looking like a stable hand rather than a well-raised young woman.” Lady Lombard lifted a hand and counted out my crimes. “Have I missed anything?”

I looked down at my fingers, which nervously knotted the fabric of my dress. “Mother, today was the first I’ve ever met with Syndrian alone. To be candid, I had no notion that he would entertain my...feelings for him... I’m not certain he feels more than pity for me,” I admitted.

“Oh, that man feels far more than pity for you. Should I be concerned for your virtue? Or your heart?”

I shook my head. “I do not know,” I whispered. “I think I only realized how deeply I feel for him when Father announced that I would be engaged. I cannot say I would refuse Syndrian anything he wanted of me, no matter the cost.”

“And you would have me believe that he had nothing to do with...the item?” she pressed, her cheeks flushed.

“Nothing, Mother, truly.” I stood weakly from the chair. I felt my normal passion abate in the presence of my mother. Somehow, I had not the strength to fight her too. Keeping secrets, carrying hopes—it all felt so dreadfully heavy. And futile.

“Mother,” I said, kneeling beside her chair. I reached a tentative hand to hers. We never had that sort of relationship, the type where I might easily seek comfort in her touch. But

unlike when she reached for me and I withdrew, my mother did not pull away from my hand. “By the gods,” I said gently, “I swear Syndrian was neither involved nor aware of the matter. I was provided an introduction to the...craftsmen... through my own connections. I told Syndrian only this evening that I’m to be engaged. When I also admitted that I’d had that item made in an attempt to escape that fate.”

She nodded again, and there was a loud knock at the door. “Come in, Norwin,” Mother called, our hands still clasped. Her head was still covered, and she looked every bit the haughty lady of the manor that she had always been. I, however, must have looked wretched, kneeling at my mother’s feet, my hands in her lap, my hair still unkempt. Norwin looked from her to me, his expression transforming from shock to concern.

He wheeled a cart toward our chairs and began pouring tea, but my mother stopped him. “That will be all, Norwin.”

He flitted a look toward me and for once remained quiet. “Yes, ma’am.” He bustled toward the door, giving me a final curious glance before leaving us alone.

“So.” My mother nodded at me, which was my cue to stand on my feet and serve her tea. “I don’t suppose I need to press very hard to learn who helped you obtain the illegal item?”

I froze, the pot of tea in my hands. “Mother,” I murmured. “Please. I take full responsibility. No one else is to blame.”

“I’m not looking to cast blame, dear. I admit I am... curious.” She accepted the tea I’d poured, holding the fragrant, steaming cup in front of her face. She breathed deeply and sighed. “You spoke of obtaining the item recently?”

I nodded, not following any of what my mother was thinking.

“Hmmm.” She sighed again, taking a long sip. “And you are aware that you’ll be unable to replace it? At least not through the craftsmanship of those who made the first?”

“I am aware of that, but how do you know?” I could not keep the question from my lips.

“Information is powerful, my darling. Perhaps even more valuable than money...or magic.” She sipped again and closed her eyes, looking as though she was savoring the fruity warmth. “Deylia makes the very best tea. Although I would not refuse a taste of what your healer brought.”

I nodded. “Of course, Mother. As you prefer.” I moved to gather the flowers, but she stopped me.

“Not now. Let’s finish our conversation, and I’ll leave you to your rest.” She set her tea down and folded her hands in her lap. “I’d like to be clear on one matter, and I’d prefer you speak honestly.”

She stood from her chair and stepped close to me but did not attempt to touch me this time. “Would you have sought such measures if there were no cutler boy? Or did you seek to avoid your betrothal because your heart belongs to this... Syndrian?” His name sounded terrifying coming from her lips. Terrifying but beautiful.

“At first,” I admitted, “I only wished for my freedom. I did not want to assume your position in this household, after you and Father move on to wherever you intend to go. But now...I feel many confusing things for him, Mother. For Syndrian.”

She nodded, a thin finger pressed to her lips. “Hmmm. And what of this freedom? If you’d managed to convince your father and me that you were dead, would you never again have thought of your parents? You would have done what? Forged a life in another shire after forgoing those who raised you? What was your plan, Palmeria?”

Tears stung my eyes, and I could not look at my mother as I admitted, “I know not what I would have done.”

Even though I could not accept my parents’ work, their lives, and their choices, they were the only parents I had. And I loved them, despite the many reasons I did not want them in my life.

“I am so very sorry.” I wept then, giving in to the burning tears. “I cannot bear for you to think that I would so heartlessly throw you away. That I care nothing for you and Father. I just...I am so tired of the lies, Mother. Of the pressure and the secrets and spending every day feeling as though I might misstep and cost someone’s life. I do not want to be married to a stranger who sees me as nothing more than the lady of this manor. I had no plan. I assure you, I had no idea what I would do. I may be a fool, but I had faith in the passion of my heart, but that is not to say I would never have wanted to send word. Never have wished to know—”

“Shhh.” Lady Lombard gave me a sad smile. “A child owes her parents nothing. Not love, not time. It is the balance of Efimia that each of us must listen to the call of our own soul, despite who may be hurt by the transaction.”

My mother straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, ever regal and composed.

“Growing up without a mother, I had many notions of what parenting should have been.” Her voice held no apology. She simply explained with a wry chuckle, “Perhaps those who know little about the work should avoid the position. I trust you have your own beliefs about what a parent should and should not be.” She pursed her lips, as if picturing the stark contrast between herself and Idony, the mother figure I clung to.

We were both quiet for a moment, listening to my sniffles and the scraping sound of my sleeve as I wiped away silent tears. She met my eyes and inhaled a long, slow breath.

“You might have made your escape and run into trouble. I would expect that you would reach out for your parents, no matter the circumstances or the time that separated us. But...” She cocked her chin and drew her lip between perfect teeth. “Perhaps you would have preferred to never contact us again, no matter your successes or failures. That’s the leap that’s required of anything we love. We can never truly control anyone else, try though we might.”

Her statement hung like lead between us. Wasn't controlling me, demanding my compliance in all things exactly what my parents wanted from me?

"I don't understand," I started, but my mother held up a finger to interrupt.

"Your parents know their own child more than you give us credit for, Palmeria. Remember that."

Without further explanation, she motioned toward my dinner. "Eat and rest. Your father will be home tomorrow. We'll speak no more of these things, and I trust you'll know not to repeat what you now know of the man your father intends you to wed."

Emeric Otleich. The man my mother said she'd once loved.

"Mother," I said, my voice wobbling. I had so many more questions. What had they truly expected of me? If my parents believed that someday I might rankle under the constraints of their choices...then was I *supposed* to rebel? To forge my own path?

That simply did not make sense. Not when they had so viciously and so completely trained me in what was expected. But instead of any of those things, I asked the question that I hoped would give me insight into all of that.

"Why did they give you to Father? What power did they have over you to arrange a marriage you did not want?"

She lifted her slim brows. "Make no mistake. I wanted this life once. I chose to marry your father. He was simply not my first choice."

She began walking toward the door, but then paused and turned back to me. "You know that I was raised in Kyruna, in a foundling home. A very small one, but one that was supported by the generosity of Wilmot Otleich. His purse ensured that each of us learned skills and had a place within his enterprise once we were old enough to work."

She pressed her lips together. "For me, that was when I turned ten. I was brought into the Otleich manor, unlike most

of the other foundlings. I kept records and grew up alongside the most trusted people in the Otleich inner circle. Working with their most sensitive information.”

She tapped the tip of my nose with a finger, then spun away.

“What you do not know is that I loved Emeric Otleich from the time I was ten years old,” she said. “But I would never have been brave enough to let him know.”

I listened, rapt, imagining my mother as a girl working in a manor, keeping the books. I’d known she was a foundling, which was why I had no relations or family on her side. But I’d never known anything else about her background.

“Your father was never engaged to Idony,” she said, “but I trust you heard that from the woman herself. She and your father had a tryst, and your father did attempt to make her his wife, but Idony...” My mother twisted her lips into a wry smile. “That woman was brave enough to speak her truth and turn your father down flat. Even as she was carrying his child.” She clucked her tongue but sounded unexpectedly approving of Idony’s choices. “This may surprise you, but I respect that woman. For that much at least.”

She rested an elegant hand on the door and shook her head, her hair perfectly trapped beneath her wimple. “I made choices so that I would feel comfort and ease, not passion and uncertainty,” she told me. “I never had the courage required to take a leap of faith. To risk even a moment’s discomfort. I take solace in that. I made my choices, and that, to me, was empowering.”

I swallowed back the last of my tears and bid my mother goodnight. She nodded.

“Good night, dear. Tomorrow, your father will return home. Nothing has changed as a result of our—understanding of each other.” She opened the door to my bedroom, and as she left, she told me, “I won’t stop whatever it is you have planned, Palmeria, but neither will I help you.”

CHAPTER
TEN

Several hours after my mother abandoned me to my quarters, I finished dinner and dressed for bed. I was far from sleepy, though. I kept thinking of the tournament in Kyruna, the melted mask...and not the least of my worries, my future husband, Emeric Otleich. Nervous energy had me pacing the floors, trying to decide on a new plan.

I puzzled through the options, but came up with nothing. No moves left to make. I stared into the fire in my bedroom, gently lifting my hands and considering my magic. My power. My secret. What good was a gift such as this if I couldn't develop it? If, like my mother, I only used it to damage things and leave no trace?

The criminal life did not seem to be one I could escape. My circumstances had determined my path. My body had created my destiny. All I knew was that I could never, ever accept a life as Lady Otleich. Never.

I closed my eyes and recalled the feel of Syndrian's stubbled face beneath my fingers. I cursed myself for not admitting what I felt for him years ago. Maybe, just maybe, we could have run off or found some way to be together before all of this. Now the odds against us, assuming Syndrian wanted me the way I wanted him, seemed harder to overcome than defeating a sea troll with my bare hands.

Laughable. Impossible.

A commotion downstairs broke through my angry reflections. As I tried to make out the muffled shouts over the

slamming of doors, I threw a veil over my hair and rushed to the stairs.

In the main hall, Norwin was arguing with...*Biko*. In the thirteen years I'd known him, he'd never once, not once, set foot in the Lombard manor. Cold, prickly dread climbed the back of my neck; a sense of doom settled over my body. If *Biko* was here, something horrible must have happened.

"Where is Pali?" His furious demand boomed through the manor. Ordinarily, I expected to hear him sing, bellow in a voice alive with song and impromptu melodies, but tonight, there was no joy in his tone. "Pali!" he shouted, his voice echoing against the cold stone walls. "Pali, I need to speak with you!"

I ran down the stairs, calling after him. "Biko? Biko, what's happened?"

Lady Lombard was gesturing wildly at my brother, while Norwin had an exasperated hand on the top of his head.

"Crofter, please, I beg you..." Norwin sputtered.

"Biko!" Breathless, my heart racing, I pushed past my mother and threw myself into his arms. "What is it? What's wrong?"

I searched his face, my heart hammering in my chest, as my mother ordered the entire staff to bed.

"I want all of you out!" she demanded. "All of you! Leave me with this crofter. That includes you, Palmeria. Go to your room!"

Norwin dashed away, ducking his head and muttering about needing security in our own home. He and the other members of the household who had gathered at the commotion heeded my mother's demand and scampered off to their quarters. I stayed close to *Biko*, gripping his waist and staring into his face.

"Is Idony all right? Please, *Biko*, by the gods, tell me what happened!"

Biko's face was stony as he pointed at Lady Lombard. "Did you come to see my mother this afternoon?"

My mother's gaze was not only cold—it was as sharp as a blade. "How dare *you* come into *my* home." She seethed, punctuating each syllable as if it had the power to hurt him. "Get out before I make you wish you were never born."

Biko's rough laugh grated my ears. "Lady Lombard, you don't know how often I wished I were never born. Born into this demon's bargain." He met my eyes. "Whatever happened today, Pali, you must tell me. I went for a walk on the grounds after dinner. My mother seemed distracted and spoke very little during the meal. When I came home, she was gone. Along with all the savings from our treasury."

I pulled away from Biko and turned on my mother. "What did you do?" I demanded. "After this afternoon... Did you go to her?"

"My comings and goings are my business." My mother's eyes were filled with rage, her hand shaking as she pointed at Biko. "Get out of my home. You have no right to come here and accuse me of anything!"

"Is that what you really believe?" Biko clucked his tongue. He walked past me slowly, his broad shoulders and thick chest erect and proud. "You," he said, his voice respectfully low, "are a cowardly woman. All I want to know is what you said to my mother and where she is. And I want you to tell me *right now*."

"That you would insult me to my face is one matter." My mother backed up slightly, making small movements toward the stairs. "But are you threatening me, crofter? In my own home? Do you value your job and your very life so little?"

"Mother, stop!" I moved from Biko to my mother, stepping close to her, puzzled but angry. "Did you do something? Do you know where Idony is?"

"Get out of my house." Her voice shook, but not with fear. With unrestrained rage. She pointed to Biko. "I expect you to vacate the crofter's residence by morning. You're no longer

employed by this house. Take your mother—if you find her—with you.”

Biko’s lips curled into a grin, but I covered my mouth in horror. She couldn’t. Couldn’t take away the only family I truly wanted in my life.

“Mother, stop. You cannot... Please! Just answer the question. Do you know where Idony is?”

“I said *get out of my house!*” my mother screamed, her voice ear-shatteringly shrill, and suddenly, the main hall was plunged in darkness. Every candle, every lamp went out at once.

“Biko!” I shouted, reaching wildly in the dark.

“I’ve got you.” He grabbed my hand.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I felt him tug me toward the door.

“If you leave, do not come back here. And that includes you, Palmeria!” A single candle flickered in front of my mother’s hands as Biko and I stumbled from the main hall. Of course, there was no candle in my mother’s hands. I watched the haunted shadows flicker across her face as her hands shook. “Leave!” she screamed. “Leave me!”

I threw my body against the door and stumbled out into the night. The moonlight and stars spilled in the sky like a pinch of salt, casting the tiniest bit of weak light outside the manor. My mother’s fury had darkened even the torches that kept the property safe from vengersax.

“Run!” Biko’s voice was low and insistent. “Pali, get to the cabin!”

Running through the darkness was slow and terrifying, like running underwater with only a sense of the surface above me. I focused my energy and attention on my hands, wishing I could start a fire from nothing. But I couldn’t. I was thoroughly untrained. Incapable of making something from nothing. My only gift—that I knew of—was manipulating an existing heat source. Without a fire, Biko and I might be attacked or killed. Surely my mother couldn’t be that

heartless? She would realize she'd darkened the entire property, wouldn't she?

As my feet pumped and I broke into a sweat, I could feel Biko's superior size and speed passing me by.

"Hurry, Pali," he called. "Get to the cabin!"

I focused on running the short distance as fast as I could, squinting to make out shapes and any small reflection from the moon on the path. Tripping and falling would be as dangerous as standing still if I drew blood or screamed. Vengersax were attracted to scent, and my sweat alone would smell like dinner.

I stumbled on the path, twisting my ankle a bit, but I stifled the yelp of surprise. I slowed just enough to make sure I wasn't seriously hurt when I heard the ominous sound I'd been raised to fear since my earliest nightmares. The flapping of wings.

"Pali..." Biko stopped suddenly, bending over, heaving a chest full of harsh breath. "Don't stop. Get to safety."

I took to my feet, trying to keep pace with him, but lost my bearings in the darkness. I heard sounds above and movement around me, and flailed my hands to protect my eyes. My veil fell from my hair into my face, confusing me even worse. I swatted at it and stumbled again, this time landing right on both of my knees.

"Ouch!" I cried, pebbles on the dry path cutting right through my nightclothes. I felt the sting of many tiny cuts as my knees scraped across the ground. "Oh, no. No..." I whimpered against the pain, minor but annoying. Worse than the pain, though, was the smell. Blood attracted vengersax like fallen fruit attracted ants. I could feel my sleep chemise stick to my knees, as a trickle of fresh blood dripped down my leg.

"Biko..." I whispered.

Above us, obscured by clouds as dark as puddled ink, were the wingbeats. The loud flapping grew closer, followed by the eerie shriek of pointed beaks the size of short swords sailing through the air.

“Run, Pali!” Biko was still bent over, his palms on his knees.

I fumbled along the path, ducking my head and moving toward the sound of his voice. After just a few steps, I tumbled into him, grabbed his shoulder, and put my face by his ear.

“What’s happening? Are you okay? I’m not leaving you!”

Biko coughed, holding a hand in front of his face. He wasn’t running. Was making no effort to move. In fact, he appeared to be struggling to stay on his feet. “Stand...back, Pali...” he grunted, his voice raspy and thick.

“No!” I clung to his tunic with my hands, ducking my head as my heart pounded so hard, I felt dizzy. “I won’t leave you! Are you sick?”

Biko shook his head, his long curls teasing my knuckles. “Go...”

Circling the air like hawks were two dark shadows, their shiny purple-black feathers glittering in the moonlight.

“I can light the torches,” I said, frantically dropping to my knees. I tore through the scrub and grass with my fingers, searching for sticks. “I’ll light a fire...”

“No time,” Biko wheezed and pointed toward the cabin. “Ruuun!”

In a matter of what seemed like seconds, I heard Biko bite down on his own forearm, muffling a sickening, retching cough.

“Biko!” I shouted. My blood and sweat must have lured the vengersax closer. I squinted my eyes shut and dropped to the ground, instinctively covering my eyes with a hand. With the other, I fumbled for twigs, sticks, anything I could use as a weapon against the winged daggers.

I heard a strange tearing and cracking sound beside me, but I was afraid to uncover my eyes. “Biko!” I shouted.

Through my splayed fingers, I saw a tiny orange light bobbing up and down in the distance and glowing yellow eyes moving fast through the nearby sky. The monsters’ nearly

translucent skin looked purple as they spread bat-like wings and swooped close to our heads. Just as a vengersax squealed and dove for Biko's face, my brother leapt from the ground, his body transformed into something not at all human. He reached an arm into the sky, swatting at the massive claws attacking from the air with claws of his own. Where my brother once stood was a massive brown bear, its yellow fangs exposed as it snarled and pawed at the swooping creatures.

The ground beneath my feet felt soft and funny, and as I fell to the dirt, I realized that I was shocked, stunned. My knees were weak, and my feet seemed unable to follow the most basic instinct to hold up my weight. I scrambled back on my rear end, watching in horror as this bear growled, a fearsome, furious sound. He reached into the sky and plucked the leg of a vengersax with a paw just as the creature aimed for the bear's face. The frantic fight between beaks and paws was more than I could make out in the darkness. I heard grunts and growls, shrieks and flapping.

I shook as cold chills seeped through my thin chemise. The orange light grew nearer as a familiar voice rang through the night.

"Biko!" Letti screamed, a torch aloft in her hand. "Let go of him, you monsters! Get!"

She waved the torch like a sword, swinging and stabbing into the sky. As she drew close, I could see the bear held one of the birds by a leg and was swiping at its beak, aiming for its eyes. But the frantic beats of its wings made it tough to land a blow, and the intensity of the approaching fire made the panicked birds screech a harsh, ear-splitting cry.

Biko released the leg with a ferocious growl and dropped onto all fours. A nasty gouge marked one of his paws, and he howled as he shook it, blood and flesh dropping from the wound.

Letti held the torch high in the air as she grabbed my hand. "Are you all right? Are you hurt, miss?" she shouted.

I shook my head, unable to speak. Unable to think. Unable to breathe.

Both vengersax flew off in a flurry of angry cries. Letti helped me to my feet. Then we turned to the bear. Biko had returned to his familiar human form, but his right hand was bleeding, the flesh was with damage from the vengersax's venom.

"Come quickly. We need to get him inside." Letti seemed completely unsurprised by any of what she'd seen, and she thrust the torch into my hand. "Lead the way." She took Biko's arm and helped him stumble toward the cabin.

When we reached the crofter's cottage, I shoved open the door and waited for Biko and Letti to safely enter. I secured the torch and lit every lamp in the cabin.

"What happened?" Letti searched Biko's face and arms for other injuries. "Where's Idony?"

Biko panted and swore, resting his injured hand against a knee. His clothes had shredded to bits on the path outside, leaving him fully naked. I don't know what I looked like, but I couldn't move, couldn't help, until Letti lowered her face to mine.

"Miss," she said urgently. "We need to bring Biko to the healer. Can you help? He needs clothes. And you..." She motioned to my bleeding knees and torn nightdress. "Can you find something to wear?"

"I...I can..." I stammered. While I knew where to find clothes for Biko and myself, what I didn't know was what to make of what I had just seen. And whether Biko could survive the vengersax toxin. "But will he...will he..."

"Pali..." Biko was flushed, and sweat poured down his face. "I'm sorry you had to see that. I'll explain. But we must hurry. I don't have much time."

Those few words sprung me into action. I ran for Idony's bedroom and threw on one of her dresses, then covered my head with a simple cap. Then I went to Biko's room and grabbed what I could find. I raced back toward the fire, where Letti was wrapping Biko's hand with rags.

“I’m going to get a horse,” she said. “I’ll ride with Biko to the healer.”

“No.” I shook my head, finally calming and finding my voice. “You stay here in case Idony comes back. She’ll be scared to death if she comes home to a dark cabin and bloody rags.” I rested a hand against Biko’s forehead. His skin was so, so hot, and his eyes were glassy. “Can you lead me to help?” I asked.

He nodded, a small trickle of spittle spilling between his lips. “Hurry,” he murmured.

“I’ll get the strongest horse from the stable.” Letti grabbed a torch. “You’ll have to ride together. I don’t think he’ll make it on his own.”

While Letti ran for a horse, I wrapped my arms around Biko’s shoulders. “I love you, Brother. We’re going to get you help.”

“P-Pali...” he stuttered, holding his injured hand carefully. “Sor-ry. It’s my...”

“Shhh,” I urged him. “We all have secrets, Biko. There is plenty of time for them come to light.”

The cabin door flew open, but it wasn’t Letti who stood waiting in the moonlight.

“Palmeria?” My mother’s face was drained of color. She was sweating and held the veil over her hair with a trembling hand. “By the gods... Are you hurt? I heard the—”

I refused to leave Biko’s side for long, but seeing my mother in the doorway, I couldn’t stop myself. “You...” I seethed. “You extinguished the torches on the entire property. You put every human and animal on this estate in mortal danger!”

Lady Lombard’s mouth fell open as she looked at Biko’s bleeding hand, the flesh bubbling and oozing a sickly shade of crimson. “I...I had no idea. I didn’t intend—”

“I don’t care what you intended. What you did was evil. Pure evil.” I strode to the door and pointed. I could see the

Lombard land was again fully illuminated, all the torches relit. “Go home, Mother. You’ve done enough damage for one day.”

My mother lifted her chin but stepped aside as Letti returned on the back of Rowan.

“She’s well healed,” Letti assured me. “Excuse me, Lady Lombard.” She waited for my mother to clear the doorway, then loosely knotted Rowan’s reins over a post on the side of the cabin. “She’s strong enough to carry you both. Just mind your speed, please. Carrying the weight of two will put quite the strain on her. But she’s the only one I trust for the task.”

While my mother watched, Letti and I helped Biko from the chair. To my surprise, my mother rushed into the cabin, grabbed a chair, and carried it outside. She set it beside Rowan and then nodded at me. Then, without another word, she gathered Biko’s shredded, bloody clothes from the path and carried them toward the manor. While my mother walked away, Letti helped Biko step onto the chair and throw his leg astride the mare.

“This was a good idea,” she said, crediting Lady Lombard. I had no such gratitude toward my mother, but I hadn’t considered how much strength would be required of him simply to climb onto the horse.

“Go quickly,” Letti urged. “Even that small injury will spread the venom quickly.”

Biko tried to support his weight behind me on the horse, but his breaths were hot against my hair, his head sagging forward so far he was nearly resting on my shoulder.

“Brother, tell me where to go,” I pleaded. “We’ll get you help.”

“Syn,” he slurred, the word spilling past his parted lips. “Get me to Syndrian.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

“To the cutlery?” I asked, taking hold of the reins.

Biko’s body was hot behind me, and I felt the slight shake of his head. “Go... I’ll show you.”

He grunted instructions, leading me from the Lombard manor to a cabin not far from Serlo’s Cutlery in the village. I realized as soon as we left the estate that I’d forgotten to grab a torch in my haste. Thankfully, the road to the village and the village itself were well lit. As soon as we drew close to the surprisingly large cottage, I turned and held Biko’s face in my hands. “Stay awake,” I begged. “Keep your eyes open. We’re getting you help!”

Biko groaned but nodded, swaying as I climbed from Rowan’s back and raced to the cottage. I pounded hard on the door, calling Syndrian’s name. His father yanked the door open, a snarl on his face.

“You,” he spat. “You trouble my shop, and now my home?” He looked like he was about to slam the door on me when Flynn rushed to intervene. He took one look at me and started shouting for his brother.

Syndrian stumbled from a room at the back of the cottage, tightening a drawstring at the waist of his pants, a tunic in his hands. His chest was bare, and his hair was loose. I’d never seen him this way before, and if my heart hadn’t been racing with fear over what was happening to Biko, I might have passed out at the sight. His body was nothing short of sinful—

sculpted muscle and smooth skin. I tried not to stare, meeting his eyes instead.

“Pali?” He looked at my bleeding knees and frantic expression and opened his arms, the shirt still in one hand. But there was no time to collapse against his bare chest. No time to accept the comfort he offered, no matter how tempting.

“Syndrian, please. We must get Biko to Odile. He’s badly hurt—vengersax attack...” The words tumbled from my lips, fear and desperation shaking every syllable.

Syndrian slipped the shirt over his shoulders and slid his feet into a pair of boots. “Flynn!” he called, tying his hair back with a length of leather. “Ready the cart! I’ll need your help.”

Flynn put on a pair of shoes and pushed past me with a somber greeting. “Evening, Lady Pali, hello, hi. Good evening. By the gods... This is... Oh gods, we need haste. I see that. I see *him*... I’m rushing. We’ll get you there.”

Syndrian’s father hadn’t moved. He just stood with his arms crossed, watching as his sons jumped to swift action.

“Go to bed,” Syndrian said. “Flynn and I’ll handle this.”

“Torches,” the older man gruffed. Then he called his wife to help. “Flynn is leaving again, my love. He’ll need the extra torches.”

Mrs. Serlo wandered into the room in a sleep chemise, with her head uncovered. She took one look at me and gasped. “Oh, by the gods! You should have told me we had company.”

Mr. Serlo smirked. “Were you not listening to the shouting voices? After thirty years of marriage, I know you prefer to ignore me, but our sons have been bellowing their voices raw.”

She walked up to her husband and swatted his arm. “You oaf,” she said. “I’m not respectable in front of the girl!”

“She’s not just a girl—she’s a *lady*,” Mr. Serlo added, seeming to enjoy teasing his wife into a state of frenzied discomfort.

“Ack!” Mrs. Serlo ran back to her room and returned wearing a simple kirtle and cap. “Mr. Serlo, you’ll keep your

foolishness to yourself. Now, how can I help with these torches?”

I watched the affection between Syndrian’s parents and was again strangely curious about the tension between father and son. But there would be time enough to investigate that once Biko was well.

Flynn arrived outside cabin driving the same cart I’d seen him drive for Odile. The two horses attached to the front snorted, ready to ride. The teen accepted the torches from his parents and then they helped him light those that were permanently built onto the cart. Syndrian immediately set to helping Biko down from Rowan and practically carried him into the back of the cart.

“I want to ride with him,” I begged.

I realized this was most definitely the very same cart I’d ridden in the night my guide took me to the goblin lair. I shuddered at the memory. While it all now made sense, I was hoping for a far better outcome after this ride than the last time I was in it.

Syndrian took my hand and helped me into the back of the cart. “Are you hurt?” He touched my face and looked down to where the blood at my knees had seeped through the borrowed dress. “I will find the bird that hurt you and end it!”

“No.” I gave him a sad smile. “I’m fine. These are just scrapes.”

“Flynn!” Syndrian leapt over the side of the cart and landed on the ground. He motioned for his brother to ride Rowan, while he assumed the driver’s seat and took over the cart in Flynn’s place. “If you can get ahead of us, ride fast. Alert Odile. Wake Neo and Rain if they are there. Let them know we have someone with vengersax poisoning.”

I had no idea who Neo and Rain were, but none of that mattered now. Biko was lying on his back in the rear of the cart, and I clasped his uninjured hand in mine, kissing his fingers.

“Biko, you’ve always meant everything to me.” I thought through the years I’d visited at his table, played with his mother, and daydreamed about his best friend, never once making certain that Biko knew that I valued him. My brother. My blood. I would not let him leave this realm ignorant of my affection. “I love you, Brother,” I whispered against his hand. “Please, please stay with me. I can’t lose you.”

Biko weakly clutched my hand and blinked. He stared blankly into the sky, but he seemed to try to reply.

“Love you,” he gurgled.

I whispered prayers against his uninjured hand over what seemed like the longest, roughest ride of my life. When we finally slowed, I peered out from the back of the cart as Syndrian climbed down and opened an iron gate set into a chest-high stone wall.

Flynn rushed ahead of us. Within moments, there was a commotion at the entrance to the manor, but I was transfixed by the surroundings. Behind the stone wall, the grounds surrounding this estate glowed red, as if the grass was illuminated by a colorful fog. I watched in awe as Flynn and Odile ran toward the cart, followed closely by an enormous man with black hair that fell to his shoulders.

Idony was just a few steps behind the man, screaming after him. “Neo, help him! Please help my son!”

“Neo!” Syndrian waved the man over to the cart, and together, they took Biko under the arms and behind the knees, then carried him inside the manor.

Wherever we were was a far smaller place than the Lombard manor, but it was a stately home nonetheless. Odile, the healer, chatted with a short, older man, who I assumed was the butler of this estate, while I grasped Idony in a tight hug.

“Thank the gods you’re here.” I wept. “When Biko said you were missing, I had no idea where you might have gone!”

She clung to me tightly, then released me, her eyes and hair wild. “I came here searching for options, Pali. I wanted to meet with the friend I told you about. The one who helped you

before. But this...what's happened to Biko...I don't understand. What happened tonight?" She seemed dazed and looked as stunned as I felt.

"Go on inside, miss," the elderly gentleman said to me. "Follow yer friends there. My wife, the butler of this fine manor, will see to you. The horses on Flynnie's cart know me well, and I'll stable your girl as well."

"Thank you," I said. Gripping Idony's hands in mine, I followed behind Odile.

"Tell me, Pali," Idony begged. "How did he..."

I didn't stop to tell Idony the whole story. "I'll explain everything... He was attacked by vengersax. His injuries would have been so much worse. He was protecting me, and he... He...he turned into a..."

"Shhh..." Idony nodded, closing her eyes. "Inside. We'll speak freely there."

Once we were indoors, a woman with long white hair was shuffling several children up the stairs. "Odile's needed for healing, kids. Everyone back to bed."

The manor, as far as I could see, was bustling with activity. Syndrian and Neo had Biko laid out on a red velvet settee in the sitting room. They urged both Idony and Odile to join him, and then Syndrian attempted to close the door.

"Are you serious?" I demanded. "You would shut me out of my own brother's deathbed!"

Syndrian looked pained. His hair was loose again, falling against his damp, flushed face. "Neo must..." He let the words die on his lips as he grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. "What you're about to see, Pali..."

I shook Syndrian's hand away, bristling at the suggestion that I hadn't the stomach for this. "Whatever happens, I'm more than capable of being here for my brother," I said.

"It's not about being capable." Syndrian rested a hand on my arm, begging me with his eyes. "Pali, please..."

"Please, what? I don't understand."

Idony stood with her back to her son, praying into the fire. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and her chin was lowered to her chest. Neo stood behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders.

“I’m going to help him, Idony,” he said, his voice low and deep. “I’ll save him if I can.”

As Neo spoke, a shock struck my body, memories driving my attention away from the scene before me. Neo was, I was absolutely certain, the guide who had taken me to the goblins. He’d been the one Idony had gone to when I needed help. He had helped me obtain the death mask.

I swallowed hard as I took in the face of my guide and watched as Idony turned away from the fire to address him. She placed her hands on either side of his handsome face and nodded. “Help my son,” she said. “No matter what is required. He cannot leave me. I cannot lose him.”

Neo kissed the top of Idony’s hair. “You won’t,” he promised.

“Will *you* be all right?” she asked. “Can the venom hurt you?”

I looked from Idony to Odile, confusion raw on my face. “What is happening? Why aren’t you helping him? I thought you were the healer?”

She lowered her chin and looked at Syndrian, who blew a frustrated breath.

“I am,” Odile admitted. “But in some circumstances, like with the vengersax toxin, even my skills are...not enough.”

“Not enough?” I rushed to my brother’s side before kneeling on the floor. I grabbed his hand and kissed it. His breathing was shallow, and his entire body had broken out in cold sweat. The hand that hadn’t been injured was too weak to grip mine back and felt clammy to the touch. His other hand, where the vengersax had struck him, rippled with vicious-looking, oozing red welts. “Someone, please!” I begged. “Do something!”

Neo walked away from Idony and held his hand out to me. "I will try." He looked at me with such an expression of kindness and familiarity. I'd trusted that man to take me into the depths of the unknown before, so I rose to my feet and stepped back from Biko.

My brother was moaning, and a light froth of saliva bubbled at his parted lips. Odile went to the fire and put an arm around Idony's shoulders.

"What's happening?" I asked, anxiety making my voice shrill. "Can someone please explain!"

Syndrian was beside me before I even knew what he was doing. "Pali..." He took my hand and led me to a chair where I could see everything happening to my brother.

"I don't want to sit," I griped. "I can handle it."

"Pali." Syndrian's bright eyes sparkled as he laced his fingers through mine. He touched a fingertip to my chin. "Then hold on to me. Tight. Let me be here for you."

As much as I wanted that, I was terrified. Whatever was going to happen to Biko was something everyone in the room seemed prepared for. Except me.

"*Please,*" I whispered, slipping my arms around Syndrian's waist.

"Always," he breathed against my hair. We sat together, his arms wrapped around me. He held me close, while I angled my face so I could watch as Neo unwrapped the rags from Biko's hand. "No matter what you feel, I've got you." Syndrian's chin was on top of my head, and I nearly had to move his hair from in front of my eyes to see.

"No matter what I feel?" I echoed. "What do you mean?"

Puzzled and beginning to grow impatient, I looked up at Syndrian. A storm cloud threatened to burst in my heart, but I rested my cheek against his chest. As I watched, Neo's eyes turned from a soft amber gold to an eerie red. Fangs poked between his lips where his canines should have been, and at Idony's soft whimper, Neo sunk his fangs deep into Biko's arm. Biting him...biting his flesh.

And drinking his blood.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Hours later, I was in the same spot, my face buried against Syndrian's chest, my eyes closed in deep gratitude, and my nose relishing his scent of almond oil and smoke. As I'd watched Neo drink from my brother, I felt hot and dizzy and the room spun, but I refused, absolutely refused to faint. Well, my mind refused to falter, but my knees did buckle, and Syndrian held me firmly, as he'd promised. Together, we'd sat on a nearby settee as Biko had been miraculously brought back from the brink of death. Even now that Biko was alert and awake, I would not let Syndrian go.

Odile was wrapping Biko's hand and explaining to Idony about the ointment he'd need while the burned tissue healed. Neo paced in front of the fire, looking from me to Idony with abject disappointment. There was no other way to describe it.

"I couldn't drink more," Neo said, rubbing his face in frustration. "I could feel the toxin taking hold...I did as much as I could, but he'll still need time to recover from this."

"Excuse me a moment." I disentangled myself from Syndrian and approached Neo.

He turned to face me, his lips drawn thin. I studied his face for a moment, the honey-gold eyes that just moments ago had flamed blood red. His lips bore tiny marks, the signs of well-healed scars. He might have looked fearsome, as if he'd been through many fistfights and lost more than he'd won, but his smile was disarming. "Lady Pali," he said shaking his head. "I hardly know..."

I cut his words off by throwing myself into his arms. “Thank you,” I gushed. I squeezed his enormous form as hard as I could. “I have many, many unanswered questions, but you saved Biko. I know you once tried to save me as well. I don’t know how to thank you.”

Neo coughed and patted me awkwardly on the back. “You’re...you’re welcome.”

The door to the sitting room opened, and the older woman with long white hair I’d seen earlier pushed a cart loaded high with refreshments into the room. She was followed by a beautiful woman who went straight for Neo. She fell into his arms, and he rested his forehead against hers, murmuring, “I’m fine, love. I’m fine.”

“The venom could have killed you!” Her words were muffled against his chest. When she released him, she peered around the room and saw Syndrian. She walked up to him and gave him a huge hug. She held him so long, I started to fidget, growing uncomfortable and more than a little jealous of their bond. “Syn,” she sighed, before patting him one last time on the back and turning to face the room. “So, it looks like we have a lot of catching up to do.”

Idony was sitting beside Biko, who was sitting up alert and awake. “Brex, I asked him if the venom could hurt him before he drank it. I would never have put both their lives in peril.” She seemed uncomfortable, but then I remembered what she’d told me back in her cottage. Unless I had misunderstood, Neo had been her lover at one time, and now he was married to Brex.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I would have told him to drink anyway, Idony. Neo knows how much he can take, and neither of us could have lived with the guilt if he hadn’t at least tried.” Brex’s warmth toward her surprised me. Brex went to the settee, knelt down, and held Biko’s knee in a hand. “And look. He’s through the worst of it. You’re Biko, Idony’s son? I’ve heard so much about you. What a shame to have to meet this way. But I am so very glad you made it here in time.” She stood and kissed Idony’s cheeks, then immediately fell into the

role of hostess, offering us drinks and snacks from the butler's cart.

Syndrian grabbed my hand and introduced me. "Lord and Lady Oderisi, this is Palmeria Lombard. Pali, Neo and Brex are two of my most trusted friends. You know Odile, and the butler, the angel of the household, is Antonia."

Antonia tucked her long white hair behind an ear and gave me a quiet smile. Then she excused herself. "The children," she explained. "They are desperate for any sort of excitement."

Once Antonia left, I rubbed my face and stared at the floor. I was in a strange, small sitting room with strangers who, in a matter of hours, felt like family. I suspected each one of them would play a critical role in my life—the life I was now about to make for myself.

I looked to Syndrian for guidance. "Odile lives here with Neo and Brex?"

He nodded. "As does her sister, who is married to Neo's brother, but I suspect they're—"

"They're working," Brex said with a sly smile.

"And the children?" I asked.

"Former foundlings," Brex said proudly. "Orphans I lived with until the foundling home burned down and I married this one." She jerked a thumb at Neo, a sparkly gold-and-red ring on her hand catching the firelight.

"That means you're up to date," Neo said, putting an arm around his wife. "Except for one thing."

"I can think of far more than just one thing," I said, shaking my head. My mind was spinning with questions. "You, Neo, are a..."

He nodded, his handsome face looking unusually pale. "It can be very dangerous to help someone after a vengersax attack," he explained. "The venom released from my bite has healing properties, but I consume some of the bird's toxin when I feed. Thankfully, you got him here quickly, and Biko is...exceptionally strong."

“He wasn’t human when he was bit.” I said the words not caring who knew or what secrets I was revealing. Lives were at risk now, real lives. Neo had endangered himself for Biko. We’d all been put at risk watching a vampire drink blood. And since my mother had cast me out and released the crofter from his duty... I dropped my face in my hands. We were all very much connected.

Idony stroked Biko’s hair away from his face. He smiled weakly. “I’m all right, Mum.” He nodded at me. “Pali, Pali, my sweet sister-gal-y.” He rolled his healing hand, inspecting the bandages. “I never expected you to find out this way. I never expected you to find out at all.”

“Find out what?” I asked. “That you have some sort of gift too? With the parents we have...” I clenched my hands into fists, trying to understand. “What more don’t I know? Didn’t you consider I had gifts too? That I had secrets or powers? That all these years, instead of hiding them, being terrified for my life, I could have used someone I loved and trusted who understood what this was like?”

“With your parents,” Idony said, “nothing is ever as simple as it should be.”

I was near tears when Brex took Neo’s hand.

“We should give you some time to talk,” she said, tugging her husband toward the door.

“We have no place to go back to,” I blurted. “My mother dismissed Biko and Idony. Cast them from the crofter’s cottage. She said I was not to return home if I left with Biko, and clearly...”

Brex and Neo traded looks, but Odile was the one who spoke up. “You can all stay here. You should, in fact, spend the night. Until we can sort things out in the morning.” She squeezed Biko’s shoulder. “I’ll come back with bedding and fresh water. We’ll leave you to sort things out. Flynn, come help me.”

After Lord and Lady Oderisi and Odile left us alone, the room fell silent. Biko’s breathing was clear and deep, and

Idony quietly wrung her hands. “Is it true, son? Have we been cast out by the Lombards?”

Biko nodded. “When I didn’t find you at home and all our money was gone...”

“You noticed?” Idony’s cheeks flushed, and she looked ashamed.

“Of course I noticed, Mum. I was worried sick and confronted Lady Lombard.” Biko’s shoulders sagged. “And I did not treat her with the respect she demanded. She let me go. I suppose she’ll allow us to return home for our things, but...I don’t know.”

“The Lombards won’t deny you what’s yours.” Syndrian strode to his friend and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “They won’t want the kind of trouble we can bring upon them. You’ll get your things back. I’ll see to it personally.”

“Can we please talk for a minute about what happened?” Now that the fear for Biko had passed, I was exhausted. I was truly beginning to realize the consequences of the night’s events. My mother had done something so reckless, so dangerous, Biko could have been killed. I could have been killed... And yet, in her fury, she cast Biko from his role. Told me never to return home to my family. Could she have meant it? What I really needed to know more than anything, though, was whether my father and Biko shared the same power. Since my mother and I both had the ability to manipulate fire, what secrets did my father’s body hold? And what about Idony?

Biko nodded. “I’m sorry you had to see that, sis.” He roughly rubbed his face and chuckled. “I’ve only just discovered I could do that. Still getting control of it.”

“You mean change into a bear,” I prodded. The sitting room was chilly, and I shivered, wrapping my hands tighter around myself. Syndrian brought me a woolen blanket and draped it over my shoulders. “Can you do that too?” I asked Idony.

She shook her head. “I’ve never been able to manipulate my own body,” she said. “I know very little about our unusual

gifts. When your father and I connected, I thought the only thing we shared was bone-melting passion.”

“Ugh, Mother.” Biko grimaced and smacked his mouth like he’d tasted something sour. “Really not the time.”

I grinned despite my confusion and shivered under the blanket. “So you, my father, my mother, me, and Biko—we all have some type of forbidden magic?”

Idony nodded. “Your father does not know that Biko and I have any gifts. He may suspect, but he and I never discussed it. The only reason I’m certain Lord Lombard has some type of magic is because Biko does. I don’t know for certain, but I believe if only one parent has magic, the child will not have any. Both parents must have some innate gift for anything unusual to be passed down.”

“And yet you cannot shift your body into other forms?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. I believe my gifts are limited to things I can touch. I can nurture plants into the strongest versions of themselves. I raised a beautiful, powerful son. And that’s been enough for me.”

“I only discovered I could do this maybe a year ago,” Biko explained, his face darkening. “I was out in the orchard at the end of a work day, late in the season last year. I was clearing ant habitats and preparing the orchard for winter when your father—our father—came out of nowhere.” Biko stared down at his wounded hand. “You know, I’ve always known that coxcomb is my father by birth, but...” He shook his head. “He’s a terrible person. I never wanted to be anything like him, certainly didn’t want to know him.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Did he try to talk to you?”

Biko growled, his human voice not nearly as fearsome as his bear noises, but still powerful and dark. “He tried to recruit me to work for him,” my brother admitted. “He was nosing around, curious about whether I wanted to make more money and if I had any interest in working for him by night while I continued as a crofter.”

Syndrian coughed into his hand. “Lord Lombard has more than a little larceny in him.”

I looked into Syndrian’s eyes, my horror only momentarily abated by him repeating my joke.

“What is happening with my father, then?” I asked. “He tried to recruit you to work for the Otleiches?”

Biko shrugged one shoulder and hummed. “I don’t know for certain what he had in mind, but I have to assume. After more than twenty years denying I exist, he wanted something that only I could provide.” He chuckled. “I got so angry, I started running, tearing my hair, beating the ground. I found a space between two trees where I could growl and scream and sing my rage out, and...I must have released something. My body started to experience the most searing pain, like my bones were breaking. My back throbbed, and the next thing I knew, I was on all fours on the ground.” He held up his hands and wiggled his fingers. “These were gone. In their place—paws.”

I dropped the blanket and walked over to my brother. “So that’s what your late-night walks have been about? You’ve been...”

“Practicing controlling what I can do.” His laugh was sad. “As you know, it’s not exactly safe to be different in this realm.” He yawned then, covering his mouth with his hand. “Should we go home, Mum? Try to sleep one more night in our beds? Surely Lady Lombard didn’t lock us out already?”

“Stay here,” Syndrian recommended. “Some of the pieces are starting to come together for me. I think you’ll be safer resting here for the night. Neo or his brother can feed from you in the morning if you need more.”

“Are they all vampires?” I asked.

“I’m not.” A very small child with hair shaved close to the scalp stood in the doorway of the sitting room.

“Ivo...” Syndrian gave the child a look. “Your auntie Brex is going to be looking for you, isn’t she?”

The child's face was expressionless, but the thoughtful, soulful eyes were what moved me so deeply. Looking at this little one was like peering through time, at something very old and very wise, and very much out of place.

"Yes, but there's too much going on to sleep. You didn't introduce me to your friends, Syndrian." The child's voice was melodic but also a little bit monotonous. Hearing the steady, small voice was almost like listening to a monk's chant.

"If I do that," Syndrian said, walking up to the doorway. "You're going to have to promise me you'll go right on to bed, then. And maybe give our friends one of those rare Ivo smiles?"

The child's thin sleep chemise was shapeless and ghostly. But as soon as Syndrian bent to scoop the child into his arm, Ivo's face broke into a relaxed smile. He wrapped his arms around Syndrian's neck and pointed at me. "Is that the girl you always talk about?"

Syndrian raised a dark brow and put a finger over his own lips to shush the child. "I thought you were good at keeping secrets!"

Ivo's face brightened as Syndrian set the child down in front of me. "Brex is not a vampire. In fact, only Neo and his brother, Rain, are. I'm not one myself. But I am...unusual." The little one extended a hand to me, waiting for my handshake. "You must be Pali. You're exactly like Syndrian said you were."

I shook the child's hand. "And you're Ivo? I'm so very pleased to meet you."

"I like games too," Ivo said, charging ahead as if I hadn't said anything. "Puzzles really. But Syndrian says you're the best at playing backgammon."

I nodded. "I do love the game. I'm not sure I'm the best, but..."

"She's goooooooood." Biko lumbered over to the child and offered his uninjured hand. "This one got beaked by a vengersax," he said. "Maybe shake the other one."

Ivo shook his little head and pressed his lips tightly together. “Very dangerous, those birds. You’d be better off avoiding them.”

Idony giggled, and I had to stifle my own smiles at the very, very serious child. He could not have been older than four, maybe five years old, and yet he conducted himself with the gravity of a monarch.

“All right, you little scamp.” Syndrian nodded and pointed at the door. “You know what to do. Before Antonia and Brex come in here all in panic.”

Ivo plodded slowly toward the door, but then he pointed at me. “I like her.”

Syndrian laughed. “We all do, my friend. Go on now.”

Once the child went off to bed, Flynn and Antonia, the Oderisi butler, returned to the sitting room with bedding.

“You should go home,” Syndrian told his brother. “Mum’ll be worried.”

Flynn nodded. “I’ll take one of Neo’s horses home and tell them you’re here. I’ll be back here tomorrow morning to work anyway.” He slapped his brother’s back in a half hug and bid the rest of us good night.

Idony set to tucking Biko into one of the settees for the night.

“Might I step outside?” I asked Antonia. “I’m curious about the mist I saw on the plants.”

Syndrian took my hand. “You’re hurt. We should have Odile look at your knees.”

“I need some air,” I said.

Antonia nudged us both from the sitting room. “Go ahead. Syndrian can explain about the blood moss. Or you can just take some time to enjoy it. I’ll settle Idony and Biko, then make up beds for you. You’ll all be safe here tonight.”

Syndrian held open the front door, and we stepped outside under the stars. The Oderisi estate was ablaze with light from

torches just like those my mother had extinguished on our property. A cold chill ran down my spine, and I shivered.

“Why did Idony come here tonight?” I asked. “What business called her away from the cottage and to this place? Biko said she’d taken all their money.”

He nodded. “If I had to guess, she was looking for a way to fix that mask of yours. Fix it or replace it.”

“I thought that was impossible.” I scratched the toe of my shoe against the smooth gray stones and stared off into the red mist hovering over the Oderisi grounds.

“A night or so after the goblins were killed, Neo and Brex went to the lair.” He chuckled. “They went on their wedding night, as a matter of fact. And they saved the only survivor. Brought him here to recover.”

A few days ago, the news that a goblin had survived and been brought to these very grounds might have given me renewed hope. Passion that I might yet repair the mask and put my plans into place. But the mask was gone. Burned by my mother’s fire. I felt the exact same way: ruined, charred, my vitality and drive reduced to ash.

“Did the survivor recover?” I asked. “Not that I’d seek him out,” I added. “I think my time with the goblins is better left in the past.”

“He did recover. And Neo was able to deliver him back to Skickligera, the goblins’ mountain outpost.”

I nodded. “That is excellent news. I hope the poor soul was reunited with loved ones.” I felt my lower lip tremble, but I bit it.

The time for tears was over. Biko was safe. We’d all been cast aside. Nothing would ever be the same as it was. I assumed my mother had not intended to toss me aside forever. If I returned home, willing to accept my future, my place in this realm, I was certain she would take me back. She had to. My father seemed single-minded in his intention to marry me off. I was certain that despite how horrific tonight had been

that my mother wouldn't risk everything that was riding on my betrothal for the pleasure of disowning me.

I couldn't hope that the same forgiveness or compromise might be offered to Biko and Idony. I could only pray that once I was established as lady of the manor, I might be in a position to reinstate them, or to find them other means of supporting them. Anything else was simply too painful to consider.

As if he could read my thoughts, Syndrian, his voice thick with emotion, broke through my sadness. "You know, if I could, I'd take you away from this. I'd leave tonight. With you."

I turned to face him. "You'd have to return," I reminded him. "You have a family, a job... You cannot compromise your life to be my cart driver, Syndrian."

"No," he said, his sky-blue eyes bright as he searched my face. "I would give it all up. Everything. Not to drive you. To be yours. Your husband, your partner. Forever, Pali. We could disappear. Together." He sounded so shy, so hopeful, my heart nearly burst with longing.

After all the years of quiet yearning, to hear him say those words...I should have been filled with hope and joy. Love and excitement. Instead, all I felt was doom.

"You do not want that, Syndrian." I sunk down on the stone steps and rested my face in my hands. "You do not want a life of running. A life of lies."

He dropped beside me and leaned toward me, his left knee against my right. "If I speak of what I want, you'll never look at me the same way again."

The stars seemed to sparkle above us, the sky a much kinder companion now that the creatures of the darkness did not hide in its murky depths. I laced my hands together. "Now that I've seen you shirtless, I'll definitely never look at you the same way again."

Syndrian barked a laugh and reached for my chin. He lifted it so our eyes met. "Do you remember how terrible I was at

backgammon?”

“Terrible?” I echoed. “You were unteachable! For the entirety of my teens, I was terrified you weren’t very interested in something I loved so deeply.” I softened my words with a grin. “Handsome, sweet, extremely intelligent, and yet...”

“Hopelessly in love with the girl teaching me backgammon,” he confessed, curling his lips. “I had to work incredibly hard to look that confused about the rules.”

I drew my face back and stamped my foot indignantly. “You...pretended? You lost thousands of games over how many years...but you were never really that bad? Just so I would keep teaching you?”

“You forget I was friends with Biko long before you started coming around. I’d been playing backgammon in that cabin for years.” Syndrian looked down at his hands, an endearingly sweet gesture. “You were so passionate, Pali. You touched my hand and shoved my arm...moved close to me to show me the best moves. My pride didn’t suffer from the losing scores,” he explained.

“But my heart couldn’t have tolerated losing your instruction. By the time I was maybe eighteen, I figured you were on to my farce.” He laughed, his sweet smile and clear happiness brightening the darkness that plagued my mind. “What really convinced me to play seriously was Biko. He threatened to tell you everything. He grew so bored of my lovesick games.”

I studied his face, resisting the urge to stroke the silky strands that had fallen loose from his ponytail. But then my passion got the better of me. My patience was frayed. My plans had turned to dust. I was without a home. Without the support of my family—the Lombards, at least. Without any means or the hope to recover an independent, free life. If my mother did accept me back, I would be essentially accepting my engagement. The path my parents wanted for me. Nothing was left for me to hold on to. Nothing except the one thing that I truly wanted.

I tossed the blanket aside and plucked the hairs away from his face. Then I scooted closer and cupped his cheeks. “I for once am tired of games. Tired to death, Syndrian.”

He fluttered his eyes shut as I stroked the stubble on his face. “Then play no more, Pali. What will you do? What do you want? Efimia is yours for the taking.”

I shook my head. “All I want is you,” I confessed. “All I’ve ever wanted is you.” I leaned toward Syndrian as he leaned toward me.

Our noses bumped, but he held my face and pressed our foreheads together.

“Would you really leave with me?” I asked. “Run off... leaving Biko and Flynn, your friends and your parents?”

“After the tournament, yes,” he said.

“By then it will be too late,” I said. “My father has decided who I am to marry. I should go home tonight and accept their choice, or play the tournament and commit to any future except the path my parents have cleared.”

Syndrian swallowed hard, a shiver rocking his solid form. “Pali.” A gentle puff of his breath rose like smoke in the cool air. “The entanglements with the Otleiches reach further than you know. Yours is not the only family they seek to control.”

My eyes flew open, and I pulled my face away from his. “You? Your family? Are you in any danger from them, Syndrian?”

He shook his head sadly. “It is only because of the work I do for them that I can keep my family safe.”

“You cannot flee this shire, then,” I said quietly. “Running off with me would be wrong. You must fulfill your duty to your family. If that means you are not meant for me, then I must accept the loss with grace.”

“No.” He stood from the steps and took my hand. My body fell against his as if for the last time. My skin, my limbs, even my hair seemed tossed against him, seeking one more kiss. One more embrace. “I will never, ever let them take you from

me. Not the Lombards. Not the Otleiches. If you want me, I am yours.”

I wrapped my hands behind his neck and pulled him close. Then I crushed my lips against his, tasting, seeking, exploring, desperate to remember everything about this man. “I want you. Now and forever. By the gods, I’ve never wanted anything more.”

He spoke quickly between kisses, his teeth clacking against mine in our frenzy of passion. “And you’re certain?” He breathed the words between kisses. “Even if I have not yet won your heart, you have forever claimed mine.”

This was the most dramatic move I’d made in my life. The biggest gamble. The scariest strategy. But if it meant saving myself from a loveless marriage and spending a lifetime with this man...like this...I was more than ready to take that leap.

“There is only one for me,” I vowed, weaving my fingers through his hair and holding tight. “There is only you and always you. Now I need you to help me. How do we win this?”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

The next morning, after thanking Neo and his wife for their hospitality, I climbed on Rowan's back and headed home alone. Syndrian and I had a plan, but I would need to play my part perfectly. At any point, anything could go wrong, and I would be—well, I would be married off to Emeric Otleich. This was the tournament that truly mattered. The stakes were my life, and I'd never felt more prepared to play and win it all.

I rode back to the Lombard manor early in the morning before the household was awake. The doors were locked, but Syndrian had given me a lockpick and shown me how to use it. After breaking into my own home, I went quietly upstairs to my room. Even Norwin was not yet tottering through the main hall, so I had no one to make excuses to. I packed all my money, along with my backgammon board and dice, and prepared a large cask of water. I dressed carefully for the plans I'd made during the long hours when I'd paced the sitting room with Syndrian last night.

But of course, once I was ready to leave, Lady Lombard stopped me. "Palmeria, wait. Please."

I turned on the steps, my arms full, but did not approach her. "I will be back, Mother," I said quietly. "I'm prepared to follow through with the plans you and my father have for me. After I do just one thing for myself. One thing I wish to do."

“What might that be?” My mother glared at me, her teeth bared. “Run off and marry the cutler boy?”

I looked down at my hands and shook my head. “I wish to play in a backgammon tournament. That’s all. It is tonight, and I expect to win a little money to replace what I spent on the... item that’s burned.”

“I see.” She softened, but only slightly. “And is the crofter boy hurt? Was the healer able to help him?”

I nodded. “He was badly hurt, and he and Idony are still there receiving care. He’s expected to recover.”

“Y-you must know I—” she stammered, flushing angrily. “I never intended to put you or that crofter in mortal danger. I lost control of my temper, which is the very reason such things are so dangerous. Now, perhaps, you understand what your father and I have tried to teach you all these years.”

I nodded slowly, seeing no point to arguing. “I understand,” I said quietly. “But your intention does not change the consequences of your actions. Biko was badly hurt. And I...” I shrugged. “I am uninjured. Physically, at least.”

Although I tried to maintain my composure, I could not. The thought of losing Biko, Syndrian, and Idony brought tears to my eyes. “It would have been difficult for me to maintain my familiarity with the crofter after my marriage anyway. This other pain is one that will heal in time.”

“So they plan to leave, then?” my mother asked, sounding defensive.

“You released them,” I reminded her. “I would not presume to speak for them, but I expect they will be back for their personal items once Biko is well enough.”

My mother covered her mouth with a shaking hand. “I do not know...I...I don’t know what your father will think. I acted rashly, Palmeria, and...”

“What’s done is done,” I said, refusing to comfort or absolve her. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll return after the tournament ends.” I turned and descended the staircase.

“Pali, wait!”

I froze in place at my mother’s use of my nickname. She’d never once used the shortened form of my name. I turned to look at her. “Yes, Mother?”

“I want to give you something. Please. Come with me.” She sounded sincere, but for a moment, everything inside me resisted following her.

What if she planned to restrain me? Subdue me so I could not leave?

Instead of demanding my compliance, she sighed. “Just wait here. I’ll bring it to you.”

I couldn’t imagine what this “*it*” was, but I waited. If she sought to hold me back, I would put up a fight the likes of which she would not forget. I’d never intentionally injure my mother, but the events of the last few days had surprised and horrified me. I wasn’t certain that I could ever truly trust her or her motives again.

She returned carrying something. “Here.” She thrust a bag at me. “I cannot take back anything that I have done, Palmeria,” she said quietly. “But I have the power to make amends.”

I twisted my lips into a distrusting frown as I leaned forward. I dared not move my feet. If she was so truly regretful of her behavior, she would come to me.

She did.

“Do not tell your father.” Her voice was a whisper as she looked past me toward the main hall. “Is your key to the family treasury in your room?”

I nodded, holding out my hand to accept her gift.

“Good.” She visibly relaxed, her shoulders sagging slightly beneath the stiff edges of her veil. “Now go. And may the gods bless you with fortune.”

The bag was heavy. I loosened the leather lace at the top and peered inside. The pouch was full—completely full—of silver coins. Enough money to buy my way out of Tutovl and

take Biko, Syndrian, and Idony with me. This might even be enough to take Syndrian's family to another shire, maybe even another realm.

I kept my face still, passive, and nodded. I would not thank her. This money was my birthright, at least. At worst, it was a blood debt. Coins would not exonerate my mother. But they would help me in my quest.

She nodded at me and whispered, "Play wisely, Daughter. And be cautious." Then she drifted up the stairs.

I could hear sounds in the kitchen, the early stirrings of Norwin preening and prodding at the staff about their tasks, Ms. Deylia preparing breakfast. I hurried from the manor quietly, clutching the sack in my hand as I headed to the stable.

I slipped into a stall long before Letti arrived—or so I thought. I spotted the woman walking the path from the crofter's cottage with a concerned look on her face, her hair mussed and her clothes looking slept in. I wondered if she'd tried to find Idony and discovered the cottage empty. When she took the path leading back to her quarters, slightly away from the stable, I breathed a relieved sigh. As much as I wished I could alleviate her concerns, the entire household would learn the fate of the crofter and his mother soon enough.

Several stalls in the stable were still vacant. Those would remain empty until my father returned with the horses he and his party had taken on their trip. Since I'd had Rowan out all night, I helped myself to Poet, making certain to pack a torch—just in case.

Before leading the mare through the stalls, I checked over her condition. I trusted that Letti groomed the mare as often as she required it, and if I'd had more time, I would have done some brushing just to make sure Poet was relaxed and ready for a ride. But the mare followed me easily, and her coat looked clean and shiny, her hooves free of stones and debris. While I didn't trust my eyes over Letti's expertise, the sun was rising. It would not be long before the entire household was abuzz.

“Time is not on our side.” I gave the mare an apologetic pat and climbed astride. I took a last look over my family’s home and urged the girl onto the road. The morning air was brisk, so it wasn’t suspicious when I wrapped my linen veil snugly around my head and tucked it firmly into the collar of my riding kirtle. I pulled the hood of my cloak farther over my face and tucked the layers of my dress tightly beneath my thighs. Then I took off for Kyruna.

When I arrived, the village was just coming to life. Sleepy-looking vendors opened shops and dragged carts into the square. The lamplighter, a spry-looking young boy, stacked boxes and climbed them to extinguish the candles that kept the village illuminated at night. I checked the office of the shire-reeve, and to my surprise, there was light coming from inside. There was, then, some presence of law in Kyruna, but I ducked my face and avoided looking at anyone who might be inside. If this place was as dangerous as everyone seemed to think it was, there was no telling whether the law was even... the law. If Wilmot Otleich controlled the people and businesses here, then the shire-reeve might be nothing more than a place for tax records to be kept.

These were not my concerns today. I headed to the public stable, where the same bulbous-nosed stable hand was scratching his behind and sipping something hot from a mug.

“Good morning, *friend*,” I said, cocking my head at him. Whether he remembered me from the other day or not, he would recall that I knew better than to let myself be swindled when I reminded him. “The price is a penny per hour, if I’m not mistaken. Two when I leave her?”

He grunted and swallowed his tea, then worked his fleshy lips over his teeth and belched. “Yeah. You got that right.” He narrowed his eyes at me but took my pennies. “Not needing any directions today, are ya, miss?”

I searched his face at the prying question but decided I would take him up on the offer. “Has the village a tailor?”

He took that moment to dramatically spew tea from between his lips. I stepped back from the splatter and

grimaced.

“Whatcha take this place for, eh? We’re every bit as civilized in these parts as wherever yer from, miss.” He set his mug down and dried his mouth with the back of his sleeve. Then he reached to take Poet’s reins. “Now, fer a couple of pennies, I can make an introduction to my personal tailor...”

I studied the man’s drab, ill-fitting garments but willed my eyebrows to stay in place, lest I further insult him. “I’d prefer common clothing,” I said. “I don’t believe I need anything quite so...fine...as an introduction to your tailor. Though I appreciate the generous offer.” I set another penny down, and his hairy hand gathered it, then pointed.

“Ain’t none finer than what you’ll find in the shop o’ Brunello.”

I supposed businesses in Kyruna were able to have names, though guests of the Knuckles & Bones pub were better without them. “Brunello,” I echoed. I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “Is that a first name or a family name?”

“Both.” My new friend the stableman seemed to be warming up to me. He ran an appreciative finger over the front of his collarless tunic. “Just ask for Brunello. He’ll fix you right up.”

I nodded my thanks and headed off into the market. There were, oddly, very few permanent signs on the shops; instead, most were simple drawings inked on thin slabs of wood and nailed to the doors. The people of Kyruna either didn’t read much, if at all, or the businesses changed so often that crude nameplates were more economical than installing expensive and ornate signs, like the one that hung outside Serlo’s Cutlery.

Brunello must have run a very steady business because his shop not only boasted a beautifully ornate hanging sign bearing his name but a second sign affixed to the door—the image of a needle and spool of thread carved, painted, and polished. Despite the early hour, Brunello’s was bustling with activity. Two women were seated at small tables, their heads lowered as they worked by the light of bright lamps. The older

of the two women looked far older than anyone I'd ever known, the deep lines in her face matching the gnarled knobs of her knuckles. Her head was covered by a veil, and an acorn hat sat atop it. The second woman was nearly a mirror image of the first, so identical, the two might have been twins. The only feature that separated the women was the simple cap-shaped bonnet covering the second woman's hair.

I knocked lightly, then pushed my way inside. The twin ladies froze and stared at me, but quickly, the one in the acorn cap stood and gave me a warm smile. She removed the hat and handed it carefully to the other, then covered her head with a bonnet before approaching me. She greeted me in a language I'd never heard, extending her hands toward me.

"I...I'm sorry. I don't understand." I knew from my father's stories that there were people in other places who spoke in different tongues, but I'd never actually heard a language other than my own. I was enchanted with it and smiled as I tried to convey my need. "Brunello?" I asked. I pointed to where the second woman was working. She had turned the acorn hat inside out and was sewing what I could now see was a repair to the inside of the hat.

"Ah-ha, Brunello." The first lady nodded and reached for a bell on her table. She rang it once loudly and motioned for me to take a seat in a chair beside the door. I did so, watching in awe as the lady reclaimed her seat at the worktable and appraised the completed acorn cap.

Minutes ticked slowly by, and I watched as the two women worked silently together, one cutting fabric, the other stitching, depending on the piece. I must have lost myself studying their work because, suddenly, one of the women stood in frustration and rang the bell again loudly. She shouted through cupped hands, "Brunello! Eh, Brunello!" And then a long stream of words I did not understand. Whatever she shouted aroused a passionate nod and harrumph from the twin.

The first woman plodded back to her work and gave me a look. "Brunello..." She clasped her palms together and set her hands on one side of her face. She closed her eyes and made snoring sounds, feigning sleep.

“Enough!” A wondrously tall man clomped down a narrow staircase that connected the upper floor of the shop with the main level. I could hardly believe that he was as tall as he appeared, but when he ducked his head as he passed through the doorway, I realized my vision was not misled.

I stood to greet who I assumed was Brunello. “Good morning, sir, I...”

“Good morning. Just a moment please.” He held his hand up and addressed the elderly women harshly, his words coming fast and loud.

The women responded in kind, then showed him the hat and various other garments they were working on. He nodded, and his voice softened as he kissed each of them on both cheeks. Then he faced me, smoothing his hair back with a hand.

“Good morning, I’m sorry for that. My aunts refuse to wake me, but then they complain I sleep too late. They love to start on my projects and then complain that I don’t do enough work.” He sighed, but a warm smile lit his face. “Family business. There is almost more drama than work under this roof. But I would have it no other way. Now, miss, how can we help you?”

This shop and the people in it were the warmest and most reassuring part of Kyruna so far. I was all the more certain my plan was favored by the gods.

“Thank you, sir,” I said. I pointed to some items hanging on the wall. “Are those by any chance for sale?”

Brunello squinted at the breeches, tunics, and coarse dresses attached by very thin nails to the wall. “Well, yes, miss, they are. But those are not new garments. We make custom clothing, if you’d like to be fitted.”

He looked over what I was wearing, clearly trying to puzzle over why a woman of my “means,” if such a thing could be inferred by the condition of my dress and fine shoes, would ask after used clothes.

“I understand,” I said. “And I can see you do beautiful work. But I’m specifically interested in these items. I’d especially prefer hosen or breeches, if you have any? Or perhaps you might tailor one of those dresses into breeches for me?”

Brunello squeezed his lower lip between two fingers and looked me over from top to toe. He closed his eyes and turned on a heel before walking up to a very large kirtle, a fabric belt loosely knotted at the waist. He spread his fingers at the widest part of the waist and then came close to me and held the same hand, fingers locked in position, in front of my waist.

“It can be done,” he said, nodding. “My aunts will work quickly. We’ll need precise measurements if none of the material is to be wasted, but I believe we will have sufficient fabric to make two pairs of breeches from this. As for tunics or shirts...” He returned to the wall and removed the thin nails with his fingernails. He took down two different shirts, both of which were slightly stained. “These will fit, with some alteration.” He looked at my clothes. “Do you plan to trade, miss? Should I work up the costs?”

I nodded. “Yes, please. I assume what I’m wearing has sufficient value? I don’t have much money with me, but if I cannot afford two sets of clothes, perhaps one?”

Brunello waved a hand. “May I see just the underside, miss?”

I cocked my chin at him, confused.

“Allow me.” He bent to one knee, putting a hand at his lower back and letting out an audible groan as his knee hit the floor. He motioned toward my dress. “May I?”

I nodded, having absolutely no idea what he was doing. He took the end of my dress in his hands and flipped the hem over so the stitching inside was visible. I noticed both aunts watched, nodding, as he did this.

“See there?” He measured the stitches with his fingers. “Most custom tailors will add volume to fabrics as fine as these.” He showed me how there was quite a bit of extra

material sewn into the dress's seams. "If you were to need a substantial alteration, say because you gained some weight or spilled wine or tore the dress, it would be very, very difficult to obtain matching fabric. Unless you have a storehouse of material, which few in this realm do. Your tailor prepared for anything that might be needed by sewing in such a manner that this dress could be repaired or resized just by tearing out the seams."

He grabbed the side of the worktable and groaned as he lurched to his feet. His aunts began chattering loudly, and he held up a hand to silence them. "They worry. I'm fine. These knees simply work much harder than knees that don't have as much leg attached to them."

Once he was back on his feet, he took the breeches and clothing and set them on the worktable for his aunts. Then he motioned to a privacy screen. "We'll accept your dress in trade for both the garments and the work to alter them, miss. How soon do you need them?"

I frowned. "Well, I'm not from this shire, and I was hoping to wear the clothes out of here today."

Brunello sighed deeply and chattered with his aunts. He shook his head while the aunts pounded their fists on the table. "We need two hours to make something you can walk out of here wearing," he said. "You may return for the second set before sunset."

"Really?" I asked. "Two hours? You can do the work that fast?"

He nodded and wandered over to the fire to pour himself some tea. He popped a dry biscuit in his mouth and pointed to his aunts. "They insist they can do it in an hour, but I told them not to rush. We have a full day of other client work ahead." He swallowed his breakfast and motioned me behind the screen to remove my dress.

"I'd be happy for you to take the two hours," I said tentatively, hoping my next request wouldn't put them off the work. "I'd specifically like some...special facets added to the clothing."

Brunello nearly dropped his mug, spilling the tea onto the floor. “Special facets, miss?”

I nodded and explained the items I wished to carry, if possible, concealed within a sleeve or the leg of the breeches. Brunello nodded, seemingly unaffected by the request. He spoke with his aunts and then confirmed.

“Two hours, no longer.”

I went behind the privacy curtain and removed my dress. Then the aunts joined me behind the screen, chatting with each other while their expert hands measured me.

Two hours later, dressed and armed in attire much better suited to my plan than my gown, I headed to Knuckles & Bones.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

My stomach rumbled by the time I finally walked the long dusty path to Knuckles & Bones. The midday sun high was in the sky. Tucked into a fold in one leg of my new-to-me breeches was a fire striker made by Syndrian's hand, a tool I wanted close at hand—just in case.

Tightly wrapped and secured in a small fabric pocket in the other leg of the breeches were some of the coins from my mother. I'd poured the rest of them into the bag with my meager personal funds. If I were robbed or otherwise lost my pouch, at least I wouldn't be stranded penniless in Kyruna.

At my hip, I wore a sheathed dagger, and over my shoulder, I slung the leather pouch that contained my game board, checkers, and the rest of the money I planned to bet with.

I'd styled my hair in the manner of working women like Letti. A practical plait that kept the hair from my eyes and gave away little more information about me. I wore a veil over my hair, but I hoped that the material's age and condition wouldn't mark me as noble, as a Lombard, or the gods forbid—should anyone in this shire know my family—the woman betrothed to an Otleich. Somehow, knowing the name of the man who would become my husband made me ever more desperate to conceal any aspects of my hair or dress that might identify me in Kyruna.

Although I had no idea what my future husband looked like, if he was one of the many nameless men I'd seen traveling with my father over the years...perhaps I would

recognize him if I saw him. Or he might recognize me. It might have been an overcautious concern, but after what I'd seen the last time I was here, being cautious and better prepared felt like the least I could do.

“Caution is my new strategy,” I reminded myself under my breath. I couldn't help wondering if I would find Syndrian in the pub, and of course my traitorous heart beat all the faster just thinking of him.

I shook away such foolish thoughts and hopes and steadied myself for the task ahead. He would likely be at his father's shop, for at least a few more hours. Unpleasant as things there were, it was his job.

But I could not help the hollow sensation that filled my chest thinking about him not being close by at such an important moment in my life. The moment when I might actually succeed at something on my own merits. Win my freedom. Save the day myself. Like I'd felt for so many years, the victory would be so much sweeter with his quiet presence and knowing smile overlooking my every move.

As I rounded the back of the tavern, I saw something that dragged my mind away from thoughts of Syndrian, freezing my feet on the path. Two bodies swung from very high ropes above the rear doors of Knuckles & Bones. In truth, it was a stretch to call the wretched rags and picked-over flesh *bodies*, but the bones that were exposed made it clear that the things in the air had once been human. Their feet—or what was left of them—dangled about an arm's length above my head. The stench of rot was nearly intolerable, and I grabbed the edge of my veil to cover my mouth and nose as I approached.

I peered up at the poor souls, a cold shiver raising the hairs on my neck. Deep gouges marked the tissue of their torsos, slicing clean through the stained fabric of their tunics. Their eyes had been pecked out, and traces of dried blood coated the bubbled skin around their sockets. Burned from the toxic saliva of the vengersax, no doubt. Their tongues had been eaten as well, as I could see from the open jaws that exposed what remained of their stained teeth.

The attack had left them so disfigured, the dead would be nearly unidentifiable, even to those who'd known them. Lowering my eyes to head level, I noted their footwear had been stolen, and even scraps of the fabric of their breeches had been cut away, leaving plenty of flesh for the winged daggers to feast upon.

"May the gods deliver you to the welcoming shores of Forráheim," I whispered. Whether or not these people had committed grave acts in life, I wished them a peaceful afterlife. Certainly not the dreaded realm of demons.

I had little doubt who they had been and why their bodies had been left there. The knife wound to the belly of one man, his tunic sliced and stained black, made me certain that this was the pair who'd been fighting in the pub when Syndrian rushed me from the scene.

A sour taste filled my mouth, and I fought the urge to cough as my empty stomach roiled. What happened to those who broke the laws of the pub, or perhaps of Kyruna itself, felt like a warning of what might happen to me if I broke the trust of the Otleich family. All the more reason to disguise myself, to maintain a low profile, and to simply win a bit of money. Well, at least until after the tournament.

I shoved my shoulder into the rear door of the pub and was surprised at how busy the place was. At this midday hour, tables were about half as full as they'd been the other evening. Even without the lamps lit, the sunshine that filtered through the windows warmed the place, lifting every smell to my nose. Barkeeps poured ale and served bread and beans. I sniffed the rich, spicy aromas while scanning the crowd. There were fewer players all around, and that meant I would stand out more, but it also meant I might be more likely to find a welcoming game.

I ducked my chin and headed to the bar. At the front door, the very same old man who'd sat by the door the other night guarded his peephole from a backless chair, and he stared off into the crowd. Studying the *friends* of Knuckles & Bones.

I slipped onto a stool beside a woman who looked about my mother's age. She was dressed in a fine gown, but like those I'd seen in the square, there was something off about her attire.

I looked down at the breeches and tunic belted just beneath my breasts; Brunello's aunties had sewn them so quickly, I would have been tempted to believe they'd employed magic. But I'd seen their work-gnarled hands and heard their chipper voices as they created something functional and beautiful from the gown and the used clothing. There was nothing but passion and experience behind their quality work—certainly no hint of anything forbidden.

I shoved the question of clothing from my mind and caught the eye of a man behind the bar. His hair tied back into a long ponytail reminded me of Syndrian, but the similarity ended there. His thin face had a mean, impatient expression, and he leaned a wiry arm against the bar, barking at me for my order.

“Eh, what're ya havin'?” He looked me over hungrily, as if I were something he might fancy feasting upon.

I could hardly contain my disgust. I'd never preened under the gaze of men or sought the artificial pleasure of a compliment. I wished I had the icy demeanor of my mother, although I had a difficult time believing she could blend into a place like this. While there were times when a cold edge and eloquent voice could be an advantage, I was grateful for my more casual accent and nondescript face.

“Some breakfast,” I said, trying to harden my voice.

“What's a beautiful lady like yerself prefer?” The barkeep again looked me over in a way that sent prickles of discomfort along my spine. Perhaps I wasn't so nondescript after all.

I took a moment and scanned behind me, and then around. The woman beside me noisily chewed on a link of sausage she held in her bare hands, the sloshing of food in her mouth setting my nerves on edge. She watched me with what looked like amusement, and I decided I needed to set the tone for the game I was playing from this very first moment.

“I prefer barkeeps who serve food and mind their business when it comes to a lady’s looks. You can keep the compliments to yourself and bring out something I can eat.” I slipped the dagger from my waist into my hand and leaned my elbows on the bar.

“Touchy in the mornin’, the lot o’ you is. Tournament brings out all sorts.” The barkeep frowned, but his demeanor quickly changed from wolfish to something more like a curious dog. “Sausage, bread, beans, and tea suit ya, *friend*?”

I nodded roughly, hoping that my aggression would serve its purpose. I turned on my chair while I waited for my meal. With the place a bit less crowded, I noticed small details that I’d missed the first time I was here. A massive shield and several flags hung from the exposed wooden rafters. The shield was carved and painted in black and green with a sigil of a gold fox and matching gold fret.

At the end of a long wooden table just beneath the shield, two men were hunched over a backgammon board. I grinned but then wiped the smile from my face as I heard the bang of a mug being roughly dropped behind me. The barkeep set a long slice of bread on the bar, piled from end to end with sloppy beans and a beautifully browned sausage. A few tiny slices of bread were on top of the beans.

The barkeep barked the price, and I dropped the pennies on the counter before digging into my meal. I used the small pieces of bread to scoop the beans and nibbled the sausage with my hands like the woman beside me had, but, I hoped, without the sloshy chewing sounds. Once I finished the meal, though it pained me to do so, I wiped my hands on the legs of my breeches. I’d have to set aside some of my manners if I really wished to blend in.

As soon as I’d eaten, I walked up to the backgammon game and watched as a very well-matched duo raced to clear their pieces from home. I couldn’t tell too much by watching the way the pieces were stacked, but I assumed a few bits of useful information. The gentleman playing black seemed to have the advantage in this game. His remaining checkers were evenly spread over the one and two spaces, ensuring that his

every roll had a better chance of removing at least one, if not two, checkers from the board. The player with the white checkers had his pieces stacked in the four, five, and six spaces of his home, which might have meant he'd scrambled to get those pieces there.

By appearances, I expected black to win, and with the wildly lucky roll of double twos, he did clear his board while I watched. The man playing white nodded, a consummate good sport, and offered his opponent a handshake before they swapped coins.

"I'm out, mate." The man playing white had an unusual accent but a pleasant manner about him. He stood from the bench and motioned toward his vacant seat. "Fancy a game, friend? I'm through."

I met the eyes of the winning player, who nodded at me.

"Mind using my board?" he asked, his voice neutral.

I puzzled over the protocol of his request as quickly as I could. If he was a cheater, using his board and dice might give him an advantage I'd not yet had time to assess. But on the other hand, since I did not yet know the man, refusing his game and pieces might insult him and turn him against playing me.

"What's the bet?" I asked. If the minimum bet was too high, I wouldn't risk my money on it. Not this soon before the tournament itself.

"Yer choice," the man said, shrugging. "A game's a game. Quarter penny?"

I nodded and sat down at the table.

The man held his hands out. "Prefer a side?"

I shook my head. "Fine right here," I murmured, pulling a quarter penny from my pouch.

I set my pieces and focused on the board, noting the weight and feel of the dice in my hand. I had two sets of dice, one for each player, but this man only had one set, which actually suited me quite well. I'd have far fewer worries that

he'd weighted the dice or was cheating in some other way if we shared the same pair.

We split the dice, just like I did with Idony, with the higher roll moving first. He rolled a five and I rolled one, so the opening move went to him. I studied the man's choice, trying to learn as much as I could about his strategy. I avoided staring at his face, since unlike card games, there was no bluff to backgammon. The player revealed everything about their strategy through their checkers. Within the first four rounds, I could tell he was a cautious player. Perhaps feeling out my skills as much as I was his. I played cautiously as well, leaving aggressive moves for when I had the most to gain from them.

He won the first game, but it was close. He had no unusual luck with the dice. Since I'd not noticed any signs of cheating, we played again. Same bet, different outcome. We played for what must have been hours, deliberating over rolls and moves. By the time I realized how crowded the pub was, the lamps were on, and my opponent's purse was nearly empty.

"I'm out. Need to save some pennies for the tournament." He shrugged and reached a hand across the table. "Excellent play, friend. I've never enjoying losing so much."

I shook his hand and helped him gather his checkers, then pocketed my winnings from our hours of play. At a rate of a quarter penny per game, I might cover the cost of stabling my horse with profit if I played more before the tournament. Even though I had the additional coins from my mother, I still sought to preserve my money.

After my opponent left the table, there were several players anxious to take the spot. The next one I recognized as the handsomely dressed man who'd bested the axe thrower the other night. He set a silver on the table and nodded at me. "May I?"

I looked over the large bet with concern but pulled a silver out to match his bet nonetheless. "Certainly," I said, trying not to obsess over the money in my purse. I would have to be very careful playing for a full silver.

“May we use your board?” The well-dressed man’s voice was pleasant, almost trustworthy. “I didn’t bring mine but am quite anxious to play.”

I felt the eyes of several watchers on me as I nodded deferentially at the man. “All right.” I set my board on the table, and he looked over the markings and wear as well as the nicely waxed checkers.

He nodded his approval, and we began. He won the opening roll and moved swiftly into an aggressive strategy. I was curious about the way he seemed to split his checkers, as if believing that the luck of the dice would be with him. It wasn’t, and it was clear within a few rolls that I’d defended my home so well that if I were able to land on one of his exposed checkers, he would be stuck. He rolled the dice hard, banging them against the board, but I didn’t sense any excess of emotion. He was just aggressive, demonstrative. No doubt a man with his glossy clothes and fine hair was very comfortable being seen.

The game moved quickly, and I suppressed a small smile as I rolled a double six, which allowed me to take four pieces off the board while he was still at least two rolls away from having all his pieces home. When I did finally win the game, he clapped and looked me over appreciatively.

“The silver is yours, miss.” He slid the piece across the table, and a chorus of cheers sounded from the watching players. He nodded and stood from his seat. “I look forward to challenging you again.”

I nodded and watched as another man took the vacant spot.

“Will you play without a bet, miss?” The familiar voice loosened the anxious tightness in my shoulders.

I set my lips and opened my eyes to the dark curls and warm eyes of my brother. “I don’t understand, *friend*,” I said, a challenge in my voice. “Isn’t the point of playing the chance of making a profit?”

His eyes darkened, and he cocked his chin, his long hair falling over one shoulder. “I prefer my games with lower

stakes,” he explained. “Especially when I fear I will be easily outmatched.”

I glared at him, debating what type of a scene to make in front of those watching. I was here to win coins, to earn as much as I could off the backs of weaker players. If the ruse Syndrian and I had developed last night was to be successful, I could not appear too agreeable. And I certainly didn’t want to give the impression that Biko and I knew each other.

But before I could refuse him, the finely dressed man clapped a hand on Biko’s shoulder. “What’s this? Looking to test your luck before you spend your pennies in the tournament?” The man whose silver I’d taken nodded at me. He lowered his lips to Biko’s ear and murmured in a voice loud enough for all to hear, “You’re wise to watch your purse. I’d put my money on her, friend.”

Biko chuckled, and the well-dressed man wandered away.

“What say you, miss?” Biko’s eyes were locked on mine, and the crowd of watchers started stomping their feet, urging us to get on with it. I flicked a look at his hand, now wrapped only with rags.

“I’ll play you,” I said tightly, trying to still the excited thrum of blood in my ears. “But I wouldn’t mind getting a look at whatever’s under that wrap,” I added, a little fire in my voice.

At that, the watchers erupted in cheers and started calling out for Biko to unwrap his hand.

“We don’t abide cheatin’ in these parts!” someone shouted.

Biko nodded, giving me a curious look. “Just a minor burn,” he said, pulling aside the wrap to reveal what was left of the rippled red welt. “Nothing hidden up these sleeves except a bit of a stomach-turning wound right there.”

Satisfied that no one would later question him, I shrugged. “I’ve no objections to a game, then, friend.”

The crowd noises picked up around us as pub patrons placed bets over the outcome of our match.

Someone called out, “No-action game! No action!”

I tilted my chin. “What’s that mean, friend?”

The man leaned forward. “That means the players haven’t staked money on the outcome,” he explained. “Helps keep disagreements from breaking out after the fact over whether there was a bet on the table.”

I muttered a response and quickly set my pieces while Biko leaned forward. Under the commotion of the crowded pub, he spoke in a voice so low, only I could hear it, and even then, I had to strain.

“Best o’ luck to ya, miss.” His eyes bored into mine, and I felt a rush of nerves in my belly.

We’d planned for this moment, but still, having a strategy, working as a team—it felt thrilling, exciting. I almost felt guilty as I wondered if this was how my father felt working with a powerful crime family. Did it give him a sense of purpose? Of pleasure, even? I shoved aside worries that I was not all that different from my father. I was playing for my life here. My father’s game had worse and more complex stakes.

“Friend?” Biko’s injured hand was stretched over the board.

I dragged in an unsteady breath and clasped his hand in mine. I could only hope we didn’t fall into familiar teasing. We needed to appear as strangers if any of this was to work.

After Biko released my hand, he set his checkers and rolled a die. I rolled, and he won. He clapped his hands and moved his pieces. I knew my brother’s play so well, we could have finished an entire game in minutes, rapidly rolling and moving, rolling and moving. But I purposely slowed my pace, studying his fingertips as he made points and split checkers. I tried not to look into his face.

When he blocked five of my checkers on his side of the board, I was certain I could not win. I grimaced and rolled hard, tossing the dice against the board with a clang. I could feel the touch of his boot against my foot, and I struggled to slow the breaths that came faster in my chest.

Whether he was attempting to distract me or send me a message, I was losing the game. I cursed myself for playing so poorly. I'd not made any mistakes, but in slowing our turns so it didn't appear that we knew each other, I'd played a distracted game. A few lucky dice rolls, and Biko soundly beat me.

Through the cheers and the swapping of coins, he nodded. I noticed a momentary look of worry cross his features. "Thank you, miss. I quite enjoyed the friendly game."

As I opened my mouth to reply, a commotion across the pub drew my attention.

"Yer a motherless son of a goat, ya is!" A woman stood from the game she was playing, pointing a trembling hand at a man. "Yer nothing but a cheat! Cheater!"

The accused man stumbled away from her, his eyes wide with fear. "No, friend... No, yer mistaken."

Through the distraction of yet another fight, Biko met my eyes. "*Outside*," he mouthed.

But I shook my head, a slight movement that I hoped no one else would see. I would not be dragged about Kyrana like a child. I had played well today—well enough, at least, to feel ready to play in the tournament. I'd hoped to make a quiet impression, appealing to players so I'd be accepted into many, many games. If I ran at the first sign of trouble, all our plans—not to mention my hopes—would disappear like coins after a losing game.

The well-dressed man walked over to the quarrel and spread his hands out as though trying to settle the tempers flaring like small fires between the players. "Friends," he said, his voice low and reassuring. "Do we have a disagreement?"

The accused man broke into a sweat. I could see him blotting his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "No, sir. I believe there's just been a misunderstandin', is all."

The woman was having none of it. "Check him," she screeched. "I swear I saw him tip a card up his sleeve. Somebody check him!"

The well-dressed man looked between them, while Biko pushed back from his seat. “Thank you, miss,” he rasped, a look of raw desperation in his eyes. “I believe I’ve run through my luck tonight.” He strode away from the table but didn’t leave. He took up an empty seat at the bar and motioned to the barkeep.

But the barkeep’s attention was on the finely dressed man, and him alone. The pub fell silent as the man’s hand went into the air, calling for silence and a pause in the games being played.

My heartbeat quickened as a hush fell over Knuckles & Bones. The fire crackled in the fireplace, and the lamps danced long shadows along the walls. I held perfectly still and looked away from the fire, hoping that my nerves wouldn’t influence the flames in some way. I flicked a glance at Biko’s back, which was rigid where he sat at the bar. His head was bowed, and it seemed as though he was intentionally refusing to look up.

I, however, could not help looking, staring, actually, like the rest of the players, all of whom seemed to know what was coming.

“Friend,” the well-dressed man said. “You understand that an accusation of cheating is most serious?”

The man grabbed a cap off his head and blotted his drenched face with it. “Sir, I know the rules o’ this here place. I been a loyal player here for years now.”

The woman began hollering again, insisting that she’d been swindled. I noticed Biko slip off his chair by the bar, and without even a look back at me, he headed toward the rear door. He pushed a shoulder against the wood and slipped out into the night.

While the rest of the players around my table stared at the argument, I gathered my checkers and dice and secured them in my pouch. Then I took up my board and stood from my seat but was prevented from moving too far by the thick crowd of watchers.

“Miss.” The well-dressed man smoothed his hair back from his face and motioned for her to step back. “Allow me to handle this.”

She grumbled and complained but stepped back into the crowd, leaving just the two men face-to-face.

“Are you new to the shire, friend?” The man I’d beat at backgammon paced a slow circle around the accused.

“I...I am not, sir. Ask anyone. I play these parts often and ain’t never had trouble. Not ’fore now.” The man’s voice shook, and the sour stench of piss filled the air.

One harsh laugh barked against my ears, but whoever found the man’s accident funny quickly composed himself. The pub stayed silent and eerily still. Barmaids stopped delivering drinks and food, and a few players gathered their things and headed for the doors.

“I see,” the fancily dressed man said. “So if you’ve been here, you’re aware that basic decency is a part of the business we’re running. Or did you simply leave your honor at home?”

I noticed the barkeep who’d served me earlier cross his arms over his chest, waiting, it seemed, for a signal.

“N...no, sir,” the accused man sputtered. “My honor is right here. Keep it with me all the time.”

“Excellent.” The well-dressed man waved a hand, and the barkeep disappeared into the back. He reappeared just a moment later with someone dressed completely in black, like the riders Syndrian and I tried to hide from the other night. But worse... The man in black was holding an axe.

The man I played nodded at the accused, his eyes gleaming with lethal anticipation. “Then you’ll have no trouble showing me your sleeves.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

G asps and murmured whispers echoed through the players.

“Come, come.” The well-dressed man waved his hand, and the patrons of Knuckles & Bones moved aside to make room for the man with the axe.

The player who had been accused of cheating tried to bolt for the door, but the crowd filled in around him and blocked the way. I noticed a flash of long white-blond hair by the bar. Feeling the same eerie anxiety that I’d felt before the stabbing here the other night, I instinctively moved closer to the bar. Since most of the observers were staring into the spectacle, not away, I felt confident taking an empty seat in view of Syndrian.

I was certain he noticed me, but I looked away quickly from the rapid blink of his eyes. He clutched a sack in his hand tighter and leaned forward, motioning toward the barkeep for a drink.

“Oy! Dice maker!” The man behind the bar gave Syndrian a full mug and nodded at the scene. “There’s always one, right? Always one has to make an example of himself.”

“That’s not any kind of example I’d be interested in making of myself.” Syndrian tipped his mug to the barkeep, then turned in his seat to face the crowd.

His eyes raked over me as he moved, but I ignored the flush of heat at my cheeks. We could reveal no hint that we knew each other. Could not give anyone cause to even suspect

it, or Syndrian's impartiality might be called into question. And worse, my honor. If the scene behind me was any indication, this pub took cheating very, very seriously.

"Please, friend! Please! This ain't how it looks..." The accused looked from the man with the axe to the finely dressed man.

I mumbled under my breath to no one in particular, "This looks like business better taken outside. If blood's to be spilled..."

The barkeep gave me a cross look but motioned toward the finely dressed man. "That man's sole purpose is to keep peace here for the owners. At any cost." He wiped the top of the bar with a rag and huffed a sigh. "He ain't put off by a bit o' blood. But cheaters might be."

I nodded and motioned for him to pour me another ale. I breathed a slight bit better knowing that man was not likely an Otleich. Syndrian had told me last night that his contact within the Otleich family was a low-level property owner. Someone with influence who stayed close to the family but whose presence in places like Knuckles & Bones kept the attention away from the family members themselves. I was relieved to know that my betrothed wasn't a man who threw knives and... I shuddered at whatever the fate of the accused cheater might be but was selfishly relieved that, if none of our plan worked, at least the man I'd played was not Emeric Otleich.

"May I have your attention, good friends of Knuckles & Bones?" The finely dressed man clapped his hands loudly, his voice carrying over the hushed patrons who followed his every move. "A tournament is planned for tonight, and we expect lots...and *lots*...of coins to change hands."

At that, a rowdy cheer rose from the crowd. The man, like a proper host, beamed and waited for the applause to quiet. He paced a slow circle around the accused man, rubbing his palms together. "Now," he called out, like a bard about to perform. I felt eyes on me—Syndrian's no doubt, and I worried for a moment about where Biko was. Why he'd walked outside for

this. But I tried to focus on sipping my ale and setting my worries aside.

“As you know, the owners of this fine establishment will not tolerate cheating.” The man held his fingers in the air as he listed off the prohibited crimes. “No card counting, no weighted dice, no marked cards... If you can think of an unfair advantage, you go right ahead and add that trick to my list. Need I say more?”

A few voices called out, “No!” and “No, friend!”

“Now.” The friend of the Otleiches pointed at the man accused of cheating. “We have a dispute, friend. This player seems to believe you’ve wronged her.” He spun toward the woman, his elegant charm giving way to a menacing snarl. “The penalties for lying about cheating are every bit as serious as those we levy against cheaters.” He leaned his face menacingly close to the woman’s. “Care to reconsider your position on what happened, *friend*?”

The woman’s voice shook, but she stood firm. “I know what I saw,” she insisted, swallowing and loudly clearing her throat. “There’s a card up ’is sleeve. I’m sure of it!”

That was all the incentive the man needed.

I felt Syndrian’s eyes on me, warning me, perhaps, to look away. But I couldn’t. If I was to be part of this tournament, I needed to know what happened to people who broke the rules. And if I lost... I’d marry into a family that delivered this kind of punishment. I felt bound to not only know what to expect but to watch it happen.

The finely dressed man lifted a hand in the air. “Friend, if you’d kindly do us the honors.”

“I ain’t doin’ nothin’ wrong! Please! I ain’t done nothin’ wrong!” As he cried out his protests, the man tried again to pry his way past the crowd blocking the route to the back door.

“I appreciate a finely worded defense.” The man I’d played earlier motioned with one hand, and two more enforcers dressed in black worked their way through the

crowd. They stood on either side of the accused man and shoved him toward an empty table.

“Arms down.” One of the enforcers shoved the man’s back, forcing him to brace his hands on the table.

With his arms splayed in front of him, there was an obvious movement, the slightest shift in the fabric of one sleeve.

“Ah-ha...” The finely dressed man stalked over to the table and bent his face so it was beside the cheat’s. His demeanor immediately changed. Gone were the fine manners and smoothly styled hair. He began shouting, gesturing with such animation that his hair flopped onto his sweaty face. Clots of saliva flew from his mouth as he chastised the man and cursed everything from his children to his soul.

I nearly covered my ears at the tirade but knew better than to give away any squeamishness. Any sensitivity. I forced myself to watch—but not until I’d traded a quick look with Syndrian. His blue gaze was anguished, and the slow blink of his eyes practically begged me to look away. I could not.

I watched as the finely dressed man motioned to the enforcer holding the axe. Then he spoke a gruesome order so calmly, he seemed possessed by an almost unnatural grace. Perhaps it was delight that he simply chose to mask with gravity. He struck me as someone who submitted to his violent duty with glee.

“Take his sleeve,” he said, his eyes focused on the garment where the alleged cheater supposedly had hidden cards. “Then...” The gleam in his eyes brought the sour taste of bile to my tongue. *“Take his hand.”*

He issued the order so quickly, neither the accused man nor anyone else had time to react. By the time the cheater screamed, his high-pitched cry for mercy piercing the hush of the crowd, the two enforcers had ripped away his sleeves, both of which did contain hidden cards, separating them from his tunic as though his clothes had been held together by little more than rotting threads.

I felt a wave of horror at what the guards had revealed. The man had cheated. Hidden away beneath the folds of filthy fabric were several playing cards. The first enforcer held up the evidence momentarily, then without waiting for any reaction, sent the axe flying. The guard sliced through flesh and bone, without so much as a grunt of effort, bringing the blade down so hard that it embedded deep in the wood of the table. As soon as the weapon completed its vicious mission, the first guard roughly tied one of loose sleeves around the gushing wound. Then, he rushed the wailing man through the stunned crowd toward the exit.

The silence in the pub would not soon be broken.

The stooped-over doorman leapt down from his post at the front door. He scurried behind the bar, grabbed a bucket and mop, and set to wiping the mess from the table. As the cheater's screams faded in the distance, the little doorman passed the hand to the finely dressed man, who held it up, blood trickling down from the gaping wound to stain his luxurious sleeves. Droplets flew from the hand and clung to his cheeks, which were no longer sweating but still flushed with excitement.

“This,” he said, holding the hand high for all to see, “is the cheater's just sentence!”

Cheers and shouts from the patrons seemed to be the sign for all to return to their play.

“Mind yer feet and find yer seats! Behind ya!” Barmaids resumed food service, carrying trays and calling out as they navigated through the stagnant crowd.

Once the evidence of the fight was cleaned, I shoved my empty mug back toward the barkeep. Biko had returned to the pub and I spotted him standing by the X on the back wall, watching as a few players chatted over their throwing weapons.

I tried to fight off a wave of nausea as the smells of sweat and blood filled my nose. And then, something else—something that reminded me of the stink I'd caught on my mother the other day: vinegar.

The black-clad enforcers congregated behind the bar, pouring a stinky liquid into mugs. I coughed and covered my nose, but the barkeep was busy, so I didn't have a chance to ask him what they were doing.

The finely dressed man passed the hand to the axe-wielding enforcer, who left the pub with it. I was certain I'd see that poor limb outside, hanging alongside the others who'd violated the unwritten rules of Knuckles & Bones.

The games on the floor resumed, while Biko stayed close to the throwing game. Syndrian was greeted by the finely dressed man, whose sleeve and skin were still wet with the cheater's blood. He accepted a cloth from the barkeep and wiped his hand mostly clean before clapping Syndrian on the back.

My stomach turned over as the man left bloody smudges on the back of Syndrian's tunic. I turned away, hoping that was not some kind of eerie reminder that no one, not even a "friend" of the Otleiches, was safe here.

"Dice-maker! Welcome." The man greeted Syndrian warmly, then mopped the sweat from his forehead. He smoothed his hair back into place and sniffed hard. "I'm sure you can see why we needed you for this tournament." He nodded toward the doorway. "Too bad you can't create a deck of cards that won't fit up a sleeve."

Syndrian nodded and shoved the bag he'd been clutching across the bar. "As requested," he said simply. "Thirty-two identical dice."

The man unlaced the bag and shook a few dice into his hand. They were made of smooth ironspruce wood. Rather than the pips being painted, the marks indicating the numbers had been carefully etched into each of the six sides.

Syndrian pointed to the dice. "There's nothing added to weigh the dice down. No paint, just a bit of finishing wax. You can rub a little ash over the pips to make them visible without adding any measurable weight."

The man inspected each one, smoothing his now-dry fingers over Syndrian's handiwork. "Beautiful," he mused. "You polished and etched these yourself? All of them?"

My brother's best friend, the man I hoped to claim as my own if we survived this tournament, nodded. "I'll vouch for each and every one o' those."

The finely dressed man's mouth widened into a greedy grin. "I hope you will," he said. "That cheater's gone and given me a taste for blood."

My pulse skittered as I thought about Syndrian being held responsible for the outcome of all the games that required dice. If a single player lodged a complaint against the dice...made a single allegation of cheating... I refused to consider it. Refused to consider that the hands that held my waist, my hands, my hair would be gone. I couldn't believe that a man could survive such an injury, but that too was a fate I could not contemplate. Not for the man who had cheated and certainly not for Syndrian.

Syndrian didn't respond to the man's comment but tapped the empty mug in front of him. "I'm going to stick around and watch some of the games," he said. "Unless you plan to pay me and kick me out."

"Pay you..." The finely dressed man motioned to the barkeep. "Get the cutler what we owe him," he said in a hushed voice.

The barkeep left the bar and walked through a swinging wooden door that I'd assumed led to a kitchen. He came out with a small pouch in his hands. Then he dropped it dramatically on the bar in front of Syndrian, who immediately opened the bag and counted the money.

"Man after my own heart!" The finely dressed man pounded Syndrian on the back again and watched. "I think you'll find the owners of this fine establishment don't engage in cheating any more than they condone it."

Syndrian grunted and nodded. Then he nudged his mug toward the barkeep. "Since I've got the funds to run up a tab,

fill me up, friend.”

“No free drinks,” the finely dressed man reminded the barkeep, then cackled, a long, loud sound. He waded his way through the crowd and announced in a booming voice that the tournament would begin within a quarter hour. “Find your tables and shake those coins! The games are about to begin.”

Biko was still hovering back by the throwing game, but at the announcement, he went off in search of something to play. I was only comfortable playing backgammon, especially since I only intended to bet on games I played, not on any of the games I watched. Keeping Syndrian’s long ponytail in my line of sight, I explored the rowdy pub.

I avoided Biko but made sure I knew where he was at all times. To my surprise, he borrowed an axe and seemed to do well playing with it. I noticed a lot of hands clapping him on the back and heard his familiar voice cheering himself on. Syndrian remained with his back to the bar, scanning the crowd while he sipped an ale.

As night fell in the shire of Kyruna, two black-clad enforcers stood just inside the rear doors of the pub. Two more stood near the little old man at the front. The barmaids wove through the dresses and boots and cloaks. A young boy stoked the fires, while the finely dressed man, his sleeves stained with the cheater’s blood, clapped once and took his spot in the center of the room. He stomped a boot on the floor, then climbed onto a table.

“Attention, friends! Attention!”

The pub grew quiet, with only the wind whistling outside and the fire crackling to interrupt the man’s announcement.

“If you’re new here, welcome. If you’re not... Well...” He wagged a finger in the air. “You know exactly what to expect! Tonight, the owners of this pub are pleased to host a tournament. The finest players of the finest entertainments in the realm will compete. The rules are simple. The winner of each game pays the house a quarter penny—regardless of how large the winnings at the table are. That means, friends, you can win three silvers on a game and pay the house just a

simple quarter penny. Why? I'll tell you why! You should spend hours in this beautiful tavern, eating and drinking your fill, of course, and gambling away your precious coins because..." He stopped and bowed dramatically to no one in particular. "At the end of the night, the house will match every cent it collects from the winnings. And one lucky player will go home with the whole lot of it."

The players started stomping their feet and bellowing cheers.

"All right, all right, friends. Let me have your attention again." He waited for the crowd to fall silent.

I resisted the urge to look back at Syndrian. I could see Biko straight ahead, his long curls and tall stature making him easy to spot over the heads of the other players.

"Now, in years past..." The man walked from one edge of the table to the other, his voice carrying over the waiting faces of people of all ages. People who, for their own private reasons, sought quick access to a full purse. "In years past we've awarded the pot to one lucky winner based on the complexity of the game and the total wins for the night." He made a face at the people standing by the throwing game. "Sorry, friends, but axes and knives may be played and bet on yet will not be eligible for the final purse."

A chorus of complaints rose around Biko, and I had to suppress a smile at Biko's feigned outrage.

"Dice and card games only, and not the bluff games. Only games of skill and chance." The finely dressed man waved a hand over the crowd. "Now, let the games begin!"

As soon as he said those words, the crowd immediately broke into groups organized by game. There were still plenty of people playing games that were ineligible for the pot and plenty of games being bet on by nonplayers, but what interested me was the intensity of the board games. I watched a card game, a chess game, and a strategy game involving cards I'd never seen before until I finally wandered over to a game of backgammon.

A man and a woman were just starting their game. I watched them play and couldn't help shaking my head. The man committed a serious blunder by splitting his checkers halfway through the game, when the woman had half the points closed in her home space. By splitting his checkers the way he did, he opened himself up to having both taken with just the right—or lucky—roll.

The woman was indeed lucky, and she took both his pieces on the next roll, sending two of his checkers to the center of the board to sit out the penalty. While he was trapped, she made another point in her home spaces, making it nearly impossible for the man to leave the penalty bar in one roll. It was painful to watch. He'd made one slightly overconfident move, and it cost him the game. But he lost gracefully, paying up what he had wagered and excusing himself from the table.

The enforcers posted by the doors were now roaming the floor with buckets in their hands. They monitored the games and collected the buy-in each time someone won. This went on for the next hour: Biko made friends and played games that were not connected to the pot. Syndrian nursed the same ale for the entire hour, watching the games with interest. And I studied the backgammon boards, watching and waiting.

When there finally seemed to be a break in players queued up for backgammon, I stepped up to the table. The woman who'd been playing for an hour had accumulated a nice pot of winnings. She nodded at me.

“Fancy a game, friend?” she asked. She wore a simple belted kirtle like the women who worked in my parents' manor and wore a cap over her hair. She looked old enough to be my mother, and I worried whether she would bet her entire winnings to play me.

“I'd like to,” I said. “What buy-in do you prefer?” I knew from watching the last few games that as the winner, she could determine the buy-in for any opponent to challenge her. If no one was willing to bet enough, she'd maintain the seat at the board. That meant that when the house picked a winner from the players left in games at the end of the night, she'd be guaranteed a chance at the final purse.

She looked me over and then eyed her pile of coins. “Two silvers,” she said without hesitating.

I winced. That meant if I wanted to play her, I’d have to put in two silvers. But if I won the game, I’d take back mine and two silvers of hers. I nodded and took the seat opposite her.

Right away the spectators around us began betting among themselves.

“My money’s on the girl in the breeches.”

“I saw her play earlier—she’s got no strategy!”

“Mine coin’s on the fresh blood.”

At the word *blood*, I tensed a bit and peeked toward the bar. Syndrian’s body was turned away from me, but I could tell his piercing eyes took in every move I made. I reached into my pouch and grabbed two silvers, then set them on the table.

“Two on the table!” a man cried out.

The woman who’d been winning set her two coins beside mine.

“Bets are placed!”

All throughout the tavern the same cry rang out as wagers were made and called in. The woman raised her hand, and the finely dressed man made his way through the crowd to our table. He had a sack in one hand and a small wooden bowl filled with ash in the other.

“Dice change,” the woman told him.

He took the pair of dice she’d used with her last opponent and placed them into a leather sack. Then he shook the sack and rolled it between his hands.

“You each choose just one,” he instructed us. “Challenger first.” He held the bag out to me, and I reached inside. I closed my eyes and let my fingers find a die, smooth and perfectly formed by Syndrian’s hands. Then my opponent picked one. “Are you satisfied with your choice?”

I looked my die over. It didn't appear to have been played yet, as each of the pips was smooth and colorless, matching the wood they were etched into. "Mine is new," I said.

"Mine as well." The woman opposite me held out the die to the man, and I mimicked her movement.

He then took a small bristle brush like the kind I used to brush my teeth and dipped it in the ash. He tapped the brush against the side of the bowl and then lightly brushed ash onto each of the six sides of both dice. Then he vigorously brushed the excess ash away, leaving the pips on each side dark enough to count from a distance.

"Do both players accept the dice as offered?" he asked, his question well practiced to the point of sounding bored.

"Yes," I said, nodding.

Once my opponent agreed as well, the finely dressed man gathered his ash and bag of dice, then shouted, "The action is on!"

When he left, I did my best to ignore the cheering and chatter around me. I tried not to worry over where Biko was. Even Syndrian's penetrating stare drifted into the background, and the entire night came down to this game. This opponent.

I looked at the woman, and she looked at me.

"Challenger rolls first," she said.

I took the die in my hands and shook it. Then I cleared my mind and let everything in my life—my mother, my father, my betrothed—all of it fade away. I threw the dice hard across the board and watched the ash-darkened pips as they tumbled and landed.

"A six!" The betters traded more coins, now that I'd won the opening roll. Well, I'd come as close to winning it as I could. Unless the woman across from me also rolled a six, I'd be moving first.

My opponent adjusted herself in the chair and scowled lightly, apparently as unhappy about my six as I was relieved by it. She blew a breath onto her hands, then picked up the die

and rolled it. Her die landed with five little pips facing up. A six-five.

The Lover's Leap.

Without hesitating, I moved one of my checkers from my opponent's home position eleven spaces. My opponent nodded as if she would have done the same thing. Then she picked up both dice and rolled a three and a four. I watched with interest as she moved two checkers from the thirteen position toward home. That was interesting. She was clearly trying to build a defensive wall around the bar. I might have scored a strong roll on the very first try, but this woman was going to be tough to beat. She didn't have very lucky rolls, but she made the most of every move, and just a few rolls into the game, she made three points in her home position and had two of my checkers on the bar.

I was losing. But I wasn't losing faith. I was just getting warmed up, and I'd come back from much further behind. Our pace picked up then, as I rolled fast. I stayed on the bar for too many turns, just by the luck of the dice. Although she brought all her checkers home while I still had two pieces in her home position, I sent one of her checkers to the bar when she was forced by a roll to expose a blot. She could still easily win if she got off the bar and rounded the board quickly, which she did. I was able to get my last two pieces to home before she gammoned me, but I lost soundly.

"Good game," I said, shoving my silvers toward her.

"Play again?" she asked. She plucked a quarter penny from the pile of winnings and dropped it in the enforcer's waiting bucket.

"Same buy-in?" I asked.

She nodded, so I shoved two more silvers her way. I wasn't worried about losing to her again. This time, I knew she'd played an aggressive move to build a defensive wall on her opening roll, so I'd either look to do the same, trying to be better and faster at blocking her, or I'd chase her into changing her strategy. That was part of the thrill of the game. There

were so many ways to play, and it all came down to the personality of the players and the luck of the dice.

While we restacked our pieces and the spectators around us reset their wagers, I noticed the enforcers taking the buckets of coins behind the bar. They pulled coins seemingly at random from the cut they'd collected and dropped them into mugs.

I lifted my chin toward the bar. "What are they doing back there?"

The woman nodded. "Checkin' for fakes."

"Fakes?" I asked, reaching for my die.

"They drop the silver in vinegar, and if it turns black after a couple minutes, it's pure silver." She shook the dice and, as the winner of the previous game, rolled first.

I grabbed my dice and readied myself for another game. From the corner of my eye, I could see Syndrian watching. I saw Biko's curls as he worked the crowd, moving past where I was playing and even stopping just momentarily, to peek over my opponent's shoulder at the game.

We set off on another fast-paced game, the crowd of watchers pointing out moves and cheering or booing based on the rolls of the dice and our respective plays. For a few short hours, I felt like we were actually going to get away with it.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

The woman I was playing was an incredibly strong match. We alternated winning until it was almost laughable. She'd win a game, I'd win two. She'd win two more, then I would get the better of her. The tournament had been running for maybe three hours. I'd only won a bit of extra money for all the time I'd played with the woman, and I was ready for a break. I didn't think she'd be easy to beat, so once I won the next game, I collected my silver from her and stood.

"Excellent games," I said. "Thank you, friend. I'm going to take a break."

She nodded at me and sorted her winnings, and I waited for the enforcer to collect the quarter penny from my winnings. Another player immediately took my spot, so I followed the man in black to the bar. Syndrian was leaning his elbows on the rough wood, making small talk with the barkeep while he poured drinks. I noticed Syndrian peek at me but look immediately away. The game we played reminded me of all the times I'd stolen looks at him in the crofter's cottage—pretending not to see him, while never actually losing sight of him.

There were no empty seats at the bar itself, so I tried to tuck myself between customers but couldn't quite catch the barkeep's attention.

"Here, miss." Syndrian stood from his chair and pointed to it.

“No, uh, that’s very kind, but...” I wasn’t sure what to do. We’d agreed we should not speak or get close to each other in any way while at the pub. If anyone were to discover a connection between us or even remember that the well-known and trusted cutler had engaged with a player... Our entire plan would be destroyed. I looked over my shoulder and saw Biko near the axe game again, close to the rear door. Exactly where he was supposed to be.

“Please, miss, take it. I’ve been warming that chair long enough,” Syndrian insisted, staring at me, his blue eyes bright but unreadable.

I moved close to him to claim his empty seat before someone else took it. “Ah, all right, friend. If you’re through here. Thank you, then.” But before I could sit, there was a commotion behind the bar.

“Hey!” One of the men in black lifted a hand and emitted a shrill, high whistle through his teeth.

The finely dressed man clapped loudly to clear a path through the crowd, chattering easily with everyone he passed like a gregarious bard and gracious host bundled into one very unpredictable man. When he reached the bar, he lifted his chin in annoyance.

“What is it?” he demanded. “Do we have a problem?”

An enforcer urged him to come around the bar. The finely dressed man’s face changed immediately. He hurried to join the enforcers and peered into one of the mugs of vinegar. I could see his back stiffen, and he ran a shaking hand through his hair. He murmured low under his breath, but I could not make out the hushed conversation that followed. Finally, he turned and faced the room.

“Friends!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Put your hands down! These games are over!”

As he shouted, some of the players froze, dropping their cards and game pieces. Others continued playing, either indifferent or unaware due to the noise that there’d been an announcement.

“I said...” He rushed out from behind the bar, waving his hands in the air. “Put your godforsaken hands *down!*”

At his repeated order, an uncomfortable silence filled the tavern. Players muttered complaints about distractions, and those placing wagers on the games grumbled about keeping track of whose turn was up. I felt Syndrian tense behind me. I pushed past him to slide onto the chair, but he did not move away. He stayed protectively close, just inches from me, his eyes fixed on the man barking orders. Biko began moving through the crowd, getting even closer to the rear door. With all the enforcers behind the bar, I knew it could be seconds before they reached for their weapons and moved into action against the crowd. But why, by the gods, would they stop the tournament?

“Someone in our midst is not a friend but a *fraud.*” The finely dressed man closed his eyes dramatically and placed his palms together. Then he pressed the tips of his thumbs against his eyelids and sighed. “My team has discovered a counterfeit coin among those we collected from the winners.”

A gasp sounded from someone in the crowd.

“That means that someone playing in the tournament tonight is a cheater. Someone who has come here not to put their skills to the test but to steal! From you and you and you and me!” He gestured wildly, his demeanor changing in a flash. He leaned forward in the face of a player still holding his cards and shrieked at the top of his voice, “Don’t you people know what happens to cheaters?”

His scream sounded unhinged, uncontrolled. I had no idea what he would do... What could he do? How, with all these people trading so much money... How could they find the person who’d brought in fake silver?

“Now,” Syndrian whispered, his words barely a breath against my hair. I felt his fingers nudge my back, but I was frozen. Transfixed by whatever brand of shire justice this thug for the Otleiches planned to carry out.

“That means,” the man continued, waving two fingers in the air, “that we’re going to have to check...every. Single.

Person. Every single player, every single betting person, every watcher. Every last one of you in this pub!”

Two of the enforcers behind the bar bent low, and when they stood, menacing spiked maces were braced over their shoulders.

“And when we find the cheat...the *fraud*...” The man sputtered, spitting saliva with his vigorous rage. “We will have justice. Nobody move!”

“Now,” Syndrian whispered and grabbed my elbow.

I peered past him to find Biko in the crowd. My brother blinked very slowly, which I knew was the sign that meant he was ready. I said a quiet prayer to the gods. Then, just like I practiced last night at the Oderisi manor, I concentrated on the fires and the lamps. If there was ever a time to embrace my darker side, to focus everything I had on the very little power I could control, that time was now.

With just the concentration of my thoughts and the slightest movement of my hands, the candles flickered in their lamps. It was working, but it was only the beginning. Knuckles & Bones had two roaring fireplaces and more than a dozen lamps mounted on the walls. Doing this would be a test of my skills unlike the pressure of any game I’d ever played. And the stakes had never felt more critical.

The mounting tension in the tavern felt like overly tight clothing closing around my throat. I tried to focus on two fires at once, but closing out the sounds around me was harder than I’d realized. As two of the enforcers waded through the crowd, I felt Syndrian stiffen further. He stood in front of me, blocking me between the chair and his body. I knew he had to be aware that I was trying to put the lights out, but I’d not prepared for doing so under this kind of pressure.

The enforcers’ boots pounded the floors. The finger-long sharp spikes on their maces glittered in the warm light. A few nervous people darted toward the doors, and a sudden rush of bodies toward the exits brought another level of panic into my already frayed concentration.

“You can do this.” Syndrian turned his head quickly, not making eye contact with me as he whispered. Then he turned away and stared into the crowd, his eyes never leaving the chaos that was unfolding around us.

I couldn’t respond. I was as focused as I could be, but when I heard the first swing of a weapon, the first shrill shriek of a terrified player, my concentration scattered like checkers spilled on the floor. I was aware of the lamps, the heat in the place, the nervous stink of the terrorized people around me.

The candles I’d made flicker burned bright and strong in their lamps. The fires in the dual fireplaces seemed enormous and powerful in a way that I was not. The noise of the tavern and the threat of real harm was nothing we’d prepared for. Last night, in the peaceful sitting room, I’d practiced putting out fires and lamps. This was supposed to be nothing more than a getaway trick, a prank like what I’d tried to pull on Norwin so many years ago. My resolve shook in my soul like that day so many years ago. When my father’s fury had stifled any hope I’d had of understanding and controlling my gift. My curse, it felt like now.

I was overwhelmed, but folding this hand, sitting this play out, was not an option.

Somehow, thinking of my father working with these men—these people who made fear and power into lethal weapons—enraged me. I gripped my hands into fists and closed my eyes. Syndrian still shielded me from the finely dressed man, who screamed at players and enforcers alike. I pictured his red face and smooth hair, letting myself get angrier. This was the type of man who’d driven me to the depths of a goblin lair. This was the type of fear that had made me want to abandon everything I knew and loved—just so I didn’t lose it all.

I could stay here in the tavern and let the gods guide my fate. I’d done nothing wrong. I’d not brought counterfeit coins into the game. If I stood in place and obeyed, just listened, maybe all three of us would make it out of here alive and unhurt.

Syndrian flinched as a man who'd tried to flee was struck in the back of the leg by the low swing of a mace. The player fell to the ground crying for help, protesting his innocence. And I knew, just knew, there would be no justice in this tavern. Ending this was up to me.

But something was missing. Last night, when I'd practiced, I had Syndrian beside me. His hot thigh pressed against mine. His fingers laced with mine, reassuring me that I could focus my power and control more than a single candle or torch. What brought me heat and strength and confidence and peace was the same thing that brought me passion and joy and love: Syndrian.

I leaned forward and rested the flat of my palm against his back. Whether the heat there brought me comfort or somehow connected me to the burning energy inside me, I'd never know. He didn't move but stood before me, a shield and a touchstone, as I closed my eyes, connected to his heat, and willed the fires to go out.

And in a flash, they did.

Once the place lost every bit of candlelight, the already chaotic scene erupted into pure panic. I could hear coins spilling, people screaming, tables and chairs being knocked over. The place was as dark as if I'd been wearing a death mask. The finely dressed man was hoarse with shrieking, and I heard the mad rush of feet running for the doors.

I trailed my hand from his back to his hand and held Syndrian tight. I was suddenly weak, nearly exhausted from the effort, but he didn't let me rest, practically dragging me through the crowd toward the door. My footsteps faltered, but I didn't release him until I felt the rush of cold air on my face.

Once we were outside, along with dozens of other people who'd made it into the streets, everything fell into place. Flynn was waiting for us in the woods where Syndrian and I had fled the last time we were here. Flynn had all three of our horses waiting. He'd paid the Kyruna stable hand an exorbitant amount to release the horses to him, then secured them in the

woods so they would be ready for us to make our quick escape.

Reunited with our horses, we took off for Omrora. Only when we were a safe distance from the village and away from the public lamps did I light our torches with what little energy I had left. I felt so drained, so exhausted, it was an effort to stay upright on the horse. But the thrill that I'd been the one to get us out of harm's way—not to mention, I hoped, kept dozens more from being hurt or killed—gave me the boost I needed to just hold on tight and ride.

When we finally made it back to Omrora, we didn't ride back to the Lombard estate. We met up at the Oderisi manor.

The entire household was awake and anxiously waiting. Dale stabled the horses, while Antonia offered us food and tea. Idony rushed through the door and launched her body at her son. She hugged him, rocking Biko back and forth, hugging him and crying, before doing the same to me.

Neo and Brex were in the sitting room with four children, including the severe little one, Ivo, that I'd met last night.

"You're early." Neo grabbed Syndrian's arm and clapped him on the back. "We didn't expect you back so soon."

"There was some unexpected trouble," Syndrian explained.

"Trouble is always expected," Neo said. "You were ready for it."

"Pali was," Syndrian said. He had an arm around my waist and was offering to carry me into the sitting room.

"I'm all right," I said, gripping his hand. "Just weak."

Biko dropped to his knees and introduced himself to each of the children, while Flynn picked up the littlest child and spun her in dizzying circles. The happy homecoming of Flynn and the children immediately lightened my spirits. I felt suddenly starving, but also re-energized. Like with food and a nap, I could take on all the Otleiches myself.

“I feel...powerful.” I tugged at Syndrian’s arm. “It’s almost intoxicating. Like now that I know what I can do, I won’t be able to turn it off.”

He tipped my chin with a hand. “You’ll never have to again. But I would like Odile to take a look at you. Make sure you’re all right. That was truly...something back there. What you did.” His face was flushed, and he seemed suddenly shy. “You are powerful, Pali. More so than any of us realized.”

I knew what he meant, as I felt the same sort of surprise within myself. The power, the thrill of being able to manipulate events and even people—I could see how it might be abused by some. I felt sincere terror at the thought that my father wielded some power—whether it was the ability to transform or control objects. Whatever he could do, I could only imagine how terrifying magic could truly be in evil hands. While I hated the dark networks that had made my father a criminal, for the first time in my life, I began to understand what might have driven him to it. If I felt this way using magic, I could only imagine what someone with more power and fewer morals might be capable of. Being close to those people, no matter the cost, felt in some ways like the safest course.

“Odile is working up in her room with Valkiva, our oldest girl,” Brex said. “I’ll summon her. She’ll be anxious to hear that everyone is safe and unharmed.”

“We accomplished much while you were gone.” Neo looked down at Ivo, who was tugging at the man’s hosen. “The records you sought from the midwife...Odile was able to obtain them. My sister-in-law, the scrivener, took a sworn statement. You should have exactly what you need.” He took Ivo’s hand but then seemed to reconsider and bent to pick the child up in his arms. “Everything is as it should be,” he murmured to the child. “We told you there would be some excitement tonight. Do you understand?”

The child nodded but rested his nearly bald head on Neo’s shoulder. He motioned for the other children to leave the sitting room.

“Come, little ones,” he said, sounding like a loving father. Something in my chest tightened. Watching him gather up these children—carrying Ivo, scolding Flynn for being too rough as he played horse with the toddler on his back—and seeing the older children hold hands and play together...I realized how much of my life had been cold. Loveless. I wondered if all that could change now.

Once Idony, Biko, Syndrian, and I were alone in the sitting room, Syndrian pulled me close to him and pressed his forehead to mine.

“You saved our lives tonight,” he said. “And many, many others.”

I savored the feel of his heat against me, taking comfort and energy in his quiet strength.

Biko dropped onto the settee and rubbed his injured hand. “Excellent work getting us out of there, Pali.” He looked at his mother. “Things got messy. Pali had to work under less-than-ideal conditions. I don’t know how she did it.”

“She is more powerful than even she knows,” Idony said, her eyes misting with tears. “I’m just glad you all made it back safely.”

“Some were not that fortunate.” I sighed and reluctantly lifted my face from Syndrian’s. “What was that man going to do?” I asked.

“That man,” Syndrian said, grimacing. “His name’s Drustan, and he’s a living devil. He thrives on chaos. He’s a thug, not a blood relative to the Otleiches, but he’s trusted by them and maintains close ties. He gets his hands dirty so they don’t have to. He would have happily killed every last person in the place, even if that meant never finding the counterfeiter.”

“How? Surely the crowd wouldn’t have allowed him to just...” I couldn’t picture it. After what I’d seen happen to the cheater and the men who’d fought in Knuckles & Bones, I could not abide the thought that just dozens, possibly more,

people would have been senselessly killed. All because one person brought in counterfeit silver.

“It’s perfect, really,” Syndrian said, scrubbing a hand over his chin. “A tournament is the perfect place to move fake coins into circulation. Lots of money changing hands. Denominations as small as a quarter penny. Someone wanting to get rid of their counterfeit silver could play a few hands, win some, lose some, and in the process replace the fake silver in their purse with the real thing. Everyone in that tavern was so focused on cheaters playing the games—who would think to question the authenticity of the coins?”

“How did that Drustan man know the coins were fake?” I leaned back against the settee, wondering what my parents were doing. My father should have been home by now. My mother would be telling him that she’d released Biko and Idony from their positions. I had no idea how she would explain my absence, but I assumed I would find out soon enough.

Antonia wheeled in a cart covered with snacks and drinks. “Please, eat your fill. Those children are spoiled rotten. I always have plenty of biscuits on hand. Nothing makes a crying little one happier than something sweet.”

“Antonia, could I trouble you for some vinegar?” Syndrian poured a mug of fresh water and passed it to me.

I gave him a smile of thanks and drank, feeling immediately refreshed. “Should we talk about what happens next?” I asked sadly.

As thrilled as I was that I’d succeeded in extinguishing the fires at the tavern, what no one was saying yet was that we’d failed. Our plan, our well-crafted plan, had not had enough time to come to fruition.

If Biko had been able to participate in some of the backgammon games, if he could have built a small purse of winnings, we’d planned to be the last two backgammon players in the tournament. One of us would have been eligible for the major prize. And even if we didn’t win it, two

backgammon players as skilled as us could've won enough money to confront my father with the truth.

It was a dangerous strategy. We'd planned to confront my father for so many things he'd done over the years.

We realized last night that Biko's birth father never formally filed adoption papers. Idony confirmed that she'd not listed a father in the records since her marriage to Cyprian hadn't taken place until after Biko's birth. My father, by hiring them as crofters, had promised Cyprian and Idony lifelong work and security—as long as they maintained the secret of Biko's paternity. But now that my mother had relieved Idony and Biko of their duties, she'd terminated any agreement that Idony had been coerced into.

Odile had gone to the midwife, Molle Noll, and obtained her sworn testimony—certified by the scrivener, Odile's sister—that my father had forged documents with the shire-reeve when Biko was born. He was the one on behalf of the unmarried mother to put the man who Idony would someday marry as the child's father—even though that was untrue. I don't know if my father assumed that the midwife's records would never see the light of day, but the discrepancy in taxes would be enough to trigger an inquiry. If Biko was the son of Lord Lombard, even if everyone pretended otherwise, my father had intentionally defrauded the crown of taxes—every year of Biko's life. The debt he would owe and the penalties would be substantial. Not enough to put a dent in the family treasury, but the truth would be costly, no matter the coin owed.

It made me sick to think that my father had swindled his own son out of his birthright. Biko, as the eldest Lombard, should have been entitled to take over the manor and management of the estate once my father retired or moved. Not me. Biko should have been graced with some sort of lifelong security—and while I didn't support him being given a job and a paltry income while I was provided with every luxury—Idony had accepted that bargain to ensure her freedom from my father and a marriage she didn't want. She'd made a beautiful life for them, given the circumstances.

And we'd had such a brilliant plan to bring it all down. To confront my father with the facts. We had intended to use the money from the tournament to hire a legal expert to demand an investigation into the birth records and taxes paid. We expected Dennes Lombard to be named as the father of Biko Ravenni in the official realm documents. Biko would then be entitled to settle his rights on his own behalf—not living with the compromises his mother had made while pregnant and without options so many years ago.

I'd had one aim in exposing Lord Lombard as a fraud with the shire-reeve and the crown—after, of course, restoring to Biko what was rightfully his. His name. Our family bond. Everything else he'd long been denied. But selfishly, I wanted something too: my release from the obligation of marrying an Otleich.

Once confronted, my father and mother could retire to the small village near the crown using the ill-gotten riches from their years working with the Otleiches, or they could stay in place and continue their lives. I would not have cared what they chose to do.

But they had to set me free.

As long as I was free and Biko was given what was rightfully his, we would have found a way forward. Living openly and freely. But now, with little more money than we'd started with, I was certain that our threats against my father wouldn't amount to much.

Without the funds to mount a legal battle, we could shake the door of the shire-reeve, but what if he too was in my father's pockets? We had the truth on our side. But the truth felt like a disappointing weapon. I supposed I could have kept the coins that my mother had given me. But somehow, using their money against them made me feel dirty. As dirty as an Otleich. If I'd won a purse on my own, I'd have had no hesitation to pursue my plan. Perhaps I'd need to swallow down my pride, my values, and behave as my parents would—using what power I had, regardless of how I came into possession of it.

“Here you go, love.” Antonia returned with a mug of vinegar. “I hope you don’t plan to drink that.” She made a face, but Syndrian just shook his head and thanked her.

“Here, I’ll show you. Can you give me one of your coins? Any will do.”

I emptied the coins from my pouch and spread them on the butler’s cart. “Help yourself,” I said.

Syndrian grabbed a coin and dropped it in the vinegar. “It takes quite a bit of time, but watch. Pure silver will tarnish in vinegar. Counterfeit coins have a much lower silver content. They may tarnish, but not nearly as fast. This coin should be pure silver. It will look dirty within just a few minutes.”

“Pali, where did you get all that money?” Idony asked, wrinkling her nose. “That looks like so much more than we counted up last night.”

I nodded. “I was able to get my savings from my room before leaving home this morning.”

“You were?” Syndrian turned to me, the crinkles around the corners of his eyes showing his concern. “Did you see your mother? What happened?”

I sighed. “I did see her.” I looked from Biko to Idony. “Lady Lombard was concerned she acted rashly in letting you go. But she did not see how she could right that wrong and save face. She was very concerned how my father would react.” I started sorting the bright, shiny silver coins. “She gave me some coins from the family treasury,” I added. “Maybe she wanted to make amends. I believe—if such an emotion is possible for her—that she truly felt bad for what she’d done.”

“Your mother gave you money?” Biko asked, his eyes narrowed. “Does anyone else find that surprising?” He got up from the settee and peered into the mug of vinegar. He slapped Syndrian hard on the shoulder. “Get another one. By the gods, get another coin!”

“What is it?” I asked.

Syndrian held out a hand. “Pali, can you pick out another coin from your family’s treasury? Not one that was part of your savings. One of the coins your mother gave you this morning.”

I shrugged. “These here, I believe. They are mixed up quite well but...” I slipped a hand into the concealed pocket in the breeches I’d had made this morning in Kyruna. “I kept a few pieces back from my purse just in case I was robbed or something unexpected happened.” I emptied the pocket and gave Syndrian every piece of silver.

He dropped them all in the liquid. Biko, Syndrian, and I gathered around the mug and watched. None of the coins from my mother tarnished in the vinegar. None of the coins darkened in the liquid. No matter how we stared, the money simply reflected through the liquid, looking bright, shiny, and new.

I understood now what this meant. What the test back in the pub in Kyruna had been intended for. And worse, how close I’d come to a fate that no one—no goblins with their magical craft, no criminal with a treasury full of money—could have reversed had it gone the way of the man who’d cheated at cards. I clenched my icy, trembling hands and bit back a sob.

Each and every one of the gifted coins was a fake.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

I staggered back from the butler's cart as though I'd been struck in the face.

"I d-don't understand..." I stammered. "This cannot be. How? How could this happen? These coins were..."

Biko interrupted me, his angry exclamations punctuated by the steely fury in his eyes. "Your mother set you up. That's the only explanation that makes sense. You crossed her, Pali. And she gave you those coins knowing full well that they'd be tested at the tournament. Do you realize what could have happened!"

Biko stormed the length of the sitting room, yanking at his hair.

"You could have been killed! What if they'd had some other system in place to detect the fakes?" He rushed over to me and grabbed my shoulders. "Sis, by the gods. Your mother sacrificed you. Served you up on a platter."

I dropped onto the settee and curled my knees in front of my chest. I wrapped my arms around them and hugged tight, my thoughts racing. "Did she know?" I whimpered. "Maybe she didn't know..."

"Pali! There's no way she did not know what those coins were." Biko lifted his injured hand to his face. "Look at this! She nearly had us killed by vengersax. Do you think the same woman who would do that had *no idea* what was in your family's treasury? Doesn't your mother manage the books and the money?"

I swallowed hard against the knot in my throat and nodded. “She does,” I admitted.

“That godforsaken demon set us up! All of us!”

I’d never seen Biko like this. Angry—fuming. Seeing the playful man driven to this kind of rage yet again because of my mother’s cruelty was heartbreaking. But I wasn’t certain I had any heart left to break.

“Think about it!” he pressed. “She dismissed me and my mother, knowing full well that your father had made a commitment to us. As long as we kept their filthy secrets, Mum and I would have a home and work.”

I could see the point he was making, but something just was not adding up for me. My mother had exposed us to the vengersax attack, but she’d seemed sincerely shocked and concerned that Biko had been hurt. And while I believed that she’d been furious at my father when she burned his village cabin, if she did know that the coins in the treasury were counterfeit...what would she have gained by giving them to me? Other than, of course, my demise?

“Maybe that’s why that coxcomb has been prowling around the grounds, trying to meet with me in secret.” Biko groaned and rolled his neck, a cracking sound echoing from his bones. “Maybe your father wanted me dead, Pali. Did you ever think about that? To ensure that I could never challenge the inheritance that would pass to your husband when you married?”

I hung my head in shame. I truly had nothing to offer Biko. No apology would make up for what my father and mother were. No excuse would clear the scorecard.

“I might have to go outside... When I’m upset, emotional like this... I can’t control what I do, what I become.” Biko groaned and wiped the back of his arm against the sweat on his brow.

Idony rushed to her son’s side and smoothed a hand over his arm. “Why don’t we go outside together? Come.” She

looked at me, tears shimmering in her eyes. “Pali, my darling, I have no words for this. We’ll be back soon.”

She quietly closed the door behind her, leaving Syndrian and me alone. The room spun, and I struggled to sit before I toppled over. “I don’t understand,” I murmured, focusing on the fire. That might have been a poor choice, though. The ripples of emotion inside me had an influence on the fire; the flames diminished like I’d thrown a cup of water against them. I looked away and they flared again, filling the room with light and heat. “Syndrian, I’m lost.”

He was still staring into the mugs, but at my words, he turned slowly, his face pensive. “I don’t think you’re lost at all. I believe you’re just coming into your power.”

He reached a hand out to me, but I was shivering, gripping my knees with my hands. “What if my mother wanted me dead all along? With both Biko and me out of the way...” I closed my eyes against the hot tears. “She could...I don’t know. Kill my father? Marry Emeric Otleich, the way she always wished?” I released my knees long enough to wipe my tear-stained cheeks. “What if my mother has been the dark force in our family all these years? I do not know what to believe.”

Syndrian scrubbed the dark stubble on his chin with one hand. “Yes,” he insisted. “You do. You’ve always known what to believe. Your instincts, Pali. They’ve never let you down.”

“Are you talking about backgammon? It’s a game, Syndrian. One with checkers and dice. Anyone with enough time on their hands and no real work to do could become proficient at it.” I shook my head, thinking of all the things I wanted to ask Lady Lombard. I could not give up until I knew the truth. I only wished I knew when and how to reach my mother. If I just went home now...and if she really did want me dead...

“Pali, no.” He knelt on the floor in front of me and rested his hands on mine. “That’s not true, and you know it. You have exceptional instincts and skill. You react in the moment based on the roll of the dice, yes, but you’re always thinking

steps ahead. I can see that in you. It's one of the things that I've always loved about you. Look at your brother. He's outside cooling off so he doesn't turn into a bear and tear apart Neo's sitting room. But even now, I'm sure you're already planning what to say when you confront your mother. Calmly thinking through each move and its consequences."

I moved my legs out of the way and laced my fingers through his. "Do you believe that my mother intentionally gave me those coins?" I whispered.

Syndrian pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. "Someday, Pali, I wish to make you my wife. I won't make allegations against your family that I cannot support. But make no mistake." He squinted his eyes closed. "If I ever have proof... your mother will know no more brutal enemy in all of Efimia than me. The fate of those corpses hanging outside Knuckles & Bones will seem like a holiday when I'm through with any who would hurt you."

I shook my head. "I can't believe she meant to. I won't believe it, even if my trust in her is my undoing."

"It will not be," he said. "If you wish to champion your mother, I'll stand by your side."

"Are you through with them?" I asked. "Now that you've finished the dice for the tournament, have you any further obligation to the Otleiches?"

Syndrian released my hands and sat beside me, his thick thigh pressed alongside mine. "Pali..." he said gently. "Why? Why ask that now?"

"You said you know I'm always thinking steps ahead," I said. "I fear I won't be able to extricate myself from the Otleiches. Not now. Everything is such a mess. We haven't the means to confront my father. We need to find a way to support Biko and Idony. If I return home, even if it's just to learn the truth, I might have to compromise what I want—my freedom."

"Why?" he demanded. "Why should you be the one to make the compromises?"

I stroked a fingertip along the fabric of his breeches, feeling the dense muscle through the material. “Because I’m the critical pawn in all this,” I said. “If I accept the roll of the dice, we can all put this behind us. Find a peaceful way forward. Perhaps if I marry Emeric, I’ll have some influence to protect Biko and Idony. Assuming I’m allowed to return home. Assuming I am correct that my mother did not intentionally try to harm me... Assuming so many, many things.”

“So you would marry him then?” Syndrian was staring at my fingers.

“I would prefer to marry the one I love, but how many people are truly blessed with that?” I asked, my temper getting the better of me.

“Neo and Brex. Neo’s brother, Rain, and his wife... Even Antonia and Dale have something true, Pali. Idony was happy all those years with Cyprian, was she not? What makes you think you deserve less?” His words struck with the force of an axe, leaving me breathless and shaken.

“I’ve enjoyed so much ease and comfort in my life,” I cried. “A beautiful home, meals... Do you know that I’ve never laundered anything? Not once. Not a rag, a dress. I don’t know where to begin living a normal life. I may have exceptional skills when it comes to playing board games, but I’m a shallow person, Syndrian. My depth is limited to those things I truly care about.”

He got up from the settee then and strode across the room. “Do you not see?” he asked. “Do you not understand that it is your very depth that sets you apart? You care more for truth and kindness than comfort and coins. If you are shallow, Pali, then the rest of Efimia has the soul of a puddle days after the rain.”

I left the settee and walked up behind him. He stared into the fire, and for once, I was not tempted to tease, to control, to taunt it. I cared only for the man before me. I slipped my arms around his waist and rested my cheek against his back. “In the pub,” I said, “it was your touch, your heat that I used to calm

me. To focus my gift. Without you, I would be a mess. Passionless. Powerless.”

“Not powerless.” He turned to face me. “But I like the sound of you passionless without me.”

I smiled at him and snuggled against his chest. “What do we do, Syndrian? I know what my instincts demand, but I’m not the only one affected by my choices. By my actions.”

He pressed his lips against my hair. “What would you do?” he asked. “If you were only responsible for the call of your heart, what would you do?”

I lifted my face to his. “After I kissed you senseless?”

He smirked at me and tapped my nose with his. “After that, I’ll be a useless companion for any quest you’d like to undertake. Let’s handle this together, Pali. Whatever you decide, I want to be a part of it. And then after, senseless kissing.”

I lifted my face to his. “Can I have just a little taste?” I begged. “Something...just in case...” My voice broke, and before I could cry again, he slipped his hands behind my neck and pressed his lips against mine.

“I’ve always loved you, Pali.” His stubble scraped my chin, and a delicious thrill flowed from my lips and then lower, flooding my body with heat. “And I will love you forever, whether you’re mine or not.” His tongue teased my mouth, filling me with his sweetness. “So let’s make certain you don’t marry Emeric. The man will not appreciate me claiming his wife and staking a camp in front of your manor.”

I kissed him again, reluctant to stop but knowing that the only way to have more of this, to build a life with him, was through it. “Come with me?” I whispered against his lips. “I need to go home.”



SYNDRIAN AND I rode to the Lombard estate despite the late hour. If I was going to confront my mother and father, there

might be some advantage to surprising them in the night. Biko wanted to accompany us, but he was too fraught...too close to erupting. I preferred to handle this myself, in my own way.

Biko had spent years being loved by his parents. Despite having a father by birth who would sooner have abandoned his child than make him part of his empire, Biko had been loved. Meanwhile, my entire past, present, and future were now in question. If I was to learn that my mother meant for me to die at the hands of thugs in Kyruna, if it were truly my father's wish to marry me off to an Otleich even though I would go to any length to be spared that fate...Well, I would need Biko's support and love later.

For now, there was only one person I wanted at my side. I wanted no one but Syndrian to hold my hand, to wipe my tears, and to give witness to whatever fate befell me. As we rode quickly and quietly through the night, all I could pray was that my parents did not hurt Syndrian. They could do what they wished to me. I would accept the consequences of my many choices. But I would make certain Syndrian came through unscathed. I would make any horrific bargain required to protect him.

We finally arrived on the property and tied the horses a small distance from the manor. We'd agreed not to stable them so we might make a quick escape, if a getaway was needed. We linked hands and approached the manor on foot. As we walked the well-lit path, we encountered an unusual cart and horses. The cart was marked with the same shield I'd seen displayed in Knuckles & Bones.

"Syndrian." I gripped his hand as my blood ran cold. "That fox...that fret..." The colors and the distinctive shape of the square knot carved into the wood marked the cart as coming from Kyruna. As belonging to the Otleiches.

"I see it." His lips were drawn, his face pinched. "We should leave, Pali. We should not go inside. Let this business settle, and then..."

"No." I shook my head. "Wait here. By the cart. If any trouble comes to me inside, you'll be the only one who can

help.”

He pulled me close. “I cannot let you go. By the gods, I can’t stop whatever’s happening in there!”

“I can,” I said softly, pressing a kiss to his lips. “Wait for me?” I asked. “I fear I will lose courage if I am not assured no matter what, you will be here.”

“There is no leap too long, too far, or too dangerous, Pali, that would drive me away. I will wait here for you until I have cause to come in and rescue you myself.”

I nodded and threw myself against his chest. The end of his blond ponytail tickled my shoulders as I held him. I breathed in the almond-oil scent of him, and closed my eyes. “Do you suppose the plunging-into-darkness trick can work again? I fear I’ve only one move up my sleeve.”

He shook his head and gave me a wry smile. “Go,” he said, patting the short sword at his waist. “I’ll be ready.”

I was unarmed and had nothing with me—not even the money my mother had given me. Nothing but the fire striker I’d stashed in the pocket of these breeches. But I was not going to need that now. I walked up to the door and steeled my spine. This was it. Things that had never been said between my parents and me would be said now. The truth would come out, even if that meant I would essentially be an orphan after tonight. A foundling. Perhaps Neo and Brex would add me to their brood if it came to that.

I sighed and shoved open the door. The scene in front of me immediately took my breath away.

“Father!” I ran into the main hall, where my father was being soundly beaten by two guards clad in leather armor and helmets.

The entire household was absent, except my mother, who stood by weeping miserably into a kerchief.

“Mother! What’s happening?”

My mother lifted her red, tearstained face, but it was my father who spoke.

“Palmeria, go to your mother. She’ll need you now.” His face was bleeding and swollen, one eye ringed by bruises. At his words, one of the fiends kicked him in the belly with the pointed toe of his boot.

My father gasped and lost his footing, falling to the floor.

“Father! What is happening?” My shock was sincere. Despite everything my parents had put me through, I could not tolerate seeing my father abused in this way. “Please stop! Stop!”

My father was on his hands and knees, shaking his head. He spit a thin stream of blood onto the floor and wiped his face with an unsteady hand. “Stay back, Daughter.”

I ran for one of the men in black and grabbed his arm. “Tell me what’s happening!”

The man lifted an arm as if to hurt me, but my mother screamed, “Don’t touch my daughter! She’s done nothing wrong!”

She raced to my side and pulled me away from the brute. I cared not for her display of motherly concern; now was not the time for this. My father was being placed into shackles and led away.

“Your father is under arrest,” one of the men droned. He grabbed an enormous bag from the floor of the main hall and shook it. “Crimes against the shire of Kyruna. Fraud and counterfeiting coins in violation of the rules of the realm. He’ll stand trial and be sentenced. Say your goodbyes.”

“You make it sound as though you’ve already judged him!” I seethed. As confused and angry as I was, I could not allow my father to be unjustly imprisoned...or worse. I broke away from my mother and tried to reach my father, but the guards would not allow me to touch him.

“I’ll be all right, Palmeria,” he promised, sniffing against the swelling of his nose. “Take care of your mother. She’ll need your strength now more than ever. I’m sorry, sweet girl.”

The guards physically dragged my father down the stairs of the manor and threw him roughly into the cart marked with

the Otleich crest. I began to cry in earnest then. Hearing my father call me *sweet girl*, for the first time ever, as he was dragged from our family home seemed like the cruelest expression of familial love and yet somehow also the most fitting. Despite what my father had done, I prayed that he survived the trip.

I stood on the stone steps outside the manor, weeping into the chill night air. I could see the flash of blond hair as Syndrian concealed himself nearby. Watching. Waiting. Once the guards had ridden away with my father, I spun on my heel and ran inside. My mother was drying her tears and looked... happy?

“Pali.” She held her arms out to me, but I was frozen in place.

“What by the gods is happening here? You let Father be arrested, and yet you escape responsibility? You knew what he was doing, and yet—”

“Shhh, darling.” My mother held a finger to her lips. “We still have a guest in the house.”

I looked wildly around the main hall but saw no sign of anyone. “What are you talking about? Have you gone mad? Mother!”

Before I could lose my patience completely, a finely dressed man with a bloodstained sleeve descended the stairs. His gaze was intense as he studied my clothes and hair. “So this is Pali,” he purred.

The maniac from Knuckles & Bones.

I flicked a look behind me toward the door, calculating whether I could run for the door and scream for Syndrian before this lunatic could lay his hands on me. Or on my mother. Before I could act, my mother calmed me with a wave.

“My dear, let me introduce you,” she said, her voice unnervingly calm. “This is Drustan.”

“I know what he is! I need not know his name!” I snapped. “What by the gods is he doing in our home?”

“Why don’t you bring your cutler inside?” she suggested. “I have much to explain.”

Drustan strolled up to my mother and handed her a sack that jingled like it was full of coins. Then he walked toward me and looked me over from head to toe. The man’s eyes alone brought me to the boiling point of my rage, but I simply said, “I hope my beloved doesn’t mistake you for an enemy of this household. Unless, *friend*, that’s what you are.”

Drustan laughed, the self-righteous sound of a man who held a winning hand. “She’s good,” he said to my mother. “You’ll be all right, both of you.” He nodded at me. “Syndrian won’t hurt me,” he said. “Not when he understands we’re all in business together now.”

I shook my head. “Never. Mother, what—”

She motioned for me to take a seat and then rang a bell to summon the butler. Norwin scurried in, looking disheveled and absolutely terrified. “Gather the household, Norwin,” my mother ordered. She pointed to the blood and saliva on the floor. “And a mop. We’ve all got some messes to clean.”

Syndrian rushed inside the main hall, and I ran for him before grasping him about the waist.

“You’re unhurt?” he asked, brushing the hair from my face.

I nodded. “My father’s been arrested,” I said.

“I saw,” he said. “But you were not? And your mother?”

“She seems only too happy to have my father carted off to his death,” I said bitterly.

“Oh, hush now, Daughter.” Lady Lombard straightened her shoulders. “Your father will be fine. In a couple of days, he’ll be comfortably situated in an estate in the realm of Drammen. Where I’ll be joining him.”

I studied my mother’s face. “Joining him? How, if he’s been arrested?”

My mother perched on a chair and explained, “Darling, the people your father works for have, unfortunately, become a bit

too—demanding. It’s the way with large organizations. The more those at the top want, the harder those at the bottom have to work. Your father truly wanted to retire. To step away from the travel and the grueling service he’s given to his employers. But theirs is not an organization that’s easy to leave.”

Syndrian gripped me around the waist, his hand tightening around me protectively.

I knew that my mother had given me the counterfeit coins. I knew as well that those very coins—the ones from our family treasury—had been the undoing of my father. The realization that Lady Lombard was behind all of this—that she was the criminal mastermind who’d bested even her own spouse—sickened me to my core. “So you had your own husband arrested? Set him up to be discovered? And you used me as a pawn...” My body began shaking so hard, Syndrian pressed against my back, steadying me with his solid strength. “Why?” I demanded. “So that you could marry Emeric Otleich like you always wanted to?”

I couldn’t believe my mother could be so...calculating. I’d always known she was brilliant and cold, but this? My heart sunk within my chest in disgust. Even horror.

“What if I—” I whirled away from Syndrian, pointing at my mother’s chest. “You used me... I could have been caught in the tournament with those coins! Do you know what they do in that place to cheaters, Mother!”

My mother lowered her eyes and gave a tiny, indignant snuffle. “There it is again,” Lady Lombard said gently. “You think so poorly of your mother you would not consider any alternative motive, would you.” She said it sadly, with resignation. I was not moved to compassion, even when she seemed to wipe a tear from her eyes. No, not a full tear. The shimmer of one. “I know I’ve done little to deserve higher esteem,” she said, her chin high. “But...I confess, your low opinion does sting.”

I nearly rolled my eyes, but the response was not nearly enough. Screaming with indignation and rage, even flying at my mother would not have been sufficient release for the toxic

pain I felt at her betrayal. I looked back to Syndrian where he stood just a few steps from where I'd moved away from him.

Drustan looked on, a highly irritating smirk on his face. "You've kept her quite sheltered, Petra." He nodded in what I thought was approval. "Well done."

Syndrian sighed and reached a hand to reassure me. "As unpleasant as this looks, I believe Lady Lombard did know she was providing you with counterfeit silver to put into play in the tournament. But unless I'm grossly mistaken, she also knew that no harm would come to you. Not with Drustan in her pocket."

My mother nodded. "He's smarter than I expected for a cutler."

"For a cutler! By the gods, what is wrong with you?" I was about to defend him, but my mother went on.

"As much as I'd love to debate the finer points of your young man's intellect, I'll need your full attention. Things are about to get a bit messy, dear. But I hope you'll be pleased in the end."

"Messy?" I echoed. "Pleased?" I crossed the floor and looked at her, fire blazing in my heart. "All my life I've done what you wanted! Been what you wanted! And tonight I learn I'm still, even now, just a pawn? Just a plaything you and Father move as you wish? How do you expect me to be pleased when my entire life has been a lie!"

My mother nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry, Pali. I know you feel I've failed you as a mother. I can only hope with time, perhaps"—she looked at Syndrian—"if you have children of your own, you'll understand that not all evil comes to do you harm. I brokered your freedom in the deal I made for your father and me. And not just your freedom. That of the crofter boy and his mother as well."

Drustan chuckled into his hands and then wiped them on the fine fabric of his breeches. "Petra is quite the strategist," he said appreciatively.

My stomach churned as I wondered whether my mother and this...this snake had something intimate between them. Whatever the nature of their bond was, I cared not for it. I cared not for secrets, but it appeared that my mother even to the last would hold fast to the truth.

I looked from Syndrian to my mother, confused, angry, but too captivated by the smallest ember of hope to release the one word she'd said. The word that had meant everything to me, and yet which had been so elusive for so long.

"I'm...*free*?" I echoed. "What does that mean? How am I free?"

She quirked her lips into a scowl. "That is the question, is it not. I cannot say for certain that your idea of freedom and mine are at all alike. For starters, you're nearly penniless now. You'll have to work to earn your way, but I trust your ingenuity and willingness to do..." She waved a hand in front of her face as if batting away the mere idea of physical labor. "...whatever it takes to make your own way in life."

Just then, Norwin cleared his throat and knocked softly on the wall of the main hall. Behind him were the staff members of the entire household. Ms. Deylia, Letti, and dozens more who had been roused from their beds and their quarters. The only ones missing were Biko and Idony—the crofters.

"Ah! Gather around, everyone. Please." Lady Lombard seemed warmer and more animated than I'd ever seen her. It was like the stiff façade she maintained relaxed, but only slightly.

Drustan was leaning impishly against a wall, his arms crossed over his chest while he watched my parents' staff, and even their children dressed in sleeping attire, fill the grand main hall. Norwin turned up the fire and Ms. Deylia looked lost, her mouth sagging open in shock.

"Should I make tea?" she asked, her voice hushed. She looked from Norwin to my mother to Drustan, her eyes lingering longest on me. "Or perhaps..."

My mother shook her head. “You’ll no longer need to serve our meals.” She punctuated her words with an odd smile. “I’m afraid you may all be out of work. But I will supply the new lord of the Lombard estate with excellent references. Should he keep you on—”

My mother’s announcement set off a rush of panicked questions and exclamations. Norwin clutched the front of his doublet, as though suffering a sudden bout of chest pain. Syndrian rushed to the man, but Norwin looked distastefully at him, as though receiving aid from a cutler was beneath him.

“Now, now!” My mother clapped her hands loudly, her piercing words silencing the staff. “We have much to discuss. The first of which is the announcement that my daughter’s betrothal has been called off. My husband has been arrested in connection with some business dealings, but we have... friends...” She paused to nod at Drustan. “...In high places. Accordingly, Lord Lombard and I will be moving out of the manor and the rightful first-born heir of this estate will be notified of the vacancy.”

“Milady.” Norwin sounded as though he were choking on the words as he spoke. “The heir is your daughter, is she not? Surely Miss Lombard would prefer to keep the staff intact, as we’ve faithfully served this family for...”

My mother held up a single finger and silenced Norwin. The entire household looked from her to him, to me and Syndrian, the confusion on their faces no doubt mirroring mine.

Lady Lombard walked up to me and held my face in her hands. “No matter how you feel I failed you, my dear daughter, never doubt that I love you.” Then she turned to the staff and announced, “The rightful heir of the Lombard land, property, and treasury is the former crofter, Lord Biko Ravenni Lombard.”

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

I rolled over in my bed, squinting my eyes to see him through the darkness. In front of the fire, on a humble bedroll, I could just make out the shape of a muscular, naked back moving slightly with the deep breaths of sleep. A smile curled my lips as I slipped quietly from between the covers.

The dwindling flames danced in the fireplace, coming to life in time with the movement of my hands as I approached the nourishing heat.

There you are, I thought, directing my energy toward the fire—not the sleeping man. *Wake for me. Burn bright and vibrant, strong and steady.*

I lifted my hands and the flames blazed hotter and even more colorfully, tendrils of blue clashing with the sun-kissed yellow and reddish orange. I shivered, my bare toes cold on the chilly floor. I padded closer to the heat and stared into it, memories flooding my mind.

But the flare of heat must have disturbed him. The blankets rustled and a sleepy voice called to me. “Pali?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you. I couldn’t sleep.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest, the thin sleeping gown providing little protection from the chill in the air.

Syndrian rolled over and immediately sat up. His hair was loose and his chest naked, but as the blanket fell away, I could just make out the drawstring at the waist of his breeches. The poor man. He’d insisted on sleeping in my quarters to protect

me from any disturbances—from our staff or any enemies who might find their way to the Lombard estate yet tonight—but he of course had nothing suitable to wear to sleep. He'd stripped to the waist and settled down on a modest hay-filled bedroll by the fire. He'd refused any of the available rooms in the manor so he could stay close enough to hear even my softest cry for help.

The household was abuzz downstairs, which probably had contributed to my inability to sleep. The staff worried after their futures—and nothing I said could reassure them. Some were already packing their belongings, despite the efforts of Norwin to pretend that absolutely everything would remain the same.

My mother had left the manor with Drustan, apparently as they'd planned all along. He had arranged transportation and promised to deliver my mother safely to the capital, where she would stand as a witness in my father's trial. He assured me that my parents would be safe—as he put it, they had friends in much higher places than the Otleiches could reach. He'd said that I would be safe as well, since those friends my father had—the ones so very close to the queen—would not abide any threats against me or my mother.

Neither Syndrian nor I felt much confidence in the promises of, well, a con man. I understood that my parents had been quietly working with the crown for more than a year to put an end to the massive counterfeiting effort that had become the primary source of the Otleich family's wealth.

They'd used the regular gaming that took place at Knuckles & Bones as a way to move the counterfeit silver into the economy of Tutovl. The queen had looked away from the enterprise as long as taxes were paid using genuine silver. And she greatly benefitted from moving those fake coins out of Tutovl in trade for gold and other goods when my father traveled outside of the realm.

But when counterfeit coins began turning up in the tax coffers of shire-reeves throughout Tutovl, the queen had confronted Wilmot Otleich about shifting his business in another direction. She didn't mind if fake money was

produced—as long as none of it passed back to her in the form of tax payments.

Despite the fact that my parents had agreed to turn against the Otleiches, and would provide the evidence required to bring them down in exchange for amnesty for their part in the crimes, the threats from the crown had indeed panicked the patriarch of the crime family. When Wilmot Otleich felt the pressure, he sought to solidify his bonds to any of the many corrupt members of his network who might be persuaded to turn on him.

That's when he demanded a marriage between one of his sons and me. To ensure that my parents' loyalty would remain with the Otleich family. What Wilmot did not know was that all along, his network of cronies was conspiring to bring him down.

Drustan and my mother had been in constant communication while my father continued to work and travel, so as not to arouse suspicion with the Otleiches. Before he and my mother slipped off into the night, Lady Lombard had pulled me aside and made me issue a promise. "Promise me you'll tell Biko and Idony..." She trailed off, looking troubled. But then as if remembering that shame, poverty, and a chance of circumstance would not change who she was, she lifted her head and said, "Tell them someday I hope to speak to them in person. To explain."

If she'd intended to apologize, she certainly would not do that through me.

Drustan had shaken his head. "I'll be back in a few days with contracts." His eyes glazed over with a greedy gleam that made my stomach roil. "The new Lord Lombard will have business to attend to."

"Thinking about what might have been?" Syndrian left the mussed bedroll and stood behind me, lacing his arms around my waist.

I sighed. "I am," I admitted. "My mother and father have worked tirelessly to free themselves from the trouble that was coming for the Otleiches, but had that not worked... They

would have allowed me to marry Emeric. I don't know how I can recover from that. Even as they worked to release themselves from their criminal cohorts, they would have continued to use me as a pawn in their game. For how long? What if I'd never played in the tournament? When and how would all of this had come to pass? After I'd married? Had children with the man?" I shuddered.

Despite my parents' long-term strategy to set themselves free from all of this, none of this had they done with my best interests at heart. Not mine, not Biko's. It stung to think that no matter what they felt for me as their daughter, they would have continued to use me as long as they felt they had to.

I felt Syndrian's chin rest lightly on the top of my head. "Hmmm-mm," he agreed. "Appears as though they would have. But, by the gods, I hope it never would have come to that."

I turned to face him. "What now?" I asked. "My mother will go to the capital and together, she and my father will testify against Wilmot. Then what happens?"

Syndrian held me closer and placed a soft kiss on the top of my hair. "Emeric will likely be arrested along with his father and just about anyone else the queen fears she can't control."

"So I am truly free. But am I safe?" I shivered at the thought of retribution from any of those who'd been crossed by my father. "Surely the queen won't arrest everyone who might have been harmed by my parents' turning against the Otleiches? There will be others left, others who have been wronged by my parents."

"I believe that's why Drustan is involved," he said softly. "He'll no doubt pressure Biko to sell the land and the manor to him. Or maybe he'll try to recruit Biko. The power structures in all of the shires will be uncertain once Wilmot and Emeric are in prison. That family had tentacles that reached very, very far."

"What do you suppose Biko will do?" I asked. I laced my hands over Syndrian's and stroked his fine, strong fingers with

mine.

I'd sent Letti off to Neo and Brex's manor, to deliver the news of my father's arrest to Biko and Idony. I did not expect them to return to their cottage tonight, but I felt they needed to know they were welcome, and should come home at first light.

Syndrian tightened his hands around mine. "If I am sure of anything, I am certain that Biko will do as his soul commands, and whatever that is will be the right decision. He's a very good man."

"One of the two best I know," I added. I turned to face Syndrian, a question on my heart. "Would you have really done it?" I asked. "Run away with me if I'd been unable to find a way out of my betrothal?"

His lips curled into a sensuous grin. "I would do it tonight, milady. Shall we go away from all of this?"

I considered it for a moment, but shook my head. "I'd like to make sure the staff is secure. If we cannot help them find jobs..." I sighed. "I may not be the lady of this household anymore, but I will not leave the people I care about to an uncertain future. But ask me again in a few days?"

Syndrian chuckled. "I plan to ask you to run off with me every day until you consent."

I stared into the fire, its heat warming my face. We were as silent as the flames dancing in the darkness.

"I have an idea." He released me and motioned toward one of the chairs before the fire. "Let's play a game."

"Really?" I brightened at the suggestion.

"I know it's the one thing that will bring you peace," he murmured. "I'll even let you win."

"Let me win!" I stood from the chair and lifted my hands to his face. "My world has changed a bit the last few weeks," I admitted. "There is now something else that brings me peace."

I cupped his face in my hands and planted a gentle kiss on his lips. Beneath the thin sleeping gown my body warmed and

I dared to lean forward and press a kiss to the hot, smooth flesh above his heart.

“Pali,” he breathed. “You’ve always been an assertive player.” He traced his fingertips along the column of my neck.

“You’ve always been my favorite game,” I admitted, a hot flush flowing past every bit of skin he touched. I gasped as he lowered his lips to my ear.

“You haven’t even seen my moves.” The suggestion in his familiar voice was so delicious and strangely new. His sweet breath tickled my hair sending prickles down the back of my neck.

“Just this once,” I begged. “Show me everything?”

He lifted his head from my hair and met my eyes. We stood before the fire, our feet bare and our hearts open. This was the bedroom I’d been raised in. A manor where I’d learned who I was, who I could never be, and who circumstances would force me to become. But that was all in the past now. Tonight was a brand new start. A new beginning. The start of a freer life that I would create for myself. I may not have had any strategy, no plans or clear understanding of the rules, but I would play this game willingly. On my own terms.

“What do you want, sweet Pali?” He moved his hands to the lace at the front of my gown. “Tell me everything. I cannot promise I will give myself to you only once, though.”

I trembled at the suggestion in his voice. “I want to take the leap. With you. Always with you.”

“Turn around.” Syndrian motioned for me to spin, and I did as he instructed. He fitted his body behind mine and took hold of my sleeping gown at the hips. He lifted it slowly past my ankles, my knees, pausing as the garment reached my hips. “Should I—”

“Don’t stop,” I assured him. I closed my eyes as the cool room air bathed my skin as Syndrian removed my gown.

He tugged it past my hair, smoothing the lengths against my back once I was naked. I faced the fire, the heat inside me

and the cool of the room playing agonizing games with my desire. I trembled, anxious and excited, uncertain what would happen until I felt Syndrian's lips at the back of my neck.

He kissed and licked my neck, weaving his fingers through my hair and tugging lightly. The exquisite pressure against my scalp and the warm puffs of air against my skin rose a deep, lusty moan to my throat. I lowered my head and pressed my backside against him until I could feel the fabric of his leggings against my bare flesh. His long hair teased my shoulders and back and as he kissed me, the slick space between my thighs throbbed unbearably. I wriggled against him, desperate to feel more of him, all of him.

He spun me as if we were about to dance and lowered me to the bedroll.

"It's not too late," he whispered. "I can still tuck you into bed and sleep here all night." A massive bulge in the front of his leggings drew my eyes along his body. He followed my gaze and laughed. "Perhaps I won't sleep much tonight, but I would tuck you in if you said the word."

"I want this," I begged. "I want you."

Syndrian's eyes sparkled with the light of a thousand stars. I reached a hand to stroke the smooth muscles of his chest, and he groaned. I gave his chest a light push and he settled onto his back. I kneeled beside his body, curiously bold.

Even though my nipples were so hard they ached, I couldn't help smiling as I traced my fingers along the scars and scabs on his forearms.

"Do you know how long I've wanted this?" I whispered. "For years I've wondered after this one, and this one... How did this happen?"

As he told me the tales of each mark on his body, I kissed each healed injury, each irregular bit of skin, more precious to me, perhaps, than even the perfect parts of him. After I kissed his arms and his fingers, I swatted his hands from my breasts.

"This is why you lose," I teased. "You're too impatient to play a long game."

He groaned and the bulge in his leggings twitched. “You cannot apply strategy to this, Pali. You intend to destroy me, don’t you?”

“In the best possible ways,” I giggled. “You know I always play to win.”

Emboldened by his arousal, I lowered my face to his chest and kissed a line from his nipples to his belly. The light dusting of hair there tickled my lips and I scratched my nails along his ribs, my hands and mouth in competition to cover all of his beautiful body at once.

When I hovered a shy hand over the waistband of his leggings, he stopped my fingers with his palm. “Pali,” he moaned.

“Shhh,” I scolded. “I’ve had my clothes removed. You don’t want an unfair advantage, do you?”

His hips bucked as I gently loosened the drawstring on his leggings and tugged the garment away from his body. I shoved them down his thick thighs, generously dusted with golden hair, his knees, his shins, and finally, his bare feet. “Woman,” he hissed, but I was too taken by his beauty to answer.

I reached for his erection, and stroked the hard length in my hand. “You’ll have to teach me the rules,” I whispered. Gone was the fear and uncertainty. My thighs were damp with need, my hairline misted with sweat. “What now?”

He grunted as he pulled me down to lie on top of him. He reached for my face and claimed my lips in a greedy, ravenous kiss. My hair hung between us and my breasts smashed against his bare chest. He opened his legs and I slid one thigh between his. As his tongue explored my mouth, he ran his hands along my backside, tugging me close to him. I wriggled my hips, and he positioned his thigh so that he could move his leg against my core in delicious, agonizing strokes.

I lifted my face from his and gasped as he scooted me farther up his body, so my nipples lined up with his mouth. He sucked the tender flesh, nipping and licking my aching peaks while his thigh worked a beautiful rhythm against my core.

The friction and the pressure, the deep, aching need I felt overtook me. I closed my eyes and heard nothing but our paired breaths, felt nothing but the rough callouses of his hands on my skin. The hairs of his legs, the heat of the fire... It all disappeared to the haze of sensual connection I felt with this man.

“It’s your move, Pali,” he panted. “Give in to what you feel.”

As he gripped my rear end in his hands and held me firmly against him, I rocked my hips and arched my back. My nipple slipped from his mouth with a satisfying pop sound, and he whispered praise and encouragement as I slammed my eyes shut and shuddered along with waves of pleasure that rocked my body against his. I collapsed against his chest, sweating and panting, my hair tangled and my legs weak.

“By the gods...” I croaked.

Syndrian laughed, a deep, rasping sound that echoed through my body. My ear was against his damp skin and I could hear his heart pounding.

“I lied,” I admitted, lifting my face. I kissed him and noticed his excitement hadn’t yet abated. “There is no way we’re doing this just this once.”

He kissed me back and growled against my lips. We snuggled together before the fire, Syndrian’s arousal still unsated. What pleasure he’d given me, simply with the touch of his thigh between mine, I was anxious to learn. Anxious to return. And he was very anxious to finally have something to teach me.

“I may need lots of practice,” I said, lowering my lips to his hardness and giving the tender flesh a soft kiss.

Syndrian closed his eyes and mewled, fisting my hair gently between those beautifully scarred fingers. “Pali,” he sighed, as I tasted him. “I’ll play you all day, every day, my love.”

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

ONE MONTH LATER...

“Lord Lombard.” Drustan held his hand out expectantly.

“Lord, lord, out of my gourd.” Biko rolled his shoulders and sighed. “Still not used to the sound of that. The title...”

“Well, as of right now, the title is no longer yours, as this property is no longer held by the Lombard family.” Drustan collected a bag of coins from Biko’s hand as well as copies of the contracts that had been signed.

Syndrian, Idony, and I were gathered in the great hall of my parents’ manor. All of the staff had gathered to witness the transaction. Once the shire-reeve looked over the parchment and gave his consent for the deal to conclude, Norwin was quick to turn his attention to the new head of the household. “Lady Lesssstalinnnnnn. It’s a pleasure to be of service.”

I stifled a chuckle as he drew out Odile’s name in the same irritating manor as he’d done with mine for so many years. I raced to be the first to hug Odile. “Congratulations!” I exclaimed.

She shook her head, looking stunned. Her sister Gia, the scrivener, witnessed the final signatures and then Drustan departed with little more than a disinterested wave. Neo and Brex stood together, holding hands and grinning. Flynn gave a loud whoop and clapped his hands, before yanking Idony away from Biko to spin in a celebratory dance.

“I...I don’t know what to say,” Odile stammered. “I can hardly believe it.”

“Believe, shire-reeve, yes, please!” Biko belted out a rhyme before rescuing his mother from Flynn. “You deserve this, Odile. The shire deserves this.”

Idony rested a hand against her son’s chest and nodded. “It’s exactly how I’d always imagined this place could be. A real home.”

Rain kissed his sister-in-law on the cheek before he and Gia excused themselves. “We’ll be back,” Gia said, “but the foundlings have likely taken over the manor. Dale no longer has the back to be ridden by children like a pony, so we’d best get home.”

After Gia and Rain left, Neo and Brex stayed behind. Odile dismissed the staff and asked for privacy so the small group of us could conclude our business together.

“And you’re sure this is what you want?” Odile nodded at Biko and Idony. “I mean, I know it’s done, but... I truly cannot believe it.”

What was done was in fact done, but none of it had happened quickly or easily. Once my mother agreed to testify against the Otleiches, my father had been freed, but with the requirement that he stay in the capital. They were not, as they’d hoped, able to flee to Drammen. My father was forced to hand his land and treasury to his first-born while he awaited the trial and settlement of the penalties he’d be forced to repay to the crown. He would not, unlike the Otleiches, spend any time in prison. But he would spend probably the rest of his life working off his debt to the crown. Drustan had assured me that my parents would be very comfortably set up to continue their dark work, only this time, they’d work for the queen—not for one of the crime families that competed with her for revenue.

Biko had made the decision to sell the property to a private individual. He’d consulted with the shire-reeve, who examined his own past decree regarding Odile and the prohibition against her earning anything for her work. Then, Lord Neoruzzi Oderisi purchased the Lombard estate, including the land and its buildings. He’d donated it to his sister-in-law, Odile Lestalin, on the condition that for as long as Odile lived, she would run the property as a hospital. As long as she personally never moved from the estate, she had been granted permission to accept payment from any who could afford to help support the costs of their care but she would also be permitted to treat any and all who sought aid, whether or not they had means.

“It’s all yours now,” I cheered, thrilled and delighted for my friend.

Odile had decided to keep on the entire staff, even Norwin. Since she was unmarried and the foundlings would remain at Oderisi manor with Neo and Brex, she would need a staff to help her manage the hospital. Biko and Idony had agreed to remain on the grounds and resume their employment as crofters.

“And what about you, sis?” Biko looped a heavy arm over my shoulder and pulled me close. “What do you plan to do with your half of Pop’s treasury?”

After paying some fines to the shire-reeve, what amounted to a bribe to Drustan for his role in getting all of this settled, and taxes as a result of the sale of the estate, Biko had indeed come away with a tidy profit after the sale to Neo.

Biko shoved a purse full of silver into my hands. “You’re not exactly a wealthy woman,” he said, “but you’re free.”

I gripped the purse in my hands and looked around the main hall. Once a place of so much pain and loss, of secrecy and lies, this place would now be a place of healing. Of hope.

“You know you can stay, Pali.” Odile moved across the floor and rested a hand on my shoulder. “This will always be your home. You can stay in your room, you can—”

I looked at Syndrian, a heated flush on my cheeks. “I expect my fiancé won’t abide me staying in my childhood room forever.”

Odile nodded. “Yes, but what will you do?”

Syndrian crossed his arms over his thick chest and grinned at me. He approved of my plan, but I was still nervous. Afraid, to be honest, that the good people in this room would discourage me. Now that I had freedom, some means, love and friends in my life, there was only one thing left to tackle.

“I’d like to work for you, Odile,” I said. With only my closest friends and family present, and Norwin and the staff a safe distance away, I lifted my hands and watched the flames in the fireplace, in the candles, and on the wall torches dance.

“I feel there’s a change coming in Tutovl. If it’s not yet happening, I want to be part of it. There are others like me, like Biko, like my parents out there. Others with gifts they have been unable to develop. I’d like to learn more about what I am and what I can do, and help others like me.”

Brex furrowed her brow. “As a healer, Pali? Or a teacher?”

I shrugged. “Maybe both? I don’t know.” I looked to Odile. “Do you think I could study and practice in safety here? Help you in some way?”

Odile worried her lower lip between her teeth before nodding. “There are many, many in this realm who need healing, and that need doesn’t always come after an injury. There is so much good you can do here, Pali. It would be an honor to have you work with me. We will figure it out case by case.”

Syndrian shook his head, his long ponytail striking his back. “This won’t do.”

I left my brother’s hold and crossed the room to the man who would soon—but not soon enough—become my husband. “Why not? What’s wrong?”

Syndrian lowered his head to mine, and touched my forehead with his. “Nothing is wrong, love. I just can’t let you work here until I’ve finished a couple of projects on site here. I spoke to your brother about them, and I think I’ll have help.”

“Help?” I lifted my face to search the depths of his sky-blue eyes.

“If you’re going to spend any amount of time here,” he said, a smile curling his lips, “this hospital will need a game room.”

I laughed and pressed a kiss to his lips. Surrounded by family and friends, I’d have a lot of work ahead of me to heal my relationship with my parents. But staring out at the pieces of my life that represented my past, I was more than ready for the future. With my hand in Syndrian’s and my loved ones close, I was more than ready to make the leap.

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Chat with Callie about all things books and fantasy in her Discord community!

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