



THE RIVER PRINCE

REALMS OF LOVE



SHEENA JOLIE

The River Prince

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BOOK TWO

SHEENA JOLIE



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Dedication

TO JACLYN, WHO WAITED THE LONGEST.

&

ALYSON, YOU SAVED THIS BOOK.

AND ME.

THANK YOU.

Patrons of Realms of Love

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You help keep the lights on and the words flowing. Thank you.

~Sheena Jolie

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Part One

THE KINGDOM OF EISTREA

Chapter One

Meadowtown *Capital of Eistrea*

The blade fell from his grip, the brutal clang of metal on stone ringing across the courtyard as it hit the ground, loud enough to earn some muttered laughs and scathing glances from others sparring nearby.

Elia flushed at the sneering contempt in the eyes of the royal soldiers around him. He gripped his wrist, the sting from the swordmaster's swing still reverberating up his arm, his fingers numb and tingling. Sweat dripped down his temples and neck, causing his eyes to burn as the leather strip across his brow failed to catch the droplets. The midday sun beat down on him, and spots swam in his vision, dehydration and exhaustion making him sway on his feet.

"Never drop your sword, boy," Swordmaster Derrent snarled in disgust. Derrent grabbed Elia by his shirt and forced him to bend down. "Now pick it back up, and stand your ground like a man!"

Elia grabbed the hilt, the leather grip damp from his perspiration, and forced his fingers to lift the heavy weapon. His grip was still loose on the training blade when he was yanked upright and thrown back several steps and he barely managed to stay on his feet. Elia kept the scowl off his face, hiding his frustration and embarrassment as best he could from the swordmaster and the other men watching him. Whenever

Derrent went at him the soldiers stopped to watch, adding to his humiliation.

Uncalled for, unwanted, Elia nevertheless felt the disdain and scorn in the air around him, and a faint hint of enjoyment coming from Derrent. He enjoyed Elia's discomfort and pain. He was a sadist, a trait that made him excel in the Eistrean royal guard.

He pushed back his traitorous thoughts, doing his best not to pay attention to the heightened emotions pummeling his mind. By sheer force of will he beat back the recalcitrant magic he inherited from his late mother, and the suffocating impressions of others' emotions became muffled and distant.

It did not help matters that Elia's older brother, Everett, was sparring on the far side of the courtyard from Elia, ignoring him completely. Clad in only a padded linen tunic and plain linen trousers, rugged leather boots and with a feral gleam in his eyes, Prince Everett was a beast, attacking with aggressive and brutal moves. His brother faced two opponents at once, live steel flashing as the soldiers defended themselves against the eldest son of High King Hadrix.

Everett parried and slashed, cutting one soldier's forearm with a snarl of victory, forcing the man to drop his weapon to the stones, blood pouring freely from the wound. He backed out of range and Everett went after the remaining duelist, overwhelming the soldier in moments and slashing a cut along his ribs, blood arcing through the air like rubies in the sunlight, releasing a cry of pain and dismay that reminded Elia of a bird struck by an arrow, falling to the earth.

The soldiers watching Everett win cast judgmental glances toward Elia, and even with his abilities repressed, he knew they were comparing the two brothers and Elia came up wanting. Even Everett's brutality and insistence on sparring with real swords wasn't enough to overcome the combined opinion of the royal guardsmen on who was the better prince. Most of them liked how vicious Everett was; Derrent's position of authority influenced the type of soldiers who joined the royal guard.

“Stop gawping at Prince Everett and get in position! You’ll never be a match for him if you keep getting distracted,” Derrent reprimanded him loudly, making Everett look over from wiping down his sword, smirking when he finally deigned to notice Elia and Derrent. Thankfully, Everett was far enough away that he sensed nothing from his brother. Elia tried his best to ignore his brother and focused on Derrent.

Face burning, Elia took a ready stance, knowing even as he did that Derrent would get through his meager guard. He was about to experience pain. And Derrent would enjoy it.

It was a daily occurrence now since the spring rains ended a few weeks ago and Elia hit his eighteenth birthday. Every day he would join the soldiers in the courtyard in the center of the barracks complex, and suffer through hours of grueling and torturous practices and forms. Never mind that he could barely lift the massive steel blade the swordmaster insisted he use nor that he lacked the muscle mass to put up any kind of fight in the hand-to-hand ring during weapons-free drills. He dragged himself back to his room at twilight every evening, dirty, sore, oft-times bloody—and every time he swore that he wouldn’t go back, no matter what his father wanted.

Yet each morning he was greeted by a stony-faced guard, and ordered to dress and then was led to the barracks, where it would start all over. His protests fell on uncaring ears, and the blisters and strained muscles were sniffed at when he went to the palace infirmary before he was sent away with a few bandages and admonishments. The king’s disdain and indifference for his youngest child pervaded the palace, and many people working within the royal complex felt brave enough to echo the high king’s sentiments.

The widespread disregard Elia was accustomed to was growing even more onerous, and when Master Derrent smacked the blade from his hand before slapping the flat of his practice sword across the top of Elia’s forearm, leaving his whole arm singing in pain, he knew it was moving past negligence into abuse and sadism.

Derrent’s grin was feral and sharp. He nodded to the dropped blade, eager to attack Elia again.

It was never going to get better.



The walk back to his rooms was hot, sticky, and painful, dust from the sunbaked earth coating his skin. Sweat dried fast under the intense heat of the evening sun, leaving him caked in streaks of dirt, his hands and arms the worst, looking as if he had been playing in mud all day like a child.

The sun was low on the horizon and light cut through the buildings, blinding him every time he made the mistake of lifting his eyes. He tried to stick to the shadows along the high stone walls of the palace and under what few trees marked the route to the private wing of the huge royal complex. The barracks were within the walls that separated the palace from the city, along with the administrative buildings and the Mage College.

Summer was in full bloom, baking the central valley of Eistrea—the flowering jewel of which was Meadowtown. Though so far it had been a hot, dry summer, and the river provided the bulk of water needed to irrigate the fields and orchards around the city and the heartland. The aqueducts were opened completely, pulling cool, clear waters from the Heartline branch of the Adracias River into the city and the supporting farmlands, circling around the main population center before emptying into Lake Isred to the southeast. Thinking about the cold glacier-born waters of the river made him even more deeply aware of the heat of the late afternoon beating down with relentless intensity. The summer solstice hadn't even passed yet and the weather was approaching intolerable.

Elia wiped at the sweat dripping from his brow, no doubt smudging dust in muddy streaks across his face. He peered one last time at the distant Mage College, pushing back the yearning and frustration that the towering stone facades always generated in the pit of his belly.

If only he were there, instead of wasting his life and his skin trying to fit the wrong mold. Elia bit his lip hard enough to bring tears to his eyes, moaning in pain as he rounded the last corner to the entrance that would take him inside.

“Young master?” came a reedy voice from next to the stone archway leading to the stairs inside. Elia raised his eyes to see Wyle, one of the oldest servants in the palace, a man so old he surely creaked when he shuffled around the echoing halls. Bent, stooped, and head covered in a wild mop of white curls, Wyle was a mix of youthful exuberance and liver spots, eyes merrily twinkling from a face heavily wrinkled by time.

“Wyle! Have you come to see if I’m still alive?” Elia called out, waving weakly with his left hand as he painfully took the stairs into the cool recesses within the wall. It was a welcome respite there under the archway, the stairs leading up to the palace dark and nearly invisible past the first few steps.

“I had no doubt of your survival, young master,” Wyle said, voice thin with age but full of gentle humor. “I came to tell you that your royal father has summoned you to attend dinner tonight with the Court.”

Elia rubbed his face with his left hand, the right far too sore to even think about doing anything with it except resting it in an ice bath. To have a day of physical abuse end with an evening of scornful indifference and verbal abuse was all he needed.

“Think I can throw myself down the stairs and avoid going altogether?” Elia grouched, and Wyle patted his shoulder with a commiserating smile. Elia bit back a flinch as Wyle’s thin hand hit a few sore spots. Each touch hurt, in more ways than one, as physical contact increased the likelihood that he would sense another person’s emotions. He made sure his mental walls were as tightly sealed as he could make them, and continued on as if nothing were wrong. Raising whatever mental protection he could against the invasion of another’s emotions was instinctive at this point.

Sensing emotions from Wyle was the least objectionable of experiences, and knowing that Wyle loved him and cared

about him kept Elia going when he was younger, in more ways than one. His own father spurned him. Wyle's devotion, detected through Elia's confounding and often uncontrollable empathy, fueled him when despair threatened to drag him under.

"Young master, surely it can't be that bad? Fine food and wine, dressed in your court best, surrounded by the high and mighty. You've attained your majority now, my prince. Maybe His Majesty has a well-bred lass visiting the court he wishes you to meet."

Elia rolled his eyes, amused despite himself, and Wyle cackled. "It's not lasses I want to meet, old codger. Besides, I'm the youngest. You know I won't be wed before my older siblings. It's just not how things are done."

Elia would much rather meet princes and lords than whatever nobly-born daughter his father's council might dredge up for a political marriage. Not that Wyle would say so in public, at least not outside Elia's rooms.

Elia had had no chance or opportunity to explore his attraction to other men. Being the youngest child of High King Hadrix left Elia isolated. Both his brothers were athletic, wide-shouldered, and tall, and they excelled at the martial skills that eluded Elia. Everett was the best warrior, and Alden was more than adequate, though he preferred drinking long into the night to rising early to practice sword forms in the barracks courtyard.

His brothers attracted women and men like bees to flowers; they had their pick. His oldest sibling, his only sister Aria, was an accomplished statesperson, skilled in diplomacy and languages, and she left all lesser beings stammering in her elegant wake. Suitors came from far and wide to ask for her hand, though none yet had been deemed worthy of the high king's only daughter, and presumptive heir. If she had lovers Elia never heard word of it, and neither did Wyle, who heard most rumors in the palace. Elia might not be favored, but Wyle was the oldest servant still active in the palace, and was held in fond regard by most of the servants. Wyle heard most rumors early on and in better detail, reciting the most salacious tidbits

to Elia over breakfast or dinner when he ate in private in his rooms.

Of the royal children, that left Elia, and sometimes he truly felt left behind. Last out of the nursery, last to be seen or acknowledged by his family and courtiers alike, last to be thought of in matters of state, and he would be last to wed, if he ever got married at all. He had no wish for it, not really, but it would be nice to think about not being so bloody lonely all the time. Maybe his future spouse would be a kind person, someone he wouldn't mind being friends with since love was never the point of a royal marriage.

Yet the more pragmatic, jaded part of him knew he was not destined for a love match. Elia would be sold off to the highest bidder, to elevate someone else's station or as a bargaining chip to cement an alliance with another powerful family. His father cared not if Elia was happy—Elia was a means to an end, and that was it. His only hope was to end up shackled to someone who had little interest in him as a person, and left him alone to carve out some kind of life on his own. Even that was a small hope, weighed down by the conviction that he was not meant for happiness, or even peace.

Elia was only weeks past his eighteenth birthday, and by the laws of their country he was now an adult, so he could take a lover if he wished—but there were no suitors vying for the privilege. And no one came to mind that he wanted to court.

While it was an unspoken truth that his sister Aria must remain untouched for marriageable reasons and could not take a lover until after she'd wed and produced an heir, his brothers were allowed their indiscretions as long as nothing besmirched the royal family's pristine reputation. That meant his brothers had to stay away from unwed maidens and took their leisure from the servants or the few willing widows at Court. The noblewomen attending the welcome feast tonight wouldn't let scandal stop them from trying to catch the eye of one of the royal sons, and Elia was beyond thankful that none had thought to try him.

His father's blatant dislike for him shielded him from any attempts to trap him in a marriage, and his youth allowed him

some leeway in staying out of court machinations. Most courtiers still treated him like a child if their paths ever crossed.

Elia was so much younger than his siblings, with several years between him and his next eldest sibling, his brother Alden. Elia never had the chance to experience Court with his siblings and engage in any flirting or meaningless courting. He actually had no idea how to flirt with someone, and the idea of attempting it left him embarrassed.

And being able to sense strangers' emotions made him wary of other people. If someone was too close, or feeling a particularly strong emotion, or Adracias forbid, actually made physical contact with Elia, he would be subjected to their emotions. No thoughts, thankfully, only their emotions, and usually just the surface emotions or the strongest emotion they were experiencing.

If he were stressed or tired he had trouble shielding himself, and that made hiding his empathy more difficult as well. Explaining away his insights as keen observation would only get him so far in crowded spaces like Court or formal functions. Elia spent his entire life exhausted, ready to cry, mentally drained and quiet, refusing to speak in case he said something too revealing.

Sometimes he knew when someone was lying to him, when a person's greed pushed them to reach for Elia with the erroneous belief that he might be able to grant their most shameful or greedy wish. With greed and anger in particular, Elia struggled to keep himself safe from the other person's emotions since they were the emotions he felt most often from other people.

When Elia had to get out of the palace and away from his family and the court, he went outside to what wilderness remained in the heart of Meadowtown.

He found peace in the gardens and the manicured parks around the palace complex when he went riding with his mare, Rose. Animals were a comforting, soothing presence, unless they were in pain or afraid, and if he was able, he could help

ease their difficulties. He loved dogs, the royal hunting hounds a particular favorite, and he always made time to scratch and pet the mousers that had free rein to hunt in the palace complex. Barn and house cats were a constant and desired animal companion in Eistrea, the tiny predators perfect for managing the rodent populations in a kingdom that made its wealth from farmlands. The dogs were always so happy to see him and get love, and the cats enjoyed his soft touches, warm lap, and patient manner.

Sometimes he even sat in the tiny, overly sculpted gardens in the royal wing of the palace and tempted songbirds down from the trees, feeding them seeds and enjoying the simplicity of their thoughts and emotions.

Animals trusted him, and he appreciated that trust more than he could ever convey with words or actions. Wyle and the animals of Meadowtown kept him going when nothing else did.

Growing up alone in the royal nursery, Elia spent his days being taught by tutors and instructors, when he wasn't running around outside, and to his father's dismay, Elia grew up to be the spitting image of his late mother. The Queen died birthing him, a late pregnancy that took its toll on a woman already suffering under her husband's callous treatment and disdain. Elia took after his mother in form and appearance, and to his regret, in her magic, as well. Where his brothers were big, powerful men, Elia was slim and relatively short, shorter even than his stately sister, while his brothers and father towered over everyone.

The late queen's magic had been a dark secret Hadrix learned only after the birth of their second son, when a slip of the tongue from an exhausted and mentally drained wife and mother condemned her to a changed existence. It was her position as both mother of his heirs and daughter of a wealthy noble family that protected her from the usual fate of the magic-born in Eistrea. Usually, it meant some combination of three horrible fates—enslavement, exile, or death.

For the Queen Consort of Eistrea, she experienced an isolated, painful life, trapped in marriage to a man who

harbored deep prejudices against the magic-born and anyone rumored to come from a family tainted by magic, regardless of connection or relation. She went from pampered wife to an ostracized, scorned woman, denied access to her three children, their minds poisoned against their mother by a father's hatred and prejudices.

What led to Elia being sired when Hadrix had three non-magical children left Elia at a loss sometimes, and his birth was hardly easy or worth it. Queen Malia died from complications at his birth—Wyle told him the truth when he was old enough to understand.

Rumors of her contaminated bloodlines rose in the months before Elia's birth, whispered amongst the court to account for the dramatic shift in Queen Malia's relationship with the high king. For once, the court rumor mill landed upon the truth, and it enraged the high king.

Hadrix beat his mother while she was heavily pregnant with Elia, forcing her into labor a month early.

She died.

Elia surviving his own birth was a miracle, and due entirely to Wyle's devotion to his beloved mistress's orphaned newborn. Wyle found him a wet nurse from a family related to one of the late queen's servants, and tended to him until the palace steward came around and took the late queen's body, surprised to find the baby alive and thriving.

Wyle never told him exactly what happened in the days after his birth and the death of the queen, merely saying that Elia might have been tiny, but he was strong and lively. He grew up under Wyle's guidance and a succession of apathetic nannies and governesses, Wyle acting as a grandfatherly figure in all ways except blood.

His isolation in the nursery made Elia dependent on the few servants assigned to him for companionship and interactions, and all of them but for Wyle maintained an emotional distance. Serving Elia was not seen as a mark of honor, not like it was for the servants assigned to his older siblings and his father.

Years passed in loneliness and solitude until his later teenage years, when younger, male tutors in courtly studies arrived to educate him foreign languages, dancing, art, and court etiquette.

In one horrible case, Elia developed an embarrassing infatuation that led to the swift dismissal of his language tutor. The young man hadn't been all that much older than Elia, but the governess responsible for minding Elia saw his steadily increasing affections for the tutor and ratted him out to his father. Instead of doing so privately, his former governess blurted it out in front of the king and half of his advisors in his study, leading to the revelation sweeping through the palace and capital that the king's youngest son was queer.

While same-sex liaisons were somewhat tolerated in Eistrea, especially in the cities, such dalliances were discouraged if children could not be produced. Children were a necessity that was shared by royals and farmers alike, and it was expected that the High King's children would make advantageous marriages and produce the next generation of heirs. Elia's attraction to men was a potential inconvenience and was merely another black mark against him in his father's eyes.

Remembering the sting of shame and frustration at his father's reprimands and the swift removal of his tutor from the palace almost took Elia's mind off his aching body and the impending torture to be found at formal dinner with the court.

Elia yearned for the days of being overlooked when his siblings had better things to do than resent that he was related to them. These days the only interactions with his siblings ended up with him sporting bruises and a plethora of insults ringing in his ears.

Wyle's soft touch on his elbow broke him free from his worrisome thoughts, and he smiled back at the old man. Wyle was worried for him, but also hopeful. Always hoping for the best.

"Come, Elia. Perhaps tonight shall be a sign of better things to come. The summer solstice festival approaches, and

the ambassador has arrived,” Wyle said, taking Elia’s arm as he carefully walked up the stairs. Wyle was a vibrant personality, but his body was old, and stairs were a particular evil. Elia kept his mental shields up, not wanting to violate Wyle’s privacy.

Elia ignored his own aches, assisting Wyle without a word. The yearly festival was a major celebration, the entire continent participating, across many nations. Eistrea and their neighbor to the west, the Hellebore Empire, shared an ancient past. They were once the single kingdom of Velanta, the name now given to the continent on which they lived, and their customs and religions were still quite similar.

“The ambassador?” It took Elia a moment, then his eyes went wide, and he sucked in a sharp breath. “The emperor’s ambassador has arrived in court?”

“Yes, just an hour ago. It was a spectacle, for certain,” Wyle peered up at him, eyes bright. “An entire squadron of Hellions came with the ambassador, and they made quite a ruckus amongst the court when they appeared before your father in the throne room. Tonight is the banquet to welcome him. That is why you’ve been summoned, I gather.”

“You old snake,” Elia teased, taking the last steps to enter the cold welcome of the palace. “You could have said that right off, you know.”

The stone walls echoed as they walked, the shadows less extreme as his eyes adjusted. Torches hung in even intervals down the long hall, guards interspersed along the walls on either side. The pikemen recognized him and Wyle, bored glances sweeping over the pair before they were dismissed as uninteresting.

Elia made sure his shields were tight to avoid feeling anything from the pikemen as they passed. It was second nature now after years of protecting himself and hiding the burdensome ability from everyone.

“I’m older than dirt, my young master,” Wyle said, gently patting his wrist before letting go of Elia’s arm. “I take my amusement where I can. I’ve instructed the servants to start a

hot bath and lay out your best clothing, and I'll style your hair for you before you go."

"Thank you, Wyle," Elia said, reassured. Surely tonight wouldn't be so bad if the focus would be off him and on the ambassador. His last appearance at Court for dinner left him unable to eat, stomach roiling with cramps, nobles snickering at his discomfort. He spent hours bombarded by unwanted emotional intrusions, and keeping himself under control while trying not to draw attention was difficult.

Only the high king's immediate family was allowed in the private royal wing of the palace, where Elia and his full siblings had their rooms, and he was thankful for that boundary growing up. Once he was in his own rooms, he was reasonably safe.

Elia stopped at the intersection of several hallways, each path a radiant of the compass design that most of the palace was built around. He watched his old friend until Wyle disappeared into one of the offshoot servant's corridors, hidden along all the main hallways behind tapestries and statues.

Wyle was the one servant in the palace he loved like family, and he dreaded the day Wyle passed from this mortal world. It was on Wyle's shoulder he cried when his father cut him down in public for the first time, or when his brothers avoided him during Court appearances, or when his sister left him feeling wholly inadequate. It was Wyle who bandaged his wounds when he was punished, and washed the blood from his clothes before the other servants could see and start gossiping.

Elia wished he was anyone but a prince of Eistrea. An accident of birth, and all he got for it was pain and suffering. He gave up on having dreams when he was younger, though the ache of wanting something better still cropped up. Once upon a time he wished for a loving father and siblings who cared for him, but as the years went by, he gave up on those foolish desires. His siblings made no effort to befriend him, and his father only ever paid him attention when he was being punished for something, or he was a scapegoat for another person the high king couldn't afford to offend.

Elia hadn't seen his father when his training began with Derrent. His training with a sword was an afterthought, something a prince should know and the lack of education in martial skills was likely a sore spot with his father, an oversight noticed by a courtier with the intent to poke at his father's pride. And Derrent was his punishment for embarrassing his royal sire, even indirectly.

Elia put aside as much worry as he could, not wanting to exhaust himself before the welcome banquet that evening. Keeping himself from shattering under the pressure of hundreds of people noticing him and finding him lacking, and holding back the tidal wave of their chaotic emotions, would take everything he had and then some.



Elia peeked around the corner of the doorway, taking the chance to see the summer courtyard before it was full of people.

The courtyard was lit by scattered torches and huge iron braziers that squatted along the base of the outer wall. The braziers lit up the pale white and gold of the stone and wood underside of the upper-level walkways accessible by stairs in the far corners of the rectangular courtyard. Pear trees and vines dotted the second inner wall of the courtyard, a short stone wall that came up to the knees and provided seats and places for trees to grow or iron poles planted to fly the flags and banners of important guests. The Hellebore flag flew from several of them, beneath the Eistrean crest, of course.

The courtyard was open to the cloudless evening sky, which was deepening from a dark, inky purple to black in the west. Stars were beginning to break free of twilight's grip, and the brightest already shimmered overhead.

The day's oppressive heat was gone, the evening breeze cool and sweet, a hint of honey blossoms and jasmine in every inhalation. Long wooden tables covered in dishes made of gold and goblets of the finest crystal shimmered, their contents

filling the air with savory aromas that made his mouth water. The ambassador's arrival was the start of the festival season, and every kingdom across the continent celebrated the summer solstice holiday. Honoring the rivers of Eistrea and the gentle seasons that succored the plentiful croplands and pastures, this year's summer solstice festival also coincided with the anniversary celebrations of the ancient treaty alliance between the Hellebore Empire and the High Kingdom of Eistrea. Both kingdoms worshiped a shared deity, the river god Adracias, and the main river that acted as the central border between Hellebore and Eistrea bore the god's name as well.

That collision of the solstice festival with that of the treaty's anniversary was why the ambassador had been sent to Meadowtown, to the High Court. His arrival heralded the emperor's intent to attend the celebrations at the Holy City for the Festival of Adracias. It was a holiday that was celebrated yearly, but every twenty years was a treaty-year, to celebrate the ancient alliance between two formerly warring kingdoms. It was going to be Elia's first trip to the Holy City of Adracias, and the first treaty-year since his birth.

“Elia!”

A harsh whisper made him jump, startled. He groaned when he saw Alden gesturing at him, anger in every line of his older brother's frame.

Elia moved away from the doorway to the courtyard and stood at a safe distance from Alden, though of his brothers, Alden was the least objectionable. He never went out of his way to hurt Elia, though he never stood up for him, either.

Alden was dressed in a white tunic that fell to his lean hips yet left his arms bare, golden bracelets and bands circling his wrists and upper arms, accentuating his firm muscles and golden skin. His undershirt was cream, his braided trousers dark brown silk and cotton accented with smooth leather panels. The whole ensemble was tied together by dark leather boots and a chain of gold around his waist.

Alden was every inch the prince, the beautiful son, and many courtiers enjoyed pitting Aria and Alden against each

other by declaring one or the other the most beautiful child of the high king. It was easier for the courtiers to irritate both royals when they were younger, and Elia only knew about it because Wyle would hear about it from the servants who attended his siblings.

Rumors and gossip from the servants and not from his own family was how Elia kept track of his siblings and father throughout most of his childhood, and then as he grew older and was incidentally included in family meetings, he tended to be overlooked by his father and sister, and if Hadrix wasn't in a bad mood, Elia made sure to stay still, say nothing, and avoid eye contact until he was able to leave.

Thankfully Everett paid him little attention if their father was present and Elia was not the main focus of their sire's anger, too intent on sucking up to their father and begging for parental approval.

By the time he was out of the nursery, both Alden and Aria were made of sterner stuff and carved out their own circle of defenders and confidants in court, and were well equipped to handle themselves in the merciless pit of vipers that was the High Court.

Everett really never had that much trouble in court, as he was the firstborn son, and in the early years before Elia was born and Alden was still in the nursery, most people in court thought Everett would be the presumptive heir. Yet Aria was the one deepest in their father's confidence and she was included in most council meetings as a participant, whereas Everett spent most of his time pursuing athletic excursions with the royal guards or hunting, gaming, and dueling. Everett enjoyed the clout that came from being the firstborn son, but wanted nothing to do with actually ruling.

Alden sighed loudly, crossing his arms and all but announcing how annoyed he was that he was stuck waiting with his little brother, ignoring Elia for the most part aside from a few judgmental sideways glances. Elia smoothed his hands down the front of his dark blue tunic, feeling inadequate but glad he was covered so his meager musculature wasn't on display.

Alden's dark blond hair was pulled back in a tail, letting Elia get a clear view of his older brother's annoyed green eyes. Alden was handsome, and he knew it, too, though at this moment his beauty was overshadowed by impatience, and he glared back down the hallway he'd come from, clearly impatient with the rest of their family. He finally strode over to the doorway and looked about, rolling his eyes and shaking his head at whatever he saw.

Alden came back quickly and then grabbed Elia's arm, towing him to the north end of the courtyard. Elia, used to Alden's disinclination to talk to him and instead move him around like a doll, made not a squeak in protest and matched his brother's pace.

The northern archway was the oldest in the courtyard and had been left untouched by renovations due to the extensive ornate carvings, wrought-iron framing, and stone statuary and reliefs around it. The door once led directly to the royal family's quarters a few generations back, before extensive renovations were undertaken in their grandfather's youth. It was usually kept barricaded with iron gates, locked and shut, but it was lit up brightly that night, meaning that their father wanted to enter through the antiquated archway for a more grandiose effect.

Elia stifled a sigh, already dreading his father's scorn, Everett's teasing, and Aria's disdain. Alden was always impatient, but sometimes his older brother saw him as more than just an annoyance.

Aria leaned out the doorway at the north end of the courtyard as they approached, frowning when she saw Alden dragging Elia behind him. Her beautiful face was as flawless as polished marble, her golden hair piled high atop her head. Pink-painted lips and a white and golden gown completed her look, ears and neck unadorned. She needed no jewels to enhance her countenance—she was perfection.

They made it through the archway into the vestibule and Elia tugged his arm free, dodging behind a few servants tending to Everett's cape, adjusting the fall down his back. Everett was a brawnier version of Alden, hair the same shade

of wheat gold, skin sun-kissed and smooth. His brothers were handsome, and the white and gold of Everett's outfit was subtler, but managed to highlight his muscular frame and his pugnacious attitude.

Everett enjoyed martial pursuits to the degree it was his core personality. He bragged that one day he might be called to join the ranks of swordmaster, but Elia secretly believed that Everett would have been granted the rank already if it were meant to be. Only a triumvirate of other swordmasters who accepted the potential's petition could elevate a warrior to their distinguished ranks. It required unanimous approval through a mysterious process known only to those among their ranks. No king or emperor could convey that honor, much to Everett's displeasure. He took his bitterness out on others, and it briefly grew worse a couple years ago when news spread from the east across the Straits of Dylan that the youngest son of the Pyrderi king was made a swordmaster, and he was even younger than Everett.

"Where was the whelp?" Everett asked Alden as he tugged at his cape, finally shooing away the servants fussing over him.

"Dragging his heels on the other side of the courtyard," Alden replied, leaning against the stone wall, idly perusing the plump backside of a retreating servant.

Aria smacked Alden's arm, making him pout, but he stopped staring. Elia smiled, ducking his head to hide his face, and remained quiet. One redeeming quality to Aria was that she made certain the servants of the palace didn't suffer any unwanted advances from her brothers. Aria had her eyes everywhere, and she kept Alden and Everett in line. That never stopped the princes from finding willing bed partners, as many vied for their attentions, but there were no abused servants while Aria was chatelaine, and she refused to allow any more royal bastards to be born, and therefore made sure all the servants had access to moon tea, which somehow prevented pregnancy. Aria had plenty of faults, but Elia could not harden himself against his eldest sibling entirely when she

showed those random moments of compassion. They were few, but enough to recall.

Only Elia seemed to get the sharper treatment.

“Did no one tell his nanny he was supposed to wear the outfit I designed for him?” Aria complained, her tone sharp with annoyance. She eyed Elia’s dark blue tunic and black silk trousers with disdain. “He looks washed out and sickly.”

“I don’t have a nanny anymore, Aria,” Elia managed to reply, glad he was out of reach of Everett when his brother glared at him for speaking up. “No one told me I was supposed to wear something in particular, and there wasn’t any clothing waiting for me in my rooms.”

Aria ignored him, waving a hand dismissively, already forgetting about him and his purported failure.

“If you think he looks washed out now, imagine him in gold?” Everett snickered, Alden snorting in agreement. Elia bit his lip and stayed in the corner. His siblings frequently insulted his pallid complexion, all thanks to their father’s own hatred of his deceased wife.

All three of his elder siblings took after their father in form and coloring, and Elia was always the odd one out, taking after their late mother instead. Many people, upon seeing him for the first time after meeting the rest of his family, commented that he must be a changeling or the result of an adulterous liaison between his mother and an unknown courtier.

Boots rang out on the stone floor, and Elia stood up straight, his siblings following suit as their father, High King Hadrix, entered the vestibule surrounded by his honor guard. Hadrix was an overwhelming physical presence, emanating an almost palpable aura of vitality and strength. The king wore his sword on his hip and a thin gold circlet held back long, wheat-gold hair. No sign of Hadrix’s age showed on his face, aside from a few thin lines next to his eyes. Laugh lines in other men, but Elia peevishly believed they were from glowering at defenseless mortals. Dressed in a long white tunic and lush, cream leather trousers, Hadrix dripped with golden chains and a massive diamond glittered from a

necklace, surrounded by woven gold and silver filigree designed to look like heads of wheat and ribbons of water. Crops and the river—the core of Eistrea, and the symbol of their royal house.

“Has the ambassador arrived yet?” Hadrix asked, and Aria stepped forward, hands clasped together at her waist, the picture of competence and decorum.

“No, Father, but the heralds have been instructed on when to announce him.”

“Good,” Hadrix replied, sweeping his gaze over his children. Everett and Alden got approving nods and Aria a brief smile; Elia didn’t even attempt to make eye contact. He knew better. He kept his mental shields tight but even repressing his wayward ability, he could *feel* the seething disdain from his parent. “Did no one tell the boy to dress appropriately?”

“Rebellion of youth, Father,” Everett said, glaring at Elia. “Shall we send him back to the nursery to change?”

Elia’s face burned, and he swallowed hard. No one had brought him anything new to wear, nor told him Aria designed him specific clothing for the evening. Elia didn’t even know he was expected to be present tonight until a few hours ago. Wyle would never let him make such a mistake, which meant Aria or one of her servants forgot to pass along both the outfit and the instructions to wear it. He was never included in these things except as an afterthought—why would he make things harder on himself by not following instructions?

Elia tamped down on his ability as best he could, a small headache brewing between his temples as a result of trying not to feel the darker emotions from his father and siblings. They were vocal about their disappointment in him—he hated feeling it, too. A cruel twist of fate gave him an ability that exposed him to the true depths of their censure and dislike.

“No time,” their father answered, as the herald out in the courtyard called out the names of attending courtiers and invited guests. “He’s still a child, no one should pay him any mind.”

That comment didn't sting as much as it would have usually—people treating him like a child meant they largely left him alone or ignored him at these events. Being ignored was easier to handle than having people pay him too much attention, straining his ability to hold off their emotions and keep his mind to himself.

The lesser-ranked nobles and a few wealthy commoners were escorted in first. As royals, Elia's family went last, his father seated after everyone else found their places among the tables in the courtyard.

Elia snuck closer to the archway, peering out into the courtyard. Courtiers in rainbow-hued silk dresses and well-cut tunics mingled about, chatting and bowing. Many of the faces in the growing crowd were nameless to him, only a few random members of his father's council were recognizable. The two heralds at the southern entrance took turns calling out the names of those waiting to be introduced, reaching now into the higher ranks of the nobles of the Court and the upper levels of the military. The ambassador and his entourage would be announced just before the royal family.

"Elia, stop gawking." Aria hissed at him, coming up behind him and shooing him from the side of the archway back toward the center of the vestibule. "As the youngest, you'll go out first."

"Wait, what? We won't be going out together?" Elia asked, eyes wide at the thought of entering under the judgmental stares of the entire Court and the ambassador.

"Chin up and no tripping," Everett murmured, and it would have been encouraging if Alden didn't start laughing, a few of the guards joining in. His father said nothing, obviously not paying attention to any of them, his gaze distant and preoccupied.

"But..." Elia couldn't hear the heralds calling out the ambassador's name past the roaring of his pulse in his ears. A group of men in dark clothing, surrounded by a half dozen armed honor guards, appeared across the long space, and Elia swallowed, nervous.

The ambassador was to be seated up near the front of the room where the high king would sit, with Elia and his siblings in descending order of age on either side of the table. Aria on the right-hand side of the king, the ambassador opposite, Everett next to the ambassador, Alden to Aria, and ... Elia sighed, realizing he would be seated next to Everett. He was in for a horrid evening.

He lost track of time, too caught up in worry to notice that everyone was waiting.

“Go! Don’t embarrass us!” Aria hissed at him, a hard hand in the center of his back making him stumble out into full view of the whole courtyard.

He heard a few snippets of laughter, face burning, and kept his head down, black hair falling over his eyes. Elia tugged down the hem of his tunic before looking up the tiniest amount to find his way to his seat without tripping.

Everyone’s eyes were on him, whispers and snickering rising to his ears as dozens of people stared at him, picking at his mental shields with their thoughts and emotions. A sensation of being hunted engulfed him, and Elia scurried toward his seat, shoulders up around his ears, hair falling over his eyes, hiding the frustrated tears that gathered in his eyes.

Chapter Two

Merrick watched the young Eistrean prince awkwardly make his way across the stone courtyard. He maintained his position along the wall, the soothing, fragrant scent of ripe pears not enough to distract him from his watchful pose. The ambiance was relaxing for such a formal event, and that made him even more determined to be on guard.

Prince Elia was slight, with thick, blue-black hair that hung chin-length around his face, hiding his eyes. He was a head shorter than the golden prince who followed a moment after, the heralds announcing him with more fanfare than the youngest prince.

Prince Alden moved as if he owned the palace and all who resided within—and he might one day, as from what Merrick understood in briefings on Eistrean politics, King Hadrix had yet to formally declare an heir.

Of the four children, the second-born child and eldest son, Everett, was the likely candidate to succeed the high king. Though, according to rumors picked up by the Hellebore spy network, the eldest of the four children, the sole princess, was the one with the most authority. Princess Aria ran the royal household and the palace, and there were whispers of the daughter being the most qualified in statecraft and diplomacy of the four.

In the years since Princess Aria gained her majority, her influence had grown, to the point that she often acted as a bridge between her father and the rest of the royal government,

and it was an open secret that she had the backing of a sizeable number of Eistrean nobles, influential and wealthy merchants and tradespeople, and scholars and landed gentry. And according to some reports, a fair number of the common populace was willing to support her if she was named heir.

Observing the rest of the royals take their seats with pride and confidence and the murmured approval of the Court, it was blatant that Prince Elia was most certainly not in consideration for the throne.

The young man was no warrior, despite reports saying he spent every morning training with the palace soldiers. He had more of a sunburn across his nose and cheeks than a tan, and he moved stiffly, as if sore. Reminded all too keenly of the young men who joined the infantry of the Hellebore army, Merrick was certain the young prince was not at all proficient in swordsmanship or hand-to-hand. He would need to speak to Foryne about some of the conclusions drawn by their people hidden in the palace and capital city.

High King Hadrix swept in, the air all but crackling with aggressive majesty, as if every move he made was essential to his sovereignty. When he took his seat, all those present sat as well, and servants flocked to the tables delivering wine and water pitchers according to rank. The higher-ranking guests were served first, from the royals on down to the wealthy commoners and honored military members.

The youngest prince sat low in his seat, as if trying to hide. Merrick frowned, eyes searching the assorted nobles nearest the lad, but none of them made even a token effort to engage the prince in conversation. Even the servants came to him last, filling his goblet with the dregs of their pitchers. It was odd to see a prince treated thus—he would expect an unrecognized bastard to be treated this way, but not a full-blooded, legitimate prince. And from what he understood from the family tree in their agents' report, there were plenty of bastards.

King Hadrix had sired a handful of bastards in all age ranges, and they were considered 'cousins' in the Eistrean royal family. He could see several of them now, golden heads

and chiseled features easy enough to pick out of the seated guests. The royal bastards were served with expediency and respect, which was more than Prince Elia was receiving. The high king acknowledged the bastards as his offspring but failed to legitimize them, likely not wanting to provoke further tensions or outright conflict for the throne, one of the few decisions made by the high king that made any sort of logical sense. No one wanted a civil war led by a fractured family.

The evening wore on, and Merrick stood guard alongside the Helleborian guards, the Hellions, scattered about the courtyard, all of them dressed as Merrick was in the crest and colors of the Imperial house. He was able to see Foryne, the Helleborian ambassador, Prince Everett, and young Prince Elia, since they faced him across the table. He watched, constantly aware of the foot traffic around Foryne. The odds of an assassination attempt were low, as the Hellebore Empire and Eistrea had a long history of peaceful relations, but being lax provided an opening he didn't want violence sneaking through.

Princess Aria and High King Hadrix monopolized the ambassador's dinner conversation, the princess charming to a fault and drawing approving and sometimes covetous glances from those seated in the courtyard. Merrick didn't pay much attention to her words, instead focusing on her tone and the way she moved. He recognized a politician's skill for performance in every choice she made in conversation and in every movement.

Prince Alden outright ignored his family and the ambassador, aside from a polite greeting when he'd first sat down. Prince Alden spent a great deal of time looking around and flirting with numerous courtiers and people Merrick pegged as wealthy merchants and guild members.

Prince Everett was making serious headway in getting drunk, blatantly bored with the entire welcome feast. He appeared to have zero interest in talking to the Hellebore ambassador about anything. He did ask about hunting in Hellebore and promptly lost any ambition in talking to the

diplomat when Foryne admitted to having no hunting experience or desire to engage in the activity.

Prince Everett was on his third glass of wine when he belched and interrupted an earnest discussion between the ambassador and Princess Aria.

“Yer Lordship, you’ve brought the Hellions with you, I see,” Prince Everett set his glass down with excessive care, as if afraid he might snap the fragile stem, and motioned for a servant to come refill it.

“Yes, the Hellions are a magnanimous gift from His Grace. They are usually serving as the imperial family’s personal guards, and he’s extended me their services on this momentous occasion. Captain Talen is an accomplished soldier and one of the few swordmasters we are lucky enough to have in Vastok. I’m deeply grateful for the honor of their company.”

“A swordmaster, you say? Which one?” Everett attempted to spin around in his seat, not quite drunk but tipsy enough that he was in danger of overextending himself and spilling from his seat. He squinted at Merrick, who stared back with a blank, impassive expression, not letting any of his feelings show on his face. Everett lost interest and moved on, squinting as he tried to pinpoint which Hellion was the swordmaster despite Foryne mentioning it was their captain. Talen bore the insignia of his position on his shoulder, a common method of showing rank even in Eistrea.

“The swordmaster is Captain Talen,” Foryne spoke plainly and a bit loudly, like he was trying to speak to a child spun up on sugary sweets and in danger of throwing a tantrum. “I can introduce you to him later, if you like.”

“Everett, brother,” Princess Aria spoke, sweet and yet pointed enough that Everett stopped twisting about in his seat and settled down. “The ambassador will introduce you to Captain Talen later. Do drink some water. And I believe your favorite dessert is available tonight.”

Aria motioned to a nearby servant who darted in and placed a water goblet in front of the tipsy prince, and then a plate of sweets. The wine glass disappeared just as fast, and

Everett frowned down at the plate of desserts in front of him, all but pouting like a toddler. The efficiency of the servants spoke to frequent practice, suggesting the princess likely had to curb her brother's drinking regularly. Prince Everett gave up attempting to figure out which Hellion was the captain, and moved his attention to the sweets piled on the plate in front of him.

Merrick wanted to laugh but held it back, a heroic feat on his part, and Talen arched a brow at him from across the courtyard. The Hellion Captain knew all his Hellions quite well, likely reading the urge to laugh on Merrick's face, so he tried schooling his features into a bored, implacable mask.

Captain Talen began his rotation around the rectangular space, keeping himself unobtrusive and out of the way of servers and courtiers. There were six Hellions around the courtyard, with the Eistrean Royal Guard posted at each archway and above on several balconies overlooking the tables below. Merrick didn't like having soldiers that weren't his in such a strategic position, but from what he could tell, none of them were armed with distance weapons, merely swords, so they were most likely there for the intimidation factor.

Captain Talen no doubt saw and heard the childish outburst from Prince Everett, but nothing of his thoughts or feelings were betrayed on his face or in his eyes, his emotional control as impeccable as his sword forms. Talen was indeed a swordmaster, and that was only part of the reason he was promoted to captain of the Hellions.

Foryne made no comment about the embarrassing treatment of the drunkard prince and went back to discussing the state of agriculture in Eistrea's northern fields.

Prince Everett wasn't as steady a drinker as his father or Prince Alden, both of whom were indulging in their fifth glasses of wine and were quite steady in their manners and speech. From what their spy briefings mentioned prior to their arrival in Meadowtown, Prince Alden and High King Hadrix had a fondness for wine and for acquiring new bed partners on a nightly basis.

And from what he was able to observe, Prince Elia was nursing his first glass of wine, hardly imbibing enough to warm the belly. He picked at his food, eating tiny bites and keeping his head down, leaning as far as he could away from Prince Everett without toppling from his seat. That spoke volumes about the relationship between the two brothers, and Merrick wondered what caused the division between the siblings. He noticed too that Prince Alden, who was seated across from Prince Elia, made no effort to speak to his youngest sibling, ignoring him completely.

No one else at the table spoke to Prince Elia, or even looked in his direction. It was like he wasn't even there, a specter assigned a seat and treated like part of the scenery instead of the youngest legitimate child of the high king.

The entire family dynamic was illuminating and informative, and reinforced his decision to meet the Eistrea royals in their home territory, where their true colors would shine through relaxed courtly manners.

Merrick's decision to come along on this diplomatic mission was made for both personal and political reasons, and thankfully those reasons dovetailed well enough that he was not at odds with himself as he played the role he was assigned. There were enough Hellions to spare to cover the ambassador and the emperor, and Merrick was able to attend to his covert mission without worrying about compromising anyone's safety as he put his full attention on learning about the Eistrea royals and who they were as people and not just rulers.

As the evening waned and the drinks flowed, the volume in the courtyard rose enough that Merrick struggled to hear the conversations between the royals and the ambassador over the din, until a ruckus near the end of the nearest table caught his attention.

A towheaded young man was tugging on the arm of a serving girl, despite her efforts to pull away. His fellows were chortling and calling out encouragement as the blond man yanked her off her feet and onto his lap. She nearly dropped her pitcher of wine leaning away from his attempts to kiss her neck. Merrick dropped his hand to his sword pommel, wishing

he dared interfere, but it would create serious difficulties. He quickly scanned the area, but not a single Eistrean guard was even paying attention to the problem.

“Dammit,” he murmured under his breath, ready to commit a diplomatic incident, but movement out of the corner of his eye made him pause.

Prince Elia was surreptitiously leaning forward with an intent look upon his face, and he was watching the same ruckus Merrick was and he thought the prince was about to get up and try to stop the abuse, and he had a feeling that would not go over well with the royal bastard. Merrick dreaded the fallout but refused to allow Elia to come to harm for trying to help, or the serving girl, but a sharp yelp and a few startled gasps made him look back.

The blond bastard was rubbing the back of his head, and the serving girl took her chance and ran. The foul young man spun in his seat, but there was no one within ten paces of him, and all the servants were too busy carrying platters and pitchers with both hands to have been the one to smack the bastard on the back of the head. His seatmates whispered amongst themselves, eyeing their rude fellow, and the royal bastard was red in the face and doing his best not to draw more attention his way, one hand still rubbing the back of his head with a bemused expression.

Merrick turned his gaze back to Prince Elia, who sat back in his seat, a small smile on his lips. He ducked his head and fiddled with his fork when the king frowned in his direction, eyeing his youngest child with suspicion. Merrick glanced again at the bastard, then back to Elia.

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning when his gaze met the young prince's. Elia stared back at him from under his lashes, mischievous and yet innocent, cheeks flushed slightly, and lips wet from the tongue nervously licking over them. He was a beautiful young man, and Merrick was enchanted. There was a glimmer, a sheen across the crystalline-blue depths of his eyes, and it took Merrick a moment to see past the man's beauty and to recognize the latent power stirring in the prince.

Eyes as bright as a summer sky, with a hint of dark, moody clouds born of magic that rose and fell in gusts before a storm.

Merrick relaxed, and subtly tried to shake the tension out of his arms and shoulders, careful not to draw attention to himself, dropping his hand from his sword. His attention riveted, Merrick's nerves vibrated with the exultation of discovery.

Prince Elia was magic-born.

And that meant myriad things, most urgent of all that the youngest prince was in a great deal of danger.



The tall, dark-haired guard with the fierce features under the pear tree was watching him again. Really, it was more accurate to say he'd never stopped watching Elia from the moment he sat down, and then stared even more so after Elia interceded with his cousin Damen and the servant.

His 'cousins', the royal bastards and distant relations, were the most unpleasant of the whole court, if he didn't count his own siblings and remaining parent. His father's bastards were treated better than Elia, despite them being illegitimate and out of the line of succession. He tried a few times as a child to make overtures to his half-siblings, but they took their cues from the true-born children and avoided him, ignored him, and even dared a few times to gang up on him when caught alone, leaving him bruised and bloody. Hadrix kept his bastards at Meadowtown, allowing them to grow up in court with their relations if their mothers were wealthy or nobly-born, as though afraid to let any of his bloodlines escape his control. Any common-born bastards were given apprenticeships and guild training in whatever field they wished, and a decent education. Hadrix gave more consideration to his by-blows than his youngest true-born son, and his *cousins* delighted in reminding him of that fact quite often.

He stopped trying to make friends when he was quite young, and mentally washed his hands of his *cousins* entirely.

Shaking himself out of the memories, Elia watched the Hellion soldier. Occasionally he would peruse the courtyard with a gimlet stare, his hazel eyes easy to discern, but eventually his gaze would return to Elia, staring, searching. The regard from the handsome foreign soldier made his heart jump and his palms sweat, and Elia felt drawn to the man in a way he was nervous to examine. He spent so much of his time isolated in his rooms with only Wyle for company or surrounded by soldiers who all but spat at him as he struggled to meet his father's expectations, and he never got to explore what it meant that he found other men attractive. All of the men in his life were either family or horrible people.

The Hellion was very, very attractive, and just thinking about it increased Elia's heart rate.

Elia wished he were close enough to the Hellion to parse out his emotions, but while he could do it from this far, he dared not relax his mental grip on his shields in the midst of the increasingly drunk court. He had no desire to sense the catty, capricious, and sometimes horny courtiers as they made one bad decision after another with the never-ending flow of wine. High King Hadrix's court was composed mainly of drunken sycophants and bitter, greedy politicians, plus bored courtiers looking for entertainment. With both tongues and inhibitions loosened, eventually their words would match their emotions and Elia wanted nothing to do with any of it.

He felt the curious gaze of the Hellion again, and failed to resist looking up through his long, black bangs to meet the gaze of the handsome warrior.

He was built much like Elia's fantasies of what a warrior ought to look like, with broad shoulders, a lean waist, and almost harsh features, as tall as the high king but without that aggressive aura that followed his father everywhere he went.

The Hellion had a short beard, neatly trimmed with sharp lines on the edges, evidence of a quality razor blade. His long, dark brown hair was tied back at the nape of his neck with a leather thong. His hair was far longer than Elia was accustomed to seeing on a man. Elia wondered if it was as soft to the touch as it looked, silken and healthy, well-tended, a

sight Elia was unaccustomed to seeing in Eistrean soldiers, who tended to keep their hair short and greasy from lack of attention.

He wore chainmail as if born in it, his over-tunic dark blue and green, lined with silver thread, the mountain and waterfall symbol of the Hellebore Empire emblazoned across his chest. He stood straight and tall, as if unaware he was naught but a bodyguard for a visiting diplomat, and there was something about him that made it hard for Elia to look away.

Intense hazel eyes latched onto his again, and Elia's cheeks burned with a fierce blush that took him by surprise.

A well-groomed, highly-skilled warrior, member of an elite fighting force, was watching Elia like he was the most important person in the whole room, and Elia wished he didn't blush so readily, surely giving away his own feelings about the intense regard.

A sharp jab from a hard elbow made him wince and hunch over. Everett glared down at him, disapproval and anger in his brother's expression. Elia sucked in a quick breath and held it as Everett leaned over him. "Don't think what you just did went unnoticed, whelp," Everett hissed in his ear. His insides churned and he felt sweat bead down his spine. Everett must have seen him use magic to stop Damen, their bastard half-brother, from harassing the serving girl. "Father saw it, too. Keep your ungodly magic to yourself." Another jab to his ribs sent the message bone deep.

He was in trouble.



The door shut, hopefully ensuring some measure of privacy in the diplomatic suite. Merrick and Talen had already searched the walls and parts of the ceiling they could reach, but found no signs of spy holes or hidden nooks and crannies. Standard practice for the Hellions in the course of their duties, and this mission was exceedingly delicate, so the more caution, the better.

There was no hint of magic that Merrick could sense, whether spell or artifacts, and the rest of the Hellions who were magic-born had checked as well upon their arrival and found nothing. It was unlikely the Eistreans had access to spying magics that were undetectable, though it never hurt to be paranoid about spies.

Foryne was stripping his outer robes, removing the sigils of office and revealing a simple white cotton shirt underneath, his breeches and bare feet a disarming sight from the normally imposing figure of the Helleborian ambassador. A handsome man in his fifties, Foryne was in excellent shape for a diplomat, strong of frame and aside from the gray hair at his temples, physically untouched by his years of service to the imperial throne. Handsome, courteous, and quick-witted, Foryne was an excellent choice for an ambassador since Merrick was a child. He was appointed by the previous emperor and maintained the trust and respect of the current emperor, Heremis.

“We should be clear,” Talen said as he came back into the main room of the suite, shrugging out of his black cape and unhooking his sword from his belt. He sat heavily on one of the chaises, and Merrick leaned against the wall, arms crossed, frowning as he thought about what had happened at dinner.

“What are your impressions?” Foryne asked, reaching for a goblet of wine on the small gold and glass table covered in delectable treats laid out by the servants in the main room of the guest suite. Their individual rooms were attached, but too small to hold a discussion for all three of them.

“The princes are the most spoiled men I’ve ever seen,” Talen said with a groan, lifting his boots to take them off one by one. Merrick chuckled at the look of distaste on Foryne’s face as he watched Talen, finding it hilarious given the man’s own bare feet. “The constant demands they made during the feast for food and wine were ridiculous. And not once did they talk to anyone who wasn’t a relative or an honored guest. The princess acts sweet and charming, but she has an ironclad hold on her brothers. I didn’t get much of an impression on the youngest prince, though. Lad looks like a changeling.”

“I heard he takes after the late queen, Malia,” Foryne murmured as he sipped his wine, gray eyes distant as he presumably recalled facts from the Hellion spy network, along with memories of previous visits to the Eistrean court in the last twenty years. Prince Elia attained his majority a few months prior, but was kept from official diplomatic events prior to his birthday. That meant Foryne wouldn’t have met the young man on his previous trips to the High King’s court. “With looks like his, he could almost be from Hellebore.”

“The current Eistrean monarchy is very, very distantly related to the Imperial family of Hellebore through a three-hundred-year-old treaty marriage. The dark-haired people in the High King’s family can all be traced back to Her Imperial Highness, Princess Ariadne of Hellebore, who was the potential spouse offered that year for the solstice festivities. Queen Malia and King Hadrix were in fact distant cousins, though not so unusual for Eistrean royalty. Old ideas about keeping the bloodline from diluting too much,” Merrick said as he pushed off the wall, pacing a short distance away before stopping, recalling his history lessons as a child. “The late Queen Malia was a many times removed cousin to the Imperial family, through Princess Ariadne. Many generations removed, but the looks bred true. More recently in history her great-grandmother married High King Croas’s second son, and Malia then married into the main line of the family, those in immediate consideration for the throne, when she wed Hadrix.”

Talen slowly shook his head, amusement twinkling in his eyes. “Recently? How recent was that?” Talen was teasing, as most nobles and commoners wouldn’t know such minute details about the royal families. Merrick wasn’t either of those, and his formal education had been full of such details growing up.

Merrick tossed a grape at Talen, who caught it with a flick of his wrist. “About eighty years ago, give or take a few years.”

Prince Elia’s beautiful face popped up in his mind’s eye again, arresting in its innocence and the mysterious power that

stirred in the depths of his eyes. The young man interested him, and the desire to assuage the misery he also saw in those crystal blue eyes was sinking its claws deep in Merrick with every thought he gave the prince. “Prince Elia is magic-born.”

The others gaped at him for a moment before Foryne leaned forward, earnest and excited. “Are you certain? Eistreans have no use for magic unless the mages are bound to the crown, and the High King is notoriously bigoted, despite coveting weather mages. The dismal lack of healers in this country is a disturbing example of their bigotry.”

“I saw his eyes after an incident during dinner. I’ve no doubt about it.” Merrick replied, one hand falling to grip the pommel of the sword he still wore. “It explains the way he’s treated, too. Old tales reached the late emperor that Hadrix beat his wife into an early labor while she carried the youngest, resulting in her death. There were additional rumors that she was magic-born herself, and Hadrix reacted badly to an incident involving the Queen. Her distant kinship to the Imperial family makes it more than likely she carried magic and passed it to her youngest.”

“We need to be careful then,” Talen said, and Merrick nodded. “Any familiarity with magic or acceptance of it will make the Eistreans even more wary of us than they currently are, and if the prince uses more magic, we need to temper our reactions. I’ll also caution that Cormand and Sitka should keep their magic hidden until we get back to the Holy City. I don’t want the Eistreans suspecting we have magic-born among our party.”

“Do that soon—I don’t want them getting in trouble with the palace or the locals,” Merrick advised, and Talen drank down his wine and tugged his boots back on before standing. He clapped a hand on Merrick’s shoulder as he passed and left the room. Foryne huffed, and Merrick quirked a brow at his old friend.

“What?”

“You might want to recall that Talen is supposed to be the ranking officer on this mission,” Foryne’s lips twisted in a

teasing smile, and Merrick grimaced ruefully in acknowledgment. “It wouldn’t do to give onlookers the wrong impression.”

“Your wisdom is impeccable, as always,” Merrick teased. He finally took a seat, removing his sword and leaning it on the chaise’s armrest. “I’ll be sure to mind myself in public.”

“See that you do. I’d like to get back to the Holy City in one piece.”

“Did you manage to talk to Hadrix about when they’ll be leaving for the city?” Merrick snagged a bunch of grapes from a platter, the soft flesh sweet and succulent.

“Not yet, but tomorrow we have a meeting arranged to discuss the details. I’ve told him the Imperial delegation is due to appear in the city a few days before the ceremonies begin. I avoided giving him a specific date and told him about Emperor Heremis’s hermitage to prepare for the solstice, so there won’t be any direct communication with him until everyone is at the city for the festival.”

“Good,” Merrick leaned back in his seat. “Offer to travel back with him. I need more time observing the royals before we return.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Should be easy enough, though—Hadrix has made overtures regarding the emperor’s current widower status. I’m sure he’ll continue to showcase Princess Aria in the best light while we’re here.”

Merrick grimaced with distaste, Foryne nodding his agreement. “She didn’t strike me as the most likable of people. Having goals is admirable, and there is nothing wrong with ambition. Pretending she’s not interested in her heart’s desire while plotting to achieve it is the objectionable part.”

“Aside from a couple people I can name,” Foryne chuckled, “most royals are generally unlikeable.”

Merrick tossed a grape at Foryne, who caught it with a slight fumble and a teasing pout before eating it.

Silence reigned while they ate, Merrick enjoying the variety of fresh fruits. Hellebore had orchards and vineyards,

but the higher elevations limited the varieties grown in their country. Eistrea was lower in elevation, mostly plains and vast croplands, with room for plenty of livestock and most towns and villages served as hubs for crop markets and trading posts.

Hellebore's economy was oriented around timber, mining, and crafts, like carpentry, jewel-making, and masonry, with little in the way of dedicated croplands. The two nations were separated by the main branch of the Adracias River that ran north to south for thousands of miles. Once a nation united, civil war had sundered the ancient land of Velanta, but that was over a thousand years past and gone. These days, the two countries traded readily, with Eistrea dependent on Hellebore for lumber, stone, and precious gems and metals. Hellebore looked to Eistrea for grains, foodstuffs, and a good portion of their livestock. Codependent a great deal, neither nation could survive to their current standards of living without the other.

Talen returned, the door shutting solidly at his back before he spoke. "I've reminded the others to watch their magic use. Thankfully they'd taken our warnings seriously before we crossed the border regarding magic—neither of them are taking any chances."

"Thank you, Talen," Merrick replied. All the Hellions were smart, but it never hurt to be cautious. "Considering the prejudice here I am wondering why the High King even has a mage college on palace grounds. The mages here are enslaved to the crown, and the message I received earlier this year from King Llyr of Pryderi revealed that people are selling captured healers into slavery along the southern coast. Something about a future son-in-law being a former such victim of the slave trade. Surely having enslaved magic-born so close to the royals is a dangerous mix? Why isn't he afraid of a revolt? I saw no mages at the banquet, or in the palace, and there are very few spells at use in the main building or the grounds we passed on the way in. The few I saw were quite old and probably haven't been maintained in decades."

"Perhaps because Hellebore has a mage college? The one at home is a dozen times larger, and clearly better funded, than the one here. I think you're right—the king likes to keep the

magicians under his control, instead of free to do their magic out in the countryside. And the country's lack of healers is disturbing. It seems so damaging and nonsensical to remove healers from the population." Foryne's thoughts made sense, but Merrick was too tired from a day of pretending to be a regular soldier while unobtrusively watching the Eistreans to do much thinking about Hadrix's peculiarities. High King Hadrix was a horrible man who grew rich from atrocities that flourished within his borders, and Merrick was primed to stop it as best he could.

The best path forward would likely reveal itself the days preceding the solstice festival that was steadily approaching, and Merrick hoped his mission would provide the clarity he needed to help find the best choice for everyone.

Culturally, the two kingdoms had very little to do with each other, aside from trade and commerce, the priests that traveled freely amongst their peoples, and the Holy City. Even sharing a religion was merely surface similarities—the Eistreans were far more devout, their laws influenced by faith, and the Helleborians were more secular in their approach to daily life, keeping religion out of the laws that governed the people.

Historically, it was the worship of the River God Adracias which helped maintain peace between the two kingdoms, with commerce a very close second, and the occasional treaty marriage between the two dynasties distant third. Merrick was convinced that eventually Hellebore would set aside what remained of their ancient ways and that gave him hope and even some worry—how Eistrea would react to a truly secular sister nation was something that kept him awake at night. It wouldn't happen anytime soon, but within a few generations it very well might.

"I'll let you ruminate about it." He stood and grabbed his sword and thought about grabbing a goblet of wine, but decided to keep his mind clear. "I'm off to bed. Goodnight."

Foryne and Talen murmured their goodnights, and Merrick wandered off down the short hall to his room. They were housed in a large, interconnected suite for foreign dignitaries.

Merrick's room was small, as befitted an officer of the diplomatic guards, and not what he was accustomed to at home. His mission was too important to risk by selfishly asking for a better room, and it suited his current needs perfectly well. He stripped off his over-tunic and chainmail hauberk, removing his leather trousers and boots. He'd call for a bath in the morning—he was tired.

He fell into the soft bed, staring up at the ceiling. Thoughts turning to sky-blue eyes and lush, pink lips, Merrick fell asleep swiftly, caught between worry and fascination.



A brutal backhand sent him to the floor, his cheek burning. Elia caught himself with his hands, but stayed down, knowing better than to get up. Everett moved back with a flick of Hadrix's fingers, his father looming over him. "How dare you embarrass this house? Defy my orders?"

Elia tongued his aching lip, cheek throbbing from the blow. He stared at the floor, the mosaic tiles mapping out the many branches of the Adracias River in vibrant blue intermixed with gold. He could make out the tiny symbol for Ceruna Fortress, the Little Brother Branch of Adracias gliding past it in a field of golden wheat. Blood dripped to the tiles from his mouth, crimson over gold, and Elia blinked back tears.

He wouldn't answer. There was no point. Everett would beat him until his father grew bored and his interest shifted elsewhere.

His father's anger beat at his mental shields, and the pain and stress and exhaustion from maintaining them all evening overwhelmed him. Rage and disgust stabbed at his mind, intrusive and violating, and Elia struggled to protect his inner self as best he could while his brother inflicted physical pain on his body.

Alden was nervous and hiding it behind drinking and overtly flirting with the servants. Aria was a cool, deep well of

indifference, more annoyed that Elia was taking up too much of their father's time and that he shouldn't even be present for the audience with the high king after the feast, and glaring at Alden for his flirtations.

A meaty hand grabbed his hair, yanking his head back, and a hiss of pain escaped before he could stop it, his eyes burning with tears as Everett's grip tightened. Everett was riding bloodlust and enjoying himself, a sadist in the truest sense of the term, uncaring that he was hurting his own brother and reveling in the damage and pain he caused with each blow.

Hadrix frowned, staring down at him as if he were nothing, a minor disappointment that he couldn't rid himself of easily. His father's rage abated that quickly, already bored and disinterested in further punishment. Elia refused to show anything on his face other than pain—if his father even suspected that Elia was using his abilities, the beating would resume and there was no one to stop Hadrix before he went too far except his siblings, and they were more likely to leave than raise an objection.

“You'll never do such a thing again, do you hear me? Magic is for the priests and those mages bound to serve us. I'll not have it smear the royal bloodline any more than it already has.”

Everett's grip made him whine in pain, and Hadrix took that as agreement, motioning Everett to release him. Everett tossed Elia back to the floor, where he lay as still as he could. He struggled to quiet his rapid breathing, his heart thudding in his ears. Aria sniffed in disdain from her corner of the room, and Alden wasn't even watching, nose buried in a wine goblet and his eyes on the maid sending him flirtatious glances from under her lashes. Hadrix withdrew to the other side of the room, Everett on his heels like a faithful dog.

Elia sat up, wiping the back of his hand across his lips, blood smearing. His lower lip was split, throbbing and stinging. Alden smirked at him and went back for another glass of wine. Aria was talking quietly to Hadrix and Everett, acting as if Elia didn't even exist, both men towering over the delicate princess. She might be small and dainty, but her spine

was made of hardened steel and her manner as unforgiving as the spring floods if crossed.

Elia ignored the pain through long practice and shored up his mental shields, until the sharp intrusions of his family's emotions were nothing but tiny flickers he could dismiss without much effort. He was no longer the focal point of Hadrix's attention and therefore so too did his sibling's minds turn away from him, as forgotten as a squashed bug at a garden party.

"Impressions of the ambassador?" Hadrix asked his two eldest children, though Everett rarely had anything to say about people except for insults.

"The ambassador seems simple enough," Everett declared with a smug confidence that Elia felt was entirely undeserved. Everett sat back in a loose sprawl in a gold and velvet chair, idly scratching his neck where the collar of the shirt he wore rubbed. "Foryne spoke of the emperor in casual terms, so he's either a friend or pretends to be. And he likes our wine. Getting information out of him about the emperor should be easier than I thought."

"Don't assume," Aria sniped back, waving off a servant who offered her wine. Alden held out his cup, the maid filling it with a tiny giggle at his salacious wink. "Foryne strikes me as a crafty old man. His family has been allied with the imperial throne for generations and he remained ambassador even when the previous emperor passed away. I don't think he'll reveal more than he's been instructed to."

That was Elia's perception of the ambassador as well, not that anyone would think to ask him, and he certainly wasn't going to voice his opinion. He dared not leave either, not until Alden was drunker, or Everett more bored than he currently was—his father wouldn't care if he were to slink away, but his brothers would notice, and they would make sure to stop him if he tried to leave. Their father always took out his anger on Elia instead of his brothers, and for that reason alone they often refused to let him escape these little family gatherings, forcing him to listen as they plotted, schemed, and

manipulated everyone around them at court and the entire country.

Whenever he was unlucky enough to be present for one of these family meetings he almost always ended up being punished for something, the opening act of a family tragedy that played out the same way every single time. Elia was beaten for some exaggerated infraction or merely for existing, and then he'd sit on the sidelines nursing his wounds while his siblings chattered about like magpies fighting over the shiny baubles of their father's sparse regard.

Elia scooted away until he could lean his back against the wall closest to the door, not standing to avoid drawing any more attention his way. He would slip into the hall once it was safe to leave; usually once his father left the room, his siblings would follow, and Elia would remain behind, unimportant and hopefully forgotten.

"What do we know for certain?" Hadrix demanded, and Elia sat as still as he could while his father paced slowly from one side of the room to the other. Hadrix didn't even spare him a glance, and he relaxed a bit. Elia wasn't important enough to waste energy over when the more pressing matters of the upcoming solstice festival took precedence.

"Emperor Heremis is supposedly arriving a few days before the festivities begin," Aria replied, her golden brows drawn in, thinking. "The ambassador said he's on a private hermitage to prepare for the festival, and he left instructions not to be disturbed until he leaves the retreat and arrives in the Holy City. In that case, I won't have much time to secure a treaty marriage if he arrives after us."

"You'll make an impression in what time you have," Hadrix growled. "Work on impressing the ambassador—he'll be our access to the emperor until the man himself arrives." Her expression grew tight but she nodded in agreement with their father's decree.

Elia really didn't like where this was going, though it made sense. Aria was unwed, of age, and the emperor was a widower, with two small children who could presumably do

with a mother in their lives. Aria wasn't maternal by any means, but Elia had a feeling that wasn't an issue. If Aria managed to snag the emperor's eye and secure a treaty marriage, raising children not her own wouldn't even cross her mind—she would be intent on providing her own children and strengthening her ties to the throne, increasing her own children's position in the line of succession, and leave her stepchildren and her own to be raised by others.

That's what happened to him, after all—he was raised by a succession of nannies and then governesses. He felt a wash of sympathy for those two children of Emperor Heremis—even though he didn't know them, and he doubted he would ever meet them, he wouldn't wish his siblings on anyone. Aria was less likely to be a mother to small children not of her own blood than she was to sprout wings and turn into a gryphon.

“What of the guards? Can they be used to garner more information, perhaps be bribed for more access?” Alden asked, sounding utterly disinterested, but then he sounded like that all the time. He reached out to pinch a maid's buttocks, but he missed by a wide margin, almost spilling from his chair. Alden was drunk already. It took a lot of spirits to get Alden drunk, but he'd probably been drinking since midday. The drunker Alden was, the easier it would be for Elia to disappear. Alden became horny and flighty when drunk and torturing his misfit brother did not cross his mind.

Everett sneered at Alden for daring to speak and take their father's attention even for a moment, but he answered when Hadrix gestured impatiently for him to speak. “I've tried to sound them out. The few I've managed to catch on their own barely did more than bow in greeting and looked right through me as if I were beneath their notice. If they weren't part of the ambassador's detail I'd show them the proper respect due to a prince.” Everett all but growled out his anger and embarrassment at what he likely saw as a deliberate snub by the Hellions. “They turned down the whores I sent, along with the ale and mead I sent to the lower-ranked soldiers. I haven't figured out which one is the captain yet, but a soldier is a soldier, no matter who they're guarding.”

“They turned down whores. Are they soldiers or priests?” Alden scoffed, draining his wine goblet and peering mournfully into its empty depths. “And Everett, their captain is the swordmaster. Do us all a favor and continue harassing the Hellions until you come across him. He’d have your head separated from your shoulders before you finished your first insult. What a relief to be spared your blustering.”

Elia ducked his head so the burst of amusement at Alden’s snide remarks wouldn’t be seen by his family. His thoughts then went to the dark-haired Hellion who had stared at him during the banquet. He was glad the Hellions weren’t susceptible to the overtures made by his brother—it meant they were less likely to unwittingly aid Hadrix’s plans to get whatever it was he wanted from the emperor.

Hadrix snorted in disgust and left the room without saying a word to any of them, and Aria grimaced, trailing after their father, her skirts whispering over the stone floor. Everett got up so fast he almost fell on his face, and Alden burst out in a drunken spat of laughter. Everett shoved Alden hard enough he nearly hit the floor, scowling as he scurried after their father and sister. Alden shrugged, eyeing one of the maids who beckoned to him seductively, and they left the room without even looking at Elia where he sat huddled on the floor.

He made it back to his room without incident, holding a hand to his throbbing cheek, and hoping there wasn’t blood on his face.

Chapter Three

Elia followed the guard through the pre-dawn quiet, the palace grounds echoing with their footsteps on the golden sandstone path that stretched from palace to barracks. Iron torches lit the way, their light dimmed by the encroaching sunrise, chilly with the lingering cool of night. The stones were damp, a sign of the brief morning fog that came in off the river before the summer sun scorched it away.

It was the more direct route and one Elia rarely took, to avoid emotional bombardment from other people. Maintaining his control over his imperfect mental shields was draining and even more so this early in the morning—he hardly got any sleep after the banquet the night before. The more exhausted he was, the less control he had over his abilities.

Swordmaster Derrent was predictably present on the training grounds, standing in the center with two strange men, their backs to Elia, but he hardly knew anyone on sight in the martial areas of the palace complex. They could be regular patrons of Derrent's tutelage for all he knew, and he set aside any curiosity he might have, not wanting to draw attention to himself. It looked to be an intense discussion, so Elia took advantage of Derrent's distraction once his escort abandoned him at the edge of the training yard.

Elia knew the drill, so to speak. He went for the racks of weapons that lined one side of the wide courtyard, looking for a wooden training sword that he could lift without too much strain. It was difficult—most of the soldiers training under Derrent's tutelage were bigger, bulkier specimens, men likely

able to lift Elia with one arm, never mind a simple training sword, even though the training swords weighed quite a bit.

Elia searched until he found the lightest training weapon among the few available. It was noticeably old, though the length of it was relatively intact, despite numerous dents and scratches on the once-polished finish. The wood pommel's grip was rough in his uncallused hand, the wooden blade too long for him to lift the whole of it entirely for more than a moment or two. It was the lightest he could find, and he was certain there were fewer options to choose from than there were the last time he was there for training.

Every day was the same—he rarely got to use the same wooden weapon more than once, and he suspected Derrent or a lackey of his was removing the training swords more suited to Elia's build and strength. Maybe it was his resentment speaking, but he wouldn't put it past Derrent or his people to be that petty.

The strangers with Derrent moved enough during their conversation that Elia was able to see them more clearly—the striking, tall and lean, dark-haired Hellion from the night before, and another man, who was as striking as his compatriot, tall with light brown hair and skin tanned golden from hours in the sun. Both men were ruggedly handsome, though the Hellion with the dark brown hair and intense hazel eyes drew Elia's attention like a moth to flame. Even at a distance, Elia was fascinated, and he fought the desire to stare, not wanting his fascination to become another weapon used against him, or Adracias forbid, against the Hellion. The poor man didn't deserve to have trouble brought his way if Derrent or even worse, Everett, assumed there was something there and took exception to it.

The Hellions were an elite squadron of warriors tasked with the protection of the imperial family of Hellebore and important dignitaries like Ambassador Foryne, so the Hellion might be safe from repercussions, but Elia wasn't. He forced his eyes away, pretending to be interested in the training going on around him as more soldiers and guards arrived for the morning session. Plenty of them went about things without

instruction, pairing off in sword work, hand-to-hand, and weapon drills with a variety of blunt and bladed weapons.

The two Hellions were dressed in light blue training tunics, comprised of padded linen across the chest, back and shoulders, and lightweight off-white linen pants, the ensemble capped by black leather boots that had seen better days, but were serviceable enough for the training yard. Swords and daggers on plain, unadorned belts hung around their lean waists, the weapons without gems or embellishments, though the high-quality castle-forged steel was obvious even with Elia's limited knowledge.

The Hellions came for exercise then, and his guess was confirmed when Derrent waved over two of his more experienced assistants, and the four men walked off to the side of the primary sparring square where Derrent stood in the center. Elia bit back a grimace when Derrent finally noticed him, and he went to the swordmaster, trying not to drag his feet. Reinforcing his mental shields and schooling his face to remain blank was a challenge, but he refused to give Derrent any excuse to lay into him this early in the morning.

Thankfully, Derrent seemed distracted by having the two foreign guards on the training yard, and with an absent wave of his hand and a grunt that passed as speaking, he set Elia to practice sword forms against a training dummy. It was a tall, thick trunk from a once great tree, with smaller pieces of wood set at equal heights to replicate an opponent's arms and legs. Some of the training dummies moved, but this one was for beginners and it remained stationary against his ineffectual blows.

Elia whacked at the training dummy, the thwack of wood on wood loud in the early dawn, and as he worked through the few forms he knew, more soldiers arrived for morning practice. Elia kept an eye out for his brother and he saw instantly when Everett arrived. He moved so he was mostly blocked from his brother's view by the tall form of the dummy. Gaining Everett's attention was as unpleasant as being the sole focus of Master Derrent, though Everett was more

likely to stay with his crowd of sycophants than spare Elia any mind.

Everett noticed the Hellions immediately. They were far more interesting than a scrawny little brother, and Elia threw up a silent thanks to Adracias for the small mercy. Everett strolled over with his cronies, a small audience gathering behind the oldest prince as he went.

The Hellions stood out in their vibrant imperial colors in a crowd of snow-white cotton and golden tans, and the way they moved was a sight to see. Everett and his cronies, a few miscreants from court, mostly second and third sons of nobles, stood not far from the two Hellions, commenting loudly as they watched the Hellions spar. Elia could not make out any words, but Everett's demeanor was belligerent and his tone rude and scathing.

Elia doubled down on his shields, already courting a headache at the effort of preserving his sanity, hoping that Everett wouldn't provoke a confrontation with the two Hellions. He was not keen to experience a diplomatic incident anywhere within his ability to sense the accompanying emotions. At the moment, he was too far to feel anything from Everett or the Hellions, but he read body language well enough and the Hellions were aware of Everett, but not reacting, keeping their focus on their sparring partners.

“Pay attention to what you're doing, boy,” Derrent barked at his shoulder, and Elia jumped, dropping the wooden practice sword with a clatter. He winced, quickly retrieving the weapon before Derrent could yell at him for dropping it. His mental shields were battened down so he was spared the worst of Derrent's aggravation, but he got enough of the swordmaster's emotions bombarding him to match the disgust he saw in the man's expression. His attention had been so engrossed with the handsome Hellion he hadn't sensed Derrent's approach and that scared him more than anything.

Derrent was pissed that Elia was even there—he felt that Elia was a stain on his specially trained soldiers and the fact that Elia was as far from the typical Eistrean soldier as one could get was something he took, absurdly, as an insult. And

that morning, to make things worse, Elia knew he was an unwelcome distraction from the interesting, new thing that was the Hellions, so it came as no surprise when Derrent grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged Elia away from the training dummy.

He regretted waking up that morning when Derrent tossed him to the center of the training yard, and there was a brief pause around the courtyard as curious eyes turned their way but most present were used to Derrent harassing Elia and people quickly went back to their tasks.

“Guard up!” Derrent barked. He stood between Elia and the two Hellions, who were sparring about twenty paces from where Elia stood. He held the training sword in an awkward two-handed grip on the slightly too-large pommel. The point came up in time for a more skilled fighter to make a stand, but Derrent moved faster than a snake, disarming Elia and checking him hard in the chest with a shoulder. Elia was knocked to his ass in the dirt, the tip of Derrent’s real and very sharp sword inches from Elia’s nose.

Live steel against wood.

It was something he had been dreading for some time.

Elia hissed in pain, ass and back smarting from making contact with the packed dirt. Another morning of Derrent beating on him, under the thin guise of training. Elia was learning nothing from the swordmaster but how much it hurt to be knocked down by a man twice his size, over and over.

It was a lesson he already knew, beaten into his muscles and bones throughout his entire life.



Merrick lost all ability to concentrate on sparring practice when the young prince took another harsh spill into the dirt, the Eistrean master-at-arms barely giving him time to regain his feet before laying him out again, each fall harder than the last.

Merrick lifted a hand to his sparring partner, a competent soldier who backed off with a nod, Merrick sheathing his sparring weapon on his side, and Talen doing the same when he saw Merrick stop training. Talen joined him after giving his own sparring partner a nod in thanks, that young man bowing to the Helleborian swordmaster with respect and some awe. All that young man had managed was keeping a grip on his sword, and the gratitude in his eyes that Talen allowed him that much was readily apparent.

Talen was a true swordmaster, the rank conveyed by his peers, through secret trials and duels, after years of training and exceptionally honed skill. Talen made it a point to tell his opponents before sparring, not out of pride, but to spare his opponent's pride when they failed to score against him.

The Eistrean soldier was not used to sparring so casually with a swordsman of Talen's skill, and from what Merrick observed between friendly matches, no one present that morning came close to Talen's level. Not even the so-called Eistrean swordmaster they met earlier, a gruff man by the name of Derrent, the master-at-arms for the royal palace.

That same man was executing a farce of training the youngest Eistrean prince. Merrick discreetly looked about the courtyard, but aside from a few people who were watching with varying degrees of amusement or scorn, no one appeared to see any problem with the way Derrent was treating the prince.

Not even his older brother—Prince Everett and a few expensively-dressed companions with flashy swords and pristine, unmarked leather gear stood nearby, the oldest prince the only one wearing sensible training gear for a morning spent in sword practice. That crowd did nothing, snorting in amusement as Derrent disarmed Elia again and sent him tripping over his own feet, landing hard on his front, hands barely catching himself before face-planting on the hard ground.

“Talen,” Merrick murmured to his best friend, fed up, wanting to intercede. The young prince was being abused,

publicly, and no one was doing a thing to stop it. Anger built in Merrick's gut, and he fought it back, maintaining control.

Elia was covered in dirt, sweat, and a growing collection of bruises, and Merrick had seen nothing in Derrent's actions with the young prince that resembled authentic training. It was thinly veiled physical abuse and outright bullying, and growing more obvious as the morning wore on and the sun rose higher over the courtyard.

Talen quickly leaned into him, his sharp eyes full of righteous anger, speaking fast, low, and urgent so only Merrick heard. "Get the prince—I've got the asshole."

If Merrick went to stop Derrent, Talen would be forced to defend Merrick and their mission would fall apart on its second day—but if Talen did it and took the brunt of the man's ire, they would all have a chance to leave the courtyard with their heads firmly on their shoulders.

Derrent shouted at Prince Elia, harsh words that were lost to the roar of anger in Merrick's ears. Merrick clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, holding onto his control by the thinnest of margins. It was ready to snap when Derrent lifted his weapon and moved toward the still-prone prince, the young man cowering in anticipation of a blow from the enraged older man. No man of honor would behave so in such a situation, unthinkable when his opponent was defenseless, unarmed, and laid out on the ground, clearly beaten. And not only that, but an untrained opponent, who was less than half the swordmaster's size. Derrent was yelling at Elia to get to his feet, but the young man was unable to do so, which was obvious to anyone watching the dishonorable display playing out in the courtyard.

No one was moving to stop Derrent, an emotional and out of control man raising a real blade to an unarmed, defeated opponent. The brother did nothing, a gleeful, eager expression on his smarmy face, and Merrick was disgusted.

Merrick was a step behind Talen as the Hellion Captain moved with a deadly grace, quickly covering the span between them and the mismatched pair in the center of the courtyard.

Before anyone could raise a voice in objection, Talen was there, sword up between Derrent and his victim, intercepting the blow the Eistrean had been aiming at the young prince. A clang of metal on metal, and Derrent squawked in stymied anger as Talen neatly stepped into his personal space, checking the man hard and sending him stumbling away several steps. Startled exclamations rose from the nearest witnesses, and Merrick hoped to avoid a diplomatic incident while protecting the young man from further harm. It was up to Talen now.

Merrick knelt beside Elia, the prince covering his head with his arms, cringing, awaiting a blow from Derrent that never came.

“Your Highness?” Merrick spoke softly, so as not to startle the young man, and Prince Elia cringed, before one bright blue eye opened a slit and peered up in confusion and fear. “Are you alright?”

Merrick kept one eye on the captain and the master-at-arms, the other on Prince Elia, who lay panting in the dirt, overcome and bleeding from his split lip. His hands were scuffed and scraped from multiple falls, and he imagined the young man was covered in bruises all over his body from repeatedly hitting the harsh ground of the training yard.

“Highness?” Merrick risked touching the young prince on one shoulder, keeping a wary eye on Derrent as Talen spoke to the other man in a deliberately sedate and almost bored tone. Derrent was making no attempt to cool his temper, if the intense red flush blooming on the overwrought Eistrean’s face was any indication.

“I’m...” the young prince sucked in a deep breath, steadying himself, and the wild animal fear of being hurt morphed into exhausted resignation. “I’m fine, thank you.”

He clearly was anything but fine, but Merrick was in no position to argue.

Merrick carefully helped the prince sit up, and Elia was shaking, wincing as he moved with caution, stiff with what must be aching muscles and developing bruises. Merrick

wanted to lay into Derrent, but for everyone's sake he focused on helping Elia to his feet.

He kept a hand on the small of Elia's back, as the prince was anything but steady, and he feared the young man might topple over at any moment. Talen sheathed his weapon, a choice Merrick would not have made himself, but Talen could draw his sword faster than any man present on the training grounds. The carefree manner in which he held himself belied his readiness to strike, and it had drawn in more than one overconfident opponent to their demise in the past.

Derrent's voice went acidic and rose high enough for most of the courtyard to hear his words, while Captain Talen's expression was relaxed and watchful. "Your interference isn't called for, Hellion. It's my duty to train the boy to fight."

"A duty you seem unable to meet," Talen interrupted the man's growing rant, Derrent's face turning crimson at the insult. "I saw a bully harassing an unequal opponent. Shall I remind you how it feels to be laid out by an opponent you have no chance of defeating, much less remaining on your own two feet against?"

"Derrent is a swordmaster, Hellion," a rough voice called out in challenge, and Prince Everett shoved his way through the growing crowd around them, cronies on his heels.

Prince Everett stopped at the edge of the crowd, but close enough that the sneer on his lips and the aggressive gleam in his eyes was visible to everyone present. Instead of diffusing the situation, Prince Everett wanted it to get worse. Crossing his arms over his wide chest, Prince Everett declared, "You can't stand against him, no matter what tavern stories say about the prowess of the Hellions in battle."

"How fortuitous," Merrick raised his voice just enough for Derrent and the eldest prince to hear him. "Captain Talen is also a swordmaster. He holds the honor of being one of the youngest to attain that rank in Hellebore in the last century."

Prince Everett's arrogance soured almost immediately, and the subtle wariness in the way Derrent shifted on his feet, as if

he were preparing to retreat, leveraged the tension in the Hellion's favor.

“What do you say, Master Derrent?” Talen spoke cheerfully, teeth bared in a predatory grin. “A friendly bout, between two swordmasters. It'll be a delight to see how the art differs between our kingdoms.”

A thin hiss of steel on leather heralded Talen's intention, the captain casually thumbing the sword free from its scabbard by a couple of inches, the edges of the blade catching the summer sunlight. Talen spoke as if he challenged men to duel every day, and it was of no more import than what he decided upon for breakfast.

That attitude was as galling to a man like Derrent as the words themselves—and Merrick saw in the man's eyes when the Eistrea swordmaster decided to accept Talen's challenge, overcoming his initial caution at hearing Talen's rank.

Onlookers were focused on Derrent and Talen, so Merrick took the opportunity to get Elia away from additional danger. He tugged the unprotesting young man through the gathering crowd, barely anyone giving them a glance. Elia stumbled, and Merrick wrapped an arm around his waist and nearly carried him out of the courtyard. He paused within the shadow of a stone wall along a path that led back toward the main palace complex, and Elia leaned against the stone wall with a faint groan.

“Sir Merrick?” A soft call broke Merrick's focus on Elia and he saw Sitka coming down the path, his fellow Hellion hurrying when they recognized Elia in the shadows of the wall. They took in the bloody, busted lip, the dirt and dust, and the painful way Prince Elia leaned on the wall, curling in a bit. “Is he all right? What happened?”

“Captain Talen is distracting the Eistreans,” Merrick said quietly, trying not to sound anything other than slightly exasperated. He wanted to avoid a diplomatic incident. And it might be too late. Things might fracture if Talen was forced to kill or seriously wound the reckless master-at-arms.

Sitka noted the lack of response concerning Elia, and they noted quickly how Elia was blushing red, eyes downcast, embarrassed. They eyed Merrick in concern but they understood enough of what he did not say aloud. "I'll see if our dear captain wants some company," Sitka replied after a fraught moment. "The Ambassador is enjoying breakfast in his rooms."

Merrick nodded in thanks, and Sitka headed down the path at a fast walk toward the courtyard, where the faint ringing of swords clashing could be heard over the exclamations of the raucous crowd.

"I'm sorry," Prince Elia whispered harshly.

Merrick took more of the young man's weight, wanting to carry the prince outright but worried about overstepping boundaries. The young prince was trim, with the muscle definition gifted to a healthy youth, but not athletic in any dedicated manner. He winced when Merrick touched him, an almost instinctive flinch, and Merrick fought back sharp anger that burst to life in his belly.

"Nothing to be sorry for, your highness." He wanted to inquire after the prince's usual treatment, to know if Derrent was an outlier, but everything he was seeing told him a darker truth.

Prince Elia was accustomed to violence, hand-shy like an abused horse. Merrick gentled his movements and helped Elia straighten, the young man brushing some dirt off his clothing, despite the futility of the action. He was covered head to toe.

"Can I take you to a healer, your highness?"

The young prince paled even further, dark shadows under his eyes, and he shook his head frantically. "No! No healers. Thank you for your help, good sir."

Prince Elia drew back, reluctantly, and it was hard for Merrick to let him go due to the despair in his bright summer-sky eyes. Yet let him go he did, Prince Elia easing back, a trembling visible in his slim frame that made everything in Merrick tense with worry and simmering anger.

A distant shout from the courtyard drew their attention, and Merrick caught a glimpse through the milling crowd of Derrent sprawled on his back, his sword lying in the dirt several feet from his outstretched hand. Talen stood nearby, idly wiping at his blade, dismissively unbothered by the fact that he had disarmed and laid out the Eistrean swordmaster.

The crowd moved again and Merrick lost his sightline to the fight, but he was not worried for the captain. Talen was exceptional, and Sitka was nearby as support. Sitka wasn't a swordmaster like Talen, but the two of them sparred often together and Sitka was quite proficient. Even massively outnumbered, the two Hellions would be more than fine.

A soft gasp had him checking on the young man next to him—Prince Elia was staring in the direction of the ruckus, eyes wide in startled wonderment. “Did your captain knock down Derrent?”

He asked it quietly, almost too low for Merrick to hear him, and he leaned in a bit so the younger man could hear his reply. “Captain Talen is a swordmaster, in the truest sense of the word. And your Master Derrent will be feeling that blow for a few days yet.”

Prince Elia smiled despite the pain he must be feeling, considering how stiffly he held himself and the growing bruises reddening his face and hands. Bright blue eyes met his, shy and wary, but a glimmer of satisfaction was evident in the crystalline depths. “Thank you, both of you. I don't know what drove you to intercede, but I appreciate it nonetheless.”

“I have a short temper when it comes to bullies,” Merrick answered, and he was delighted by the faint flush that bloomed on high cheekbones. “His treatment of you was abominable. I'm sorry it took me so long to stop him.”

Lips parted on a soundless gasp, and Prince Elia swayed a bit in his direction. Merrick slipped a hand back under his slim arm, supporting the young prince. He felt another shiver rake the arm he held, and Merrick wondered if it was pain and exhaustion, or something else.

Yet this was no place to discover what that delicious shiver meant—Prince Elia was too exposed, and any number of witnesses could spy them standing far too close for propriety's sake given where they were.

“Let's get you somewhere you can rest, Your Highness,” Merrick murmured, and with gratified surprise, Prince Elia nodded without a word and leaned into him. Merrick slipped an arm around his waist, and took as much weight as the prince would allow him.

“You know who I am?” Prince Elia asked softly, shy, eyes on the path in front of their feet as they slowly left behind the training yard.

“I do, Your Highness,” Merrick answered. “Forgive the impropriety, I am Sir Merrick, one of the Hellions assigned to Ambassador Foryne. I was at the feast last night.”

“The man beneath the pear tree?” Prince Elia leaned into his side even more and Merrick glanced down to see beautiful blue eyes staring up at him through thick black lashes.

“You noticed me, then?” Merrick gently teased, and then he sternly reminded himself that he was not in Vastok and he was not himself, but then the young prince blushed again. It was a deeper red that spread across his cheeks and down his neck, not at all off-putting—Merrick wondered how far the blush went, and mentally scolded himself for the inopportune thoughts. The prince was in pain and needed to rest.

Prince Elia pointed just off the path and Merrick helped the young man through a gap between stunted trees, and suddenly they were in what appeared to be a forgotten space where the path arched away from the palace and a curve in the wall left a mossy bench a stone's throw from the carved archway that led into the building. It was cast in shadows, hidden by trees grown into a wall, and the moss and cool temperatures made it clear this spot received little sunlight during the day.

Prince Elia sat on the bench, exhaling in relief, slumping over his knees for a long moment. Merrick worried the prince

was more hurt than he assumed, but after a long moment the prince straightened with a low groan and managed to sit up.

“Do you need anything?” Merrick asked, crouching in front of Prince Elia, their heads about level. Prince Elia was shorter than him and the ancient bench was worn down and partially sunken into the soft earth of the forgotten little grotto, putting them nearly face to face.



Elia stared into intense hazel eyes and struggled to decipher the words spoken to him. He was blushing, and rather distracted by the courteous attention and proximity of the handsome Hellion, this Sir Merrick.

He asked if Elia needed anything, and Elia was struck silent by the endless possibilities of things he *needed*. All he could do was shake his head before his mouth broke away from him and blurted out something ridiculous, like asking for a kiss.

Scents of leather, sun-warmed grass, and a hint of sweat seduced his senses, and Elia couldn't help the way his eyes mapped the broad shoulders and lean waist, the linen dampened by exertions in the training yard and clinging to the defined muscles of his lower abdomen. Usually the sweaty, messy, stinky mass of warriors was unappealing by the end of the training hours every morning, but Sir Merrick was nothing to turn a nose up at—everything about him was appealing.

Unlike Elia, Sir Merrick was not covered in dirt, and was relatively unscathed by his time spent sparring that morning. A long, thick tress of dark brown hair was freed from the tail at the base of his neck, falling along his temple, and Elia's fingers itched to brush it back behind an ear.

This was the closest he'd willingly been to an attractive man in his entire life, and he still felt the heat along his side from Sir Merrick helping him down the path. He wanted to lean forward a hand's length and see if that short, neatly trimmed beard was soft or prickly to the touch, maybe learn

how it felt to kiss another man, and it was only the nerve-shattering fear of being discovered that kept him from caving to his foolish desires. And the terror that Sir Merrick would not take kindly to Elia's attentions.

A soft touch to his knee freed him from his rude staring, and he looked down, flustered. "Thank you for helping me, Sir Merrick."

He glanced up through his lashes. Sir Merrick had a slight smile on his lips, as if he were trying not to chuckle. It was then he realized that he felt nothing in the way of foreign emotions from the other man, and he stared again in fascination.

Nothing—no exasperation, frustration, anger, or amusement. No annoyance at having to deal with Elia, or boredom. Merely a hint of a living presence, the energy all living beings held, and an impression that there was a wall of sorts between himself and the other man. A wall not of his own making—his mental shields, pathetic as they were, hadn't survived the encounter with Derrent and he needed energy and focus to rebuild his meager defenses.

Yet here, now, he was unencumbered by Sir Merrick's emotions, free from the typical bombardment he usually suffered when in close proximity to another person.

"You are most welcome, your highness." Sir Merrick paused, eyes searching Elia's face for a heartbeat before continuing. "Can I be of further assistance?"

Elia breathed in, eyes falling to land upon a wide, lush mouth, enchanted and failing to hide it. The hand on his knee grew heavier, but not in a stifling or invasive way—it was as if Elia's awareness of the point of contact made it more real every passing second, and his skin tingled where big fingers held his knee, his body lighting up with every beat of his heart.

A swift look into Sir Merrick's eyes, and he saw what he thought might be an answering awareness. Elia realized with a jolt that a part of him was actually sensing something from Sir Merrick—physical touch let a trickle of insight slip past that mysterious wall between himself and the other man. He took a

chance and set a hand on top of Merrick's, the hand on his knee, and he was gifted with a sensation he'd never felt from another person before—attraction.

Appreciation, in a very simple, basic manner—in a way Elia had never experienced. Unmistakable and it sank into his very bones, impossible to avoid or deny. Reciprocated and honest, and that revelation left him breathless, eyes wide, utterly absorbed by the man crouching so close.

Sir Merrick was attracted to him. And worried, quite a lot in fact, but Elia was far too interested in the attraction to give a thought to why the Hellion would be worried about him.

“I want...” Elia sighed, distracted thoroughly, unable to think of what he was going to say.

Hazel eyes framed by thick, dark brown lashes dropped to his lips, and Elia instinctively ran the tip of his tongue along his bottom lip, nervous and excited, pulse erratic. Every ache and pain was a distant thought, and he was utterly absorbed by the man in front of him.

Sir Merrick was a mere hand's length away, and Elia was breathlessly waiting for something to happen.

“What do you want, Your Highness?” Sir Merrick whispered, and Elia leaned forward a tiny bit more, a hair's breadth away from knowing what it felt like to be kissed. Sir Merrick was so, so close—Elia felt the wisps of the man's sweet, clean breath on his face, his eyes wanting to fall shut in exorable anticipation. “If it's in my power, let it be yours.”

Elia was both terrified and thrilled at the next words that fell from his mouth in a near breathless whisper. “A kiss?”

“A kiss?” Sir Merrick repeated, and Elia nodded, and then he startled slightly when a big, warm hand slid along his jaw, fingertips slipping into his hair, holding him still, gentle yet firm. The Hellion leaned in, so very close, their lips nearly touching. “A kiss can be dangerous, my prince.”

“Please,” Elia begged on a sigh, eyes falling shut as he waited and hoped.



Merrick answered that heartfelt plea the only way he could, leaning forward that last whisper of distance between him and Elia. His mouth met soft, trembling lips, and Merrick was lost.

Kissing Prince Elia was both the stupidest and best decision Merrick had made in years. Here he was, kneeling in front of a foreign prince, in public, holding the sweet young man as he gently pressed their lips together where anyone could see—and he had no concern to spare, too overcome by the prince’s charm and beauty. A shallow excuse, and he knew it, yet he made the decision then and there to give the young prince what he wanted.

Soft lips fluttered against his, a gasp of startled wonder, and Elia sank into the melding of mouths with a sweet yielding of his entire body, Merrick sliding his free arm around Elia’s waist and tugging him closer. His torso was between spread legs, slim hands alighting on his shoulders and clinging to his tunic, Elia holding tight to him as the kiss heated.

A shiver ran through him at the contact, the soft lips beneath his own parting and giving him the faintest taste of Elia’s essence. He fought dark urges to deepen the kiss, and kept it as chaste as he could, despite the needy gasps and sweet taste of the prince in his arms.

A clamor rose from the courtyard, and Elia jerked back from the kiss, eyes wide, lips wet, panting. His gaze was alight with desire and magic, a hint of storms brewing in the depths of his summer-sky eyes. Merrick realized too late that they were about to get caught, and turned at the sound of people shouting. He held tense, Elia shivering in his arms, but no one was shouting at them, and after a long moment, he reluctantly withdrew and stood, giving Elia space to rise to his feet.

“Forgive me for the impropriety, Your Highness,” Merrick said softly, watching Elia’s face for some sign of how he was reacting to what just happened. He was a fool—the young man

was injured, and not in a frame of mind to handle an amorous overture from a stranger.

Prince Elia touched a trembling fingertip to his lower lip, eyes wide, and Merrick saw nothing but wonder and passion, easing some of his guilt. Prince Elia sucked in a deep breath, shoulders back, and he stood tall despite his aches.

“No forgiveness required, Sir Merrick,” Prince Elia declared, cheeks red and eyes bright, but uncowed in that moment. “Thank you for helping me, and for giving me my first kiss.”

Elia was gone before Merrick could do more than lift a hand in his direction, shocked by his declaration. Elia slipped through the trees and Merrick tried following, but he lost sight of the younger man as soon as he entered the palace.

Merrick stood on the threshold for a heartbeat, fighting the urge to run after Elia in search of clarification. Elia was an adult, beautiful, royal, and from what Merrick knew of Eistrean culture, free to take lovers as long as he avoided scandal. That Merrick was Prince Elia’s first kiss was an unexpected experience, but one Merrick was happy to have shared with the beautiful young man.

Merrick sighed and turned away from the palace, forcing himself to rejoin Talen and Sitka, hoping Derrent was still in one piece. Explaining the events of the morning to Foryne was going to be an adventure.

Chapter Four

“I do not think this is wise,” Talen grumbled as they passed under the front gates of the Eistrean palace, heading down the main thoroughfare toward the city of Meadowtown. Sitka led the way, Cormand behind Merrick and Talen, the four of them out of their uniforms and though unmistakably soldiers of some type, their official stations were unlikely to be guessed by the average Eistrean on the street.

Sitka burst out with a sharp laugh, smiling wide at the Eistrean guards manning the gates watching as people came and went from the palace complex. One guard smiled back, hesitant, but Sitka was charming and not many people could resist their smile when it was shining full force.

The befuddled gate guard almost fell over trying to keep an eye on Sitka as their small group headed into the throng of people on the road outside the palace walls, and Merrick clasped a hand on Talen’s shoulder, keeping his friend facing forward. Sitka led the way, knowing exactly where they needed to be for Merrick to see the truth. Cormand was silent at the rear of their group, though Merrick caught a glimpse of amusement in the Hellion’s eyes.

“No flirting with the locals,” Merrick warned Sitka, Talen grumbling. His friend’s jealousy might cause some trouble they did not need at the moment. Sitka sighed loudly, amused, and Merrick fought back his own chuckle. “And you need to lighten up,” he spoke to Talen, tone a bit sharper. “We’re merely guards enjoying an evening off-duty, exploring a

foreign city, maybe getting drunk and enjoying some bawdy tavern songs and a hearty meal.”

Talen side-eyed him. “You do know you’re not truly a Hellion, right? You need to give the uniform back when we get home. I don’t want to wander into your rooms one morning and see you pretending to be a guard, shepherding about the boys between pretend engagements and parties.”

“I think the twins would love it, actually,” Merrick replied with a wry grin. “They already play soldiers and bandits, adding Hellions and royals wouldn’t be much of a stretch.”

Cormand chuckled, greatly amused, though he was watchful under the easygoing expression he wore, sharp eyes covering their flanks and the street around them.

“Shh!” Sitka hissed at them over their shoulder, glaring. “Talk a bit louder, why don’t you?”

The city was loud, and no one paying them any mind, but Merrick took the admonishment to heart, as did Talen, the captain flushing from the reminder that they were meant to blend in, not stand out. Merrick and Talen shared a grimace and kept their mouths shut as they followed Sitka deeper into the city, Cormand at their backs.

Getting out of the palace was simple. Plenty of servants and soldiers spilled out of the palace complex as the sun set and shifts changed over, and those freed from their duties escaped back to their own homes or sought out entertainment in the sprawling city around the palace.

Meadowtown was flat, as was this entire region, barely higher than the banks of the river that idly wound its way through the valley in a general southwestern direction. The Heartline branch of the Adracias River that ran through the city was huge, wide, and held a deep current near the middle, despite the river lacking in whitewater rapids and waterfalls. And it was warmer than Merrick was accustomed to—rivers back in Hellebore were rarely idle enough for bathing, let alone warm enough to be safe for swimming, and only a small section of the Marnican branch of the Adracias that stretched into Hellebore was flat and calm enough for boats and barges.

Most of the rivers and streams in Hellebore were narrow, full of rocks, and riddled with waterfalls as the incline steepened the further north and west one went in the Empire.

And the river here smelled atrocious, thanks to its wide shores and the summer sun beating down on it, the stone of the city's foundations heating the river and holding that heat in, even at night. The combination of overly warm water, stagnant flow, and too many people and nothing in place to prevent waste from entering the river, created a stench that was overwhelming at first and it took Merrick an uncomfortable amount of time to be able to ignore it.

The Heartline stank, an affront to the senses and surely to the river god himself. Merrick was not overly faithful, but he was certain the god was displeased with the treatment his waters received from the blithely ignorant Eistreans. Vastok City was blessed with an abundance of well-trained magic-born citizens who enjoyed clean water for drinking and household uses, and had laws in place to protect the sanctity and well-being of the river, both within the city and down-current, a duty and courtesy to both fellow citizen and the river god's domain.

Eistrea and Hellebore had many differences underneath the thin surface similarities bequeathed to both countries by their shared past. One of which was the most glaring and atrocious, their goal that night in entering the city.

They headed north through the squat, ancient buildings toward the barge docks moored along the river. As they walked, they left behind the crowded array of stores with second-floor homes, and entered a more industrial sector, composed of warehouses and wide open spaces broken up by holding pens for numerous stockyards, the lowing and calling of a variety of livestock species and their waste filling the heavy evening air. Merrick rubbed at his face and nose, consigning the bigoted ancestors of the Eistreans and their anti-magic views to the river depths.

Cormand muttered softly under his breath as the shadows deepened around them, muffling their footsteps and voices, encouraging idle gazes to pass them by, uninterested in what

trouble a group of roughnecks might be up to that evening. The glamour was subtle and clever, a mere tweaking of sight and sound, less a grandiose spellcasting and more a quicksilver shimmer of energy dismissed by the uneducated and ignorant Eistreans.

“It stinks here,” Talen muttered, and Merrick hummed in agreement. “A few simple spells would solve the problem. These people cut off their noses to spite their faces, I swear.”

“Any spells that once existed here are long since gone,” Cormand said softly, standing near enough for whispers to be shared without straining their ears.

“What I want you to see is not far, the westernmost corner of the yard by the water’s edge, next to the red barge,” Sitka whispered and directed their gaze toward their target.

Merrick immediately saw the unpleasant truths that Hellebore spies had passed to the Hellions the night before under cover of revelry.

“Slavers,” Merrick growled under his breath, thankful for the shadows and the spell blanketing them.

A handful of men with whips and rough clothing were shepherding a pair of people off the barge, rough sacks over their heads and faces, chains dripping from arms and wrists, feet bare, clothing torn asunder and bruises and cuts showing through smeared dirt and dried blood.

“Two magic-born on their way to the Mage College,” Sitka whispered, voice hollow and resigned. “Stolen downriver along the borderlands south of the Holy City, according to the brokers our people bribed, the ones who negotiated the deal with the palace.”

Talen stiffened. “Helleborians?”

Whether they were from Hellebore or not, those two kidnapped souls were about to be consigned to a lifetime of servitude and ultimately death, and Merrick found himself unable to allow that to happen, even if he risked their mission.

Sitka answered anyway, their voice heavy with resignation and tired outrage. “It’s likely one of them is from Hellebore.

The slavers are finding fewer native magic-born people in Eistrea and are getting bolder, striking over the river borders and stealing our people for the slave trade here.”

“How often does the high king buy from these slavers?” Merrick asked, moving through the darkness under the shade of a warehouse wall, trusting Cormand’s magic to keep them hidden from the nervous eyes and ears of the slavers.

“Once a month, on average, if our people can’t get to the victims before they reach Meadowtown,” Sitka answered, shadowing Merrick. “These particular slavers are on retainer with the palace, and they’ve a yearly quota to supply to keep that contract. They used to bring in a dozen or more a month—now it’s a mere handful a year. There are fewer and fewer conscripts suitable for the Mage College, and from what we’ve learned, the weather workers are spread too thin across the countryside, and not enough Eistreans are being born with the gifts the high king covets.”

“Our people are getting many of them out of the country before they’re exposed,” Talen informed him, echoing the information Merrick read in reports. Magic was common in Hellebore, and those with the right gifts could identify it in others. It was an unfortunate facet of reality that magic rousing in a human most commonly showed in the eyes, and it took control and training that Eistreans lacked to prevent their eyes from giving away the truth.

Merrick made himself focus, refusing to look away from the harsh truth playing out in front of him. Reading reports about the slave trade in Eistrea from the safety of the Imperial palace was a far different experience than seeing it in person. “The sorties across the borders by slavers are going to increase, I’m afraid.”

“Where are they taking these two?” Merrick asked, watching intently as three guards roughly prodded their captives away from the river and down a narrow street on the other side of the dockyard. Soon they would be out of sight and lost in the tangled warren of poorly constructed streets and buildings in this part of the ancient town.

He didn't wait for an answer, weaving his own glamour and wrapping it around himself like a cloak, hiding him completely from any onlooker's senses. A drain on his reserves but something he could manage for a short time. Merrick hurried out from under the cover of Cormand's glamour and sprinted after the slavers, dodging around crates and stacks of goods, his startled companions hard on his heels.

"Merrick! You fool, get back here!" Talen hissed under his breath, catching up quickly despite Merrick's head start. "If you die doing something stupid, I'm the one who'll explain that to your sister!"

Merrick reached the corner of a building on the south side of the street the slavers had disappeared down, and he leaned enough to take a quick glance. The group were still on the street, walking parallel to the river with the looming golden walls of the palace in the far distance, its torches silhouetting the crenelated top of the stone structure. A small gate manned by several guards was visible where the river went under the wall.

The street was a long, almost unobstructed span along the river, allowing traffic to maneuver quickly into different parts of the city. The closer to the palace walls the more torches lined the street and the street-facing sides of the buildings, casting shadows even into the alleyways. If he was to do anything it had to be soon.

There were no others on the roadway but the slavers and their captives, and the guards in the far distance. Those guards were within sight, but just barely, and not close enough to intercede if they saw anything amiss.

He turned to Cormand, who hovered at Talen's shoulder. "Can you hold the glamour and fight?"

Cormand's eyes went wide. "I can, but not for long. Direct contact will break it down faster. A few moments only."

"Are you honestly going to do what I think you are?" Talen growled at him, jaw clenched. "If you get hurt, this entire farce will have been for nothing."

“I can’t watch this and let it happen, regardless of which throne these poor souls pledged their loyalty. I can’t.”

Talen searched his gaze for a heartbeat, then went around Merrick and took the lead, unsheathing two daggers from his belt. Talen might be a swordmaster, but that didn’t mean he was unskilled in other forms of combat. He was as deadly with a piece of straw as he was a castle-forged steel sword. He spoke quickly over his shoulder, eyes on their quarry. “Leave them blinded and bound, we’ll take them to our contacts here in the city to get them out. Sitka, our goal is to toss the slavers in the water before they can call for help. Merrick, hold the glamour. Cormand, get our two victims into the first alley; Merrick, stay on his heels. Sitka and I will disarm the slavers while you cover the ruckus this is going to make.”

Merrick nodded, relieved. He was skilled with a sword but not as much as the three actual Hellions, and he could dampen sound and sight easily enough for a short span. “Good plan.”

Talen waited long enough for Merrick to spin his own glamour, allowing Cormand to drop his and draw his sword. Merrick wove a thick layer of shadows that he pushed ahead of them by several yards, making sure to cover the confused, frightened exclamations from the slavers as the glamour met them, a black wall of nothingness.

A bit over the top, but Merrick was not taking chances.

Talen was in the midst of the slavers faster than a thought, and Merrick followed behind Cormand as he went straight to the captives, sword singing through the evening air as the steel cut through the rusty iron links of the chains held by the slavers. Merrick spun the glamour wider, covering them from behind in just in case, and he caught one poor soul Cormand deftly handed off to him. Cormand wasted no time, slinging his charge up and over his shoulder with one arm, muffled cries of fear and confusion coming past the dirty rag covering their mouth.

Merrick winced but did the same. “Forgive me, you’ll be safe soon,” he said harshly, and managed to copy Cormand’s maneuver without dropping his charge or the glamour. A

startled cry but thankfully the poor soul slung over his shoulder seemed to believe he was there to help and didn't fight him.

Cormand sheathed his sword and grabbed Merrick's arm, yanking him out of the way of the largest slaver, a stout man with a fount of blood spilling from his severed neck as he windmilled backwards and fell into the river with a splash. Merrick flinched—not in sympathy—he forgot to mute that area of the river, so anyone nearby might hear the sound of bodies hitting the water. Sitka dispatched the second with a sword under the ribs and to the heart, a soundless kill, and kicked the body off their sword into the water. Talen killed the last slaver, who held a whip he was too slow to unfurl before Talen took his hands and then his head, kicking the twitching body and the extremities into the water, all before Merrick could adjust his spellwork. None of the slavers got a blow in, and the only sounds were the splashes as they sank into the disgusting water.

The head *plunked* loudly into the slow-moving water, sinking into the muck instantly. "Shit," Talen swore at the noise as he looked toward the palace and then back toward the docks where the slavers had come from. "Too late to worry about it. Move!"

Sitka sheathed their sword and took Merrick's precious burden despite his protest, slinging the captive over their shoulder and running after Cormand, who led the way into a side alley. Talen sheathed one dagger and with his now freed hand seized Merrick by the shoulder, pushing him ahead and covering their flight. "Mind the spell, Merrick, and if we get caught, you are to glamour yourself and run, do you hear?"

Merrick ran after the other two Hellions, and he thought he was in shape, but that notion was quickly put to rest after the second block of them running full-out. "I won't abandon you or the others," Merrick hissed back as they paused in the shadows, separated from Sitka and Cormand, who crouched behind a wagon laden with barrels that stunk of rancid wine a few yards ahead on the street.

Talen spun him around and shoved him none too gently into the stone wall at his back, leaning in to all but growl in Merrick's ear. "Your sons are too young to rule, Your Grace, and your sister has her own family to raise. Don't be an idiot. If we come under attack, you will run and hide yourself by any means until we find you. Understood?" Talen shook him with the grip he held on Merrick's tunic, and Merrick lifted his hands in acquiescence.

"Forgive me," he said softly. "I understand."

Talen in that moment wasn't his childhood best friend but Captain of the Hellions, and charged with Merrick's protection, even in the most dangerous and foolhardy of times. The poor man was already at his limit with this entire mission despite his usual stoic manner. Talen held him there for a long moment, then eased up, relaxing his grip and letting Merrick off the wall, though he kept his hand on Merrick's shoulder as if afraid he might disappear right in front of him.

"Let's get these poor souls to safety, and get back to the palace before we're caught," Talen ordered, back to his usual efficient and slightly aggravated self.

No signs of pursuit, and the streets were empty in this part of the city, no torches lit aside from dim candlelight shining in a few dirty windows overlooking the street. It was an odd contrast to Vastok—the city he was raised in was so brightly lit at night by spelled lamps and starfire torches that it shone like a diamond caught in the midday sun. Here the cobblestones were lost beneath disturbing grime, probably refuse from chamber pots and passing livestock, and dirt seeping up from beneath poorly maintained roads in the damp earth of the river valley.

"Stay here," Talen ordered him, and Merrick nodded, realizing he had pushed his friend and guard too far tonight. Talen went around the corner and Merrick heard nothing, Talen reappearing soundlessly a few moments later. Talen gestured with his unarmed hand for Merrick to follow, and he did so with a single glance to where Sitka and Cormand had been with their charges, but the street was empty.

“Cormand is obscuring their passage so they can take their charges to our people,” Talen informed him. “Keep our glamour up until we get nearer to a more active part of the city and I’m positive we haven’t been followed.”

“We should—”

Talen sent him a look that made Merrick feel like he was a young boy being chastised for running in the temple. “If you say anything about us sticking together I’m going to knock you out and carry you back to the palace. I’ll tell the guards you drank too much. They’ll believe it, too.”

Merrick bit his tongue, and reminded himself that Talen was the Hellion, and he was definitely not the experienced soldier he was playing at being—Sitka and Cormand were vastly more skilled in all manner of delightfully dangerous activities that wouldn’t endanger the peace between two kingdoms.

Chapter Five

The next day, Merrick saw nothing of Prince Elia, despite hoping otherwise. Not unexpected, considering they were attending to Foryne as he sat in talks with the High King for most of the day. There was no feast that night, since normal activities within the palace had resumed, merely dinner with some courtiers, now that the ambassador was settled.

There was nothing mentioned about killings in the city, and the atmosphere in the palace was no different than the day before. Still, they remained ever watchful, in case something might change to compromise their mission.

Merrick kept out of the way, and let Captain Talen stay with Foryne in the High King's council rooms while Cormand and Sitka stood outside in the hall. Before they had left for their mission, they had given Foryne an accounting of the previous morning's incident with the Eistrean swordmaster and the prince, and he asked that they avoid a repeat until he sounded out the high king's reaction to the incident.

A wise precaution, and the next dawn the Hellions remained in their rooms, even though Merrick wanted to head out to the training yard to keep an eye on the youngest Eistrean prince. The only thing that kept Talon from being forced to sit on him was the news Sitka brought from the servants along with their breakfast, that morning training was suspended while the ambassador and his guards were in the palace. All under the flimsy reasoning that the high king

wanted his sons nearby in case they were needed for diplomatic negotiations.

Merrick spent that day torn between regretting his position as a Hellion and thankful for it—his usual freedoms were upended and new restrictions put in place while this ruse played out, and he was balancing too many plans with too many potential outcomes, some of them dire, for him to upset the precarious balance so early in the scheme of things. Other than what he did last, of course. While he regretted worrying Talen and the others, he couldn't regret having saved those victims. Though he was also glad his rash actions had not undermined everything.

So today he was determined to see things through, and somehow, someday, do something for Prince Elia. There was a limit to what he could do as Sir Merrick, and he chafed at the restrictions, even though he'd done it to himself. Talen would be glad to remind him that he'd thought this a terrible plan to begin with.

Merrick followed behind Foryne, two steps back and to his right, as any proper guard should, with Talen doing the same on the left. They weren't expecting trouble, but Merrick distrusted the Eistrean High King—Hadrix was a harsh man, and anyone suspected of abusing his own children wasn't trustworthy.

Cormand and Kell came in from their adventures in the city the night before full of rumors and wild stories about the royals. Some of them, especially the tales about Prince Everett and Prince Alden, seemed to be truer than not—chasing maids and getting into squabbles with cuckolded spouses in the court, along with frequent duels that ended in dead courtiers. Prince Everett killed a man in a duel not even a fortnight earlier, all over an ill-thought-out affair with the man's wife. All reports had the affair ending with the prince looking for a new lover and the dishonored widow escaping to a country estate.

The two elder princes seemed to be troublemakers and while Hadrix appeared to have his rowdier offspring largely in hand, he also didn't stop their atrocious behavior. The royal

bastards, on the other hand, were left to run amuck. While the two elder princes did not seem as unhinged, he wouldn't consider their behavior to be anything but ill-mannered and spoiled. Merrick was certain that parental control was minimal, and held by the threat of violence, severe punishment, and financial coercion, though really only for incidents that threatened the king's reputation.

There was little in the way of rumors about the eldest, Princess Aria—she was held in high esteem by the people and the court, and there was no scandal attached to her name. She was also seen as the preferred heir to the high king, though most of the people knew it unlikely that the high king would name his daughter as his heir, so the crown would go to the oldest son, Prince Everett. There had not been an Eistrean High Queen who ruled in her own right as sovereign in hundreds of years, and it was unlikely Hadrix would buck tradition and crown his daughter as heir, no matter how deserving she might be of the role.

There was nothing said about Prince Elia—in fact, when the Hellions made mention of him to see what rumors might abound about the youngest prince, nothing was said at all. It seemed that most of the citizens forgot he existed, or assumed he was still a child in the nursery. To be perceived with such indifference was decidedly odd for a royal that hadn't done anything scandalous aside from existing, and reinforced Merrick's assumption that Elia was indeed the unfavored child. In most kingdoms, Elia's treatment would be the standard for royal bastards—but Elia was true-born, his parentage confirmed and uncontested. It showed the disfavor that the late queen fell into prior to her death. And made Merrick all but certain that High King Hadrix really did kill her, whether by accident, negligence, or deliberate purpose it mattered not, the end results were the same. A motherless child who inherited the stigma held against his mother, and who was poorly treated by family and forgotten by his country.

Hadrix paid handsomely for magic-born with powers he coveted, those best suited to match his needs. Plenty of weather mages and earth and water mages, and they were trained in the College and then sent out in spring and autumn

to tend to the massive herds of livestock and the croplands that made up the majority of the countryside. Guarded by soldiers and kept chained in shackles that dulled their powers when not performing their duties, the enslaved mages might appear to be well-tended, but the truth was far more horrible. To the high king, they were things, tools to be used until spent, then discarded.

Merrick had a sinking, sickening suspicion that those magic-born enslaved in Eistrea that did not serve the high king's needs were either sold out of the country, or slain. Helleborian spies reported that any Eistrean magic-born with powers that were too strong or dangerous—those who could fight back—were killed quickly, usually their whole families too, to prevent that family line from producing more magic-born. It was horrible knowledge that Merrick struggled with—Hellebore was overflowing with magic-born citizens, and magic was as common as brown hair and nearly as unremarkable. For the Eistreans to kill their own for the imagined sin of wielding magic was impossible to reconcile with the peaceful, beautiful land Eistrea appeared to be on the surface.

The entire abomination of the slave trade in Eistrea was enough to make him sick just thinking about it, and Merrick stewed over his options after he heard the reports from the Hellions, spending the early morning hours cursing the need to wait and watch, when his entire being wanted to act. Delicate, dangerous plans relied on his actions over the next few weeks and he had a serious choice to make by the time the summer solstice arrived—he could not make the best choice by fuming and pacing in his rooms.

Kell strode quietly behind Merrick, and Cormand spoke softly to Talen as they walked through the palace halls, with Sitka bringing up the rear. They neared the main dining hall where meals were served when the court wasn't in attendance, and the seating was as informal as it could be in a palace. The doors were open and unmanned, and a low hum of chatter from courtiers and staff filled the huge space.

The goal of their mission was to be seen as friendly, accessible, and eager for firmer diplomatic connections between their two countries. Merrick in particular sought the most accurate information about the royals as individuals and the power structures at court, and the best way to get it was to let the natural order of things play out.

Foryne picked a table nearest the raised dais that held the king's table. The four Hellions ate before they left the ambassador's quarters, leaving Foryne to eat alone with the court. Merrick wasn't used to the duties of a bodyguard, but he understood them well enough to pass as one without qualms. Thankfully he was skilled with a sword, though not as adept as the other Hellions on this mission. Merrick's own magic kept his features obscured in case they ran into anyone who'd seen him in Hellebore—they couldn't afford for the ruse to be discovered.

He saw no one he recognized personally in the large dining hall, though he wasn't going to let down his guard. There were no mages to contend with either, which in this case was good because some of them could see through illusions like those he cast to hide his identity. He didn't change his entire face—merely altered it enough that he looked less like himself and more like the average citizen of Hellebore. Thankfully their people tended to run strongly with rugged features and dark hair. He resembled Talen and Kell enough to be brothers, both guards with strong jaws, high cheekbones and longish dark hair.

The Eistreans tended to run to golden and red hair, in varying shades, and any brown hair tended to be lighter, more honey tones, with wild red and gold highlights. Prince Elia was an outlier in more than his magic, so dissimilar enough from fellow Eistreans in appearance to be mistaken for a citizen of Hellebore. That distant kinship to Merrick's homeland was showing in more ways than one—even generations removed, Prince Elia bore the same general outward appearance and was blessed with the magic often seen in the Imperial family.

Foryne sat and the servants flocked around the ambassador. The four guards spread out, Talen taking up position not too far from Foryne's shoulder with Kell and Cormand along the wall behind the ambassador. Sitka remained near the door they would use if they needed to vacate the room quickly, keeping it clear of obstructions.

Merrick strode casually along the periphery of the room, ostensibly checking for threats but really hoping to overhear conversations amongst the courtiers as he walked.

It was closer to midday than dawn, and despite the late hour, those breaking their fast were few and far between. Most of the richer or higher-ranking courtiers were likely still abed or eating in their rooms elsewhere in the palace. It was a smaller palace than the one Merrick knew so well back home, and the number of people who could reside in the palace here in Meadowtown was probably limited. That in turn would likely affect the veracity of any gossip he might overhear, but sometimes it was the people most overlooked who knew the most about the goings-on in a hierarchical world like palace life.

His armor and the tunic he wore bore the Hellion colors and the Hellebore Imperial crest on his chest, the silhouette of a mountain carved in the vague shape of a castle, surrounded by white waterfalls on a field of green and blue, setting him apart from the palace guards. The servants darting between tables paid him more attention than the courtiers. From the servants he got appraising glances and friendly smiles or brief nods of acknowledgment. From the courtiers, not so much—they tended to ignore him, eyes sliding over him as if he didn't exist at all. Those people in between the two classes, like scholars and secretaries, briefly eyed him with curiosity and then went back to ignoring him, dismissing him as unimportant.

A wizened old man dressed in an upper level servant's garb stepped out from a recessed archway not too far from where Merrick stood, carrying a tray laden with covered plates, bowls, and a tea service. His arms shook, and Merrick leapt forward to take the tray before it spilled.

“Oh, thank you,” the old man exclaimed, watery blue eyes full of gratitude. “I’m not quite as strong as I used to be.”

“No thanks needed,” Merrick said with a smile, “let me help you take this to your destination.”

The old man looked about nervously, then shrugged, gesturing toward a servants’ hall entrance off to the side. He looked back and saw the kitchens through the recessed arch—the old man probably cut through the main dining area instead of taking a warren of passages meant for the servants since it was a more direct route and likely shorter. The old man should be gently retired to enjoy his last years in comfort.

Merrick matched his pace to the old man, and he caught Talen eyeing him in exasperation over his shoulder before they left the dining hall.

The servants’ hall had barren stone walls, though well-lit with torches and windows rested near the ceiling. Servants were bustling about, ducking through discreet doors and going about their duties, though they gave the old man a respectful nod or fond greeting as they walked down the hall and deeper into the palace into an area Merrick had yet to see. It was obvious Merrick was carrying the tray for the old man, and he got nods and smiles for it, and no complaints as they passed people in the servant hall.

“You’re one of the Hellions, then?” the old man said as he examined Merrick’s uniform with open curiosity.

“Yes, sir. This is my first time to Meadowtown with Ambassador Foryne.”

“Nice chap, the ambassador. Always kind to the servants. He was kind to my young master, too, so that makes him an alright sort in my book.”

“Your master, good sir?” Merrick asked casually, thinking perhaps the old man was a beloved servant to a minister or courtier. Most servants never got so old without being retired, forcefully or not. He seemed well-looked after even with the frailty of his advanced age.

“Ah, the young Prince Elia,” the old man said with obvious pride, smiling wide, revealing a full set of white teeth that spoke of a healthy, steady, lifetime diet. A beloved servant, indeed. “Sweet as the day is bright, and kinder than an old man like me deserves for a master. I served his late grandmother, mother, and now my young prince.”

Merrick merely nodded and tried to keep the excitement off his face at learning the old man was taking him to see the youngest prince. “I never got your name, sir,” Merrick said as he followed the old man out through a narrow door that opened into a spacious, luxuriously appointed hall.

“Wyle!” A gasp came from an open doorway mere feet away and the beautiful young prince dashed across the threshold into the hallway, hugging the old man. “I told you not to get breakfast, I don’t want you falling. Come on, back inside, please,” Prince Elia chided the old man, who merely tutted at his young master and batted away his hands.

“I can walk, my dear boy,” Wyle protested gently. “I’m not that far gone.” Wyle gestured to Merrick. “And this kind young Hellion walked me back from the kitchens, saving your breakfast.”

Prince Elia did a double-take and his face went red with a fierce blush, but he said nothing as he led Wyle into the room, Merrick following through the open door. That concerned him—if Merrick was just any guard from a foreign power, having him alone with a young prince could be potentially lethal. The boy had no concern for himself, though the love and care he took for a servant long past the age of retirement was commendable and heartening. There were no guards stationed in the hall near the prince’s rooms, either. Merrick wondered if the other royals had guards outside their doors, and suspected they might.

Merrick set the breakfast tray on a table beside a cold fireplace and watched in bemused fascination as Prince Elia fretted around the old man until he sat in an armchair beside the hearth, a thick blanket in his lap and a book pressed to his hands. Elia was doing his best to ignore Merrick, but he kept glancing through thick lashes at him as he pattered about,

nervous and startled, but also careful as he tended to the old man.

The prince darted over to the table, quickly poured a cup of tea, and brought it back to his servant, setting it carefully down at his elbow on a small table beside the chair.

“Drink your tea and I’ll get you some fruit. Did you grab some on your sneaky escape to the kitchens?” It was said lightly and in a teasing manner that spoke of long familiarity and a deep fondness. The prince was relaxed now that the old man was safely seated, his blush easing as he calmed from the shock of seeing Merrick at his door.

“I did indeed, young master. Eat your breakfast, I don’t need much,” Wyle ordered, though it was obvious Elia was going to do as he pleased, and that was taking care of Wyle over his exasperated protestations.

“Thank you for helping Wyle,” Prince Elia finally addressed Merrick as he returned to the table, grabbing a small bowl of fruit he uncovered before returning to Wyle, placing the bowl beside the cup of tea. His old servant taken care of, Prince Elia finally looked him full in the face, biting his lower lip and fidgeting a bit before settling.

Prince Elia blushed again in the most charming manner, a flush across high cheekbones and the adorable bridge of his nose, and a bit down his neck. Part of his face was hidden by thick, dark strands of hair that hung just past his chin, so black that the highlights from the morning sun pouring into the room through the tall windows flashed blue as he moved through the light. He was beautiful and striking, a rare bird glimpsed in a manicured garden, a hint of something precious in the mundane.

Merrick told himself to behave—this young man was no brazen courtier looking for a midday diversion with a willing partner, and he would bet his entire fortune that Prince Elia had no idea of the fetching image he made. He kept his appreciation under firm control, not wanting to impose himself upon the prince.

Even though he wanted to kiss those soft, sweet lips and make Elia sigh in pleasure.

Again.

Merrick bowed deeply, hair sliding over his shoulder. He slowly rose, noting the stirring of magic in those bright blue eyes. That flash of sky blue was a concern, but only slightly—he didn't think Prince Elia was trained, and the odds of him being able to see past the spells disguising Merrick's identity were slim, despite not knowing what gifts the young man possessed. And even if the young prince could see past his glamour, he doubted Prince Elia would recognize him since he'd never been to Hellebore.

Even then, Merrick was glad for his own extensive training, letting him maintain the glamour and his mental shields. He had no idea what gifts the prince had, aside from the telekinesis he used the night before at the feast, and that was an ability that very rarely appeared on its own—usually the magic-born had more than one gift, all of varying strengths.

“Your Highness, forgive the intrusion. I am Sir Merrick, one of the Hellions assigned to guard Ambassador Foryne. I was glad to be of assistance to your manservant. Wyle is a devoted companion.” He decided to pretend it was their first meeting, not wanting to expose the prince to his servant. He doubted Wyle spoke ill of his master to the other servants, but even the most innocent of comments could ignite a devastating rumor that destroyed reputations and lives.

“Thank you, Sir Merrick. Wyle means a lot to me,” Prince Elia said, blush spreading across his beautiful face. He nibbled on his lower lip with shiny white teeth, a smile flirting on his soft lips as he realized what Merrick was doing. He brushed a thick strand of blue-black hair back behind one ear and away from his face.

Merrick saw the split lip and a dark bruise on a pale, sharply defined cheek. Merrick winced internally at the sight, wanting to lift a hand to ease the pain, but unable to do more than yearn.

The mark on the youngest prince's face was not an injury typically received in a sparring circle. Bruising like that came from a slap or backhand, not a punch. Merrick was nearly convinced he saw deeper red and blue lines left by fingers on a fair cheek before raven-black hair obscured Elia's face. Those bruises were older than the injuries in the sparring circle, and Merrick thought back to the day before, realizing he had assumed the split lip was fresh, delivered by Derrent, but it was more than likely an older injury reopened during the farcical 'training.' Under the dirt and sweat and flushed skin, Elia's older injuries had blended in with the new yesterday, but now Merrick was able to see the evidence of older abuse on the prince's fair skin.

Merrick schooled his expression, keeping the rage kindling in his gut off his face, his mental shields strengthening as he worked to keep his magic from responding to his emotions. At home, no effort would be wasted on obscuring his eyes as magic stirred from within, but the prejudices held by the Eistreans regarding the magic-born made it essential for him to hide that part of himself.

Elia was flustered, and spoke more candidly than he probably should have with a strange soldier from a foreign country, twisting his fingers together. His right hand was bruised on his knuckles, and there was a hint of recently split blisters on his palm. "Wyle should be retired, but he has no family here to take care of him since he came with my mother when she got married. If he retires, he won't last long. I'm all he has."

"Your kindness does you credit," Merrick murmured in lieu of saying anything about his injuries, afraid to embarrass the young man. He did not know how Prince Elia would react to being questioned about the bruising, and he wanted the prince to enjoy his company. Pretending that he hadn't kissed that tender mouth the day before, on the other hand, was one of the hardest things he'd done in months, but protecting Elia was important. The high king learning that his son had been engaging in salacious activities with a foreign guard might spell disaster for everyone involved.

Merrick also wanted to reach out and grab those slim hands, ease the tension, apply some salve to the blisters and wrap them in protective bandages to prevent infection. That a prince was left un-tended by healers was unconscionable, confounding, and infuriating.

Heart racing, anger stirring in his core, Merrick had trouble looking away from the beautiful prince who had stepped far too close to Merrick for propriety, close enough that Merrick could reach out and tug him into an embrace. Yet they were not alone, and the door was open. Anyone passing in the hall might see them.

A distant murmur of voices broke Merrick free from the spell anger and fascination had woven around him, and he cocked his head to the side, listening intently as the words grew more distinct and a few people approached the prince's room in the hallway. It sounded like a few people conversing casually. Their strides weren't urgent, not like royal guards responding to a report of a foreign guard seen in a young prince's private rooms.

Elia heard the voices too and bolted to the door, peeking out into the hall before pulling back, shutting the door but for a sliver. The sound of people walking could still be heard through the door, but no one stopped, and the voices faded as they kept going.

"I'm sorry to be so rude, but you need to go back. You can't be seen here. For both our sakes," Prince Elia whispered urgently to Merrick once those in the hall were out of earshot, fear evident in his expressive eyes. The young prince took a sharp breath and made a visible effort to calm himself before speaking in a more tempered manner. "Please give my best to the ambassador."

Elia opened the door enough to peek again before turning back to Merrick, frantic worry in every line of his body, the urgency in his voice conveying quite clearly that Elia worried about being found with him. Merrick wondered if it was due to his status as a Hellion or because he was a strange man in the prince's rooms. Might even be a combination of factors, and it

hurt Merrick right under his breastbone that such a kind soul was so worried to be discovered.

In Hellebore, such a scene would be unremarkable—Elia was of age, as was Merrick, and there was a servant present—no impropriety at all. Yet this was Eistrea, the high king's son and palace—and Merrick wanted nothing more than to fix everything and make Elia safer.

Elia waited anxiously, eyes pleading. He held the door open with his left hand, keeping the injured right hand out of view down by his hip, eyes wide with worry. Merrick nodded to Wyle in goodbye and headed for the door.

“Thank you,” Prince Elia said quietly as Merrick passed him into the hall. “Take the same path back that you took to get here, and you shouldn't get lost. I don't want either of us to get in trouble, so please hurry.”

“Your Highness,” Merrick bowed shallowly at the shoulders then left quickly, ducking through the same narrow door that took him there with Wyle.

Merrick made sure the doorway was securely shut before he clenched his eyes and jaw and let righteous fury ignite in his heart.

Someone hurt Elia.

The bruising was clearly defined on a pale, fair-skinned cheek, hints of deeper red from fingers laid out in a slap. The lack of contusions caused by a punch from a trained soldier supported his hypothesis. The marks on the younger man's hand could have been earned in the training yard, but they were clearly untreated by anyone with first aid experience or a healer, the ripped skin of the blisters leaking fluid and the skin irritated and inflamed.

The young prince was afraid of being caught with a man in his room. It had been a sharper, more visceral fear than could be explained by Merrick's status as a soldier from another country. Elia was an adult, and Merrick doubted the older princes would be worried about someone finding them with a Hellion in their sitting rooms, especially with a servant present

as well. Hellebore and Eistrea were allies, the relationship friendly on the surface, and there was little in the way of political maneuvering like there was between Hellebore and more reserved allies to the south of the empire.

Everything in Merrick wanted to go back, scoop Elia over his shoulder, and return to Hellebore with all possible speed. And that was a far better option than finding the person who abused Elia and running them through with his sword.

Killing the High King of Eistrea would lead to war, and probably upset Prince Elia.

His snort of stifled, almost manic laughter and grumble of rage were loud in the empty hall, and Merrick paced a few steps away from the doors, then back again, talking himself down from doing something stupid.

Heartbeat loud in his ears, Merrick breathed through his anger, sparks cracking along his fingers and shoulders, his magic escaping through the tiny gaps the rage created in his usually iron control. He let it go as best he could, learning from long years of practice that suppressing the rage made it worse. If someone were to see his eyes in that moment, the truth of who he was would be harder to hide—his eyes showed the truth of the magic-born, and his illusions might not hold.

Learning emotional control as a young boy gifted with magic of his own had been of the utmost importance, and he was so glad he could call on that control now as a grown man. He let himself feel the anger, breathed through it, and eventually it eased with each passing heartbeat until it was gone. Suppressing anger never boded well—acknowledging it, feeling it, and letting it pass was the best way to keep anger from harnessing his magic and leaving destruction in its wake.

Merrick returned the way he'd come, the walk back helping to ease any remaining tension from his shoulders, and he made sure to keep his expression as unbothered as he could manage. There were fewer servants in the halls as he retraced his path and then slipped back into the dining hall without anyone raising a fuss. He resumed his lazy patrol around the room, nodding to those who met his gaze, and then rejoined

the Hellions standing guard along the wall behind Foryne as he ate breakfast.

The ambassador was not alone—Princess Aria sat across from him, dressed in a white gown trimmed in lace threaded with gold, hemmed in designs of wheat with tiny blue gems sparkling along the neckline in wavy lines like water. Thick golden hair was pulled back from her face with two braids and the rest left to fall down her back in a thick mane nearly to her waist.

She was fresh-faced and lively, more animated than the few sleepy courtiers present, despite the hour nearing midday. Merrick was able to get a good line of sight on the princess as he joined the captain and stood at rest, hands clasped behind his back, expression set to mildly disinterested as he made a show of scanning the hall before looking back to Foryne and his companion.

Captain Talen side-eyed him, mildly annoyed, and Merrick bit back a smirk when he heard a quiet grumble from the Hellion, who was no doubt dying to interrogate him about his disappearing act.

Mindful of their task and the company of the nearby princess, Merrick escaped imminent interrogation from the captain. No doubt the second they were back in their quarters, Talen would be relentless. Well before they left Vastok to begin their mission, he did promise not to leave the captain's sight unless it couldn't be helped, and Talen was probably going to remind him of that promise the first moment he was able.

“How fares the Imperial family, Ambassador?” Princess Aria asked with an ingratiating smile as she daintily cut a piece of fruit on her plate.

Merrick listened with half an ear to the conversation, taking in the unspoken words and behaviors of the princess. Intonation, expressions, the weight of pauses and emphasis to certain words, they all revealed more than most people thought. A lifetime of living in the imperial court in Vastok

gave Merrick a fluency in the hidden meanings beneath a person's words.

Turning his attention to the dining table, Merrick noted that the knife and the plate were gilded with gold, and the fork even appeared to be pure gold, making his left brow twitch. Staring at the amount of gold that covered even the most commonplace of objects left Merrick with a deep dislike for the metal when previously he'd been purely ambivalent. He was going to come out of this mission hating the sight of it, and was more than thankful that the aesthetics in his homeland ran toward stone and wood and a wide variety of jewel tones.

Everything in Eistrea was light in color: yellow, beige, or white, rarely darker than the golden hue of ripe wheat, and covered in gold. *Even the people*, he thought to himself as he took in the princess with a covert gaze. There was gold in her hair, heads of wheat fashioned into clasps to hold her hair back from her face, a heavy gold necklace around her throat, and each hand bore at least three or more rings made of gold and set with blue stones. Gold thread comprised the embroidery around the hems, and he wouldn't doubt her slippers had gold on them as well.

Eistrea was wealthy, or at least the nobles and merchant classes, and obviously the royal family. What wealth they had came from the international trade and exports of the crops grown in the bountiful fields in the Eistrean countryside. Most of the kingdoms around the Sea of Iscandis ate some sort of food that came from Eistrea or contained ingredients sourced from that kingdom. Eistrean wheat and other grains fed millions of people in half a dozen countries, and most of the profits returned to the High King's coffers.

The wheat in the Eistrean royal crest made sense, as it accounted for a large portion of that family's wealth.

As did the slave trade.

It was so pervasive that magic-born with earth or water sense or weather-working were sold by their own families or communities to the crown. Those lucky enough to hide their abilities could go a lifetime without being found out, but

Helleborian spies embedded in the countryside still reported back tales of elders killed by children or grandchildren when old age lessened their control over their abilities or senility overcame their caution.

Keeping his composure came naturally, and that was a good thing when Princess Aria continued her subtle inquiry with the ambassador.

“His Grace is expected to arrive so late to the solstice festival, is everything well?” Princess Aria asked politely as she cut a tiny piece of fruit and raised it delicately to her mouth, barely moving her lips as she ate. How she managed to appear to not eat or talk without breaking the smooth planes of her face left him wondering if she hadn’t some measure of magical abilities herself.

“His hermitage has been planned for some time, since last summer. Emperor Heremis has been anticipating the isolation to reflect on his duties as emperor before his pilgrimage to the Holy City of Adracias. He is looking forward to the solstice and treaty celebrations.”

“Sounds quite relaxing, and commendable. To reaffirm one’s life in service to duty is an honor only a few people can comprehend, of course. I too have devoted my life to the crown and serving as an example of humility and grace for the people of Eistrea,” Princess Aria declared without a trace of irony or sarcasm. She did not follow it with any examples though, and Merrick certainly could not recall any crucial moments of upheaval or strain within the country that her highness could have helped navigate.

“Your two great families have much in common, Your Highness, and it cheers me to see your steadfast devotion to duty and the Eistrean crown at such a young age. You do the high king proud.”

Foryne was a diplomat for a reason, and Merrick bit the inside of his mouth to keep from smirking at the tiny hint of exasperation in the ambassador’s voice. Thankfully the princess was either too well-trained to react or too oblivious to notice, and responded to his statement at face value.

“Will the rest of the imperial family be joining us in the Holy City?” Princess Aria asked next, holding the golden utensils at the ready as she made a show of looking for the next tiny tidbit she might eat. Merrick hoped she at least ate something substantial before fortuitously arriving to dine with the Imperial ambassador in the public dining hall.

Merrick made sure to watch her expressions as Foryne contemplated his answer. Foryne knew exactly what to disclose to the Eistreans and what was to be withheld—Merrick wasn’t worried about Foryne letting something slip he shouldn’t.

“His Grace’s sons, the Imperial princes, are remaining in Vastok. They are only just five years old and quite rambunctious. Her Grace, The Imperial Princess Marion, is minding her nephews until the Emperor returns home to Vastok.” Foryne kept his tone civil and impartial, as if relating the weather, keeping the princess from picking at his words looking for a weakness.

“Twins, as I recall? How lovely for His Grace,” Princess Aria said, making a show of neatly cutting a grape in half and spearing one of the pieces with her golden fork, eating it delicately.

“Yes, identical. A trait from their late mother’s family. Empress Estelle was delighted by their births, as was His Grace. The princes are precocious children and a living testament to Her Grace’s memory, Adracias rest her soul,” Foryne said softly at the end, reaching for his goblet and taking a small sip, and Princess Aria was left floundering for a moment, effectively shut down in her questioning as Foryne appeared deeply moved by remembered grief at the mention of the late empress.

Princess Aria echoed the sentiment, and Merrick looked away, pretending to observe the room. He saw Talen checking on him from the corner of his eye, and gave his friend a slight smile and short nod to let him know he was well.

Empress Estelle had been a fine woman—kind, intelligent, and a willing and able companion to the emperor, shouldering

the duties of the imperial throne without a qualm or break in stride. The emperor mourned her premature death not long after the birth of their twin sons, as did the entire empire.

Princess Aria quickly steered the conversation toward amusements to be found in the imperial court in Vastok, all but interrogating Foryne on how often the emperor entertained the court with balls and parties. She grew increasingly frustrated, though she concealed it well, when Foryne casually informed her that the emperor's sister ran the court and the season's schedule while the emperor tended to running the empire.

Merrick bit back a smile, glancing down at the floor, again thankful that the previous emperor had the wisdom and foresight to appoint Foryne as ambassador. The man delighted in politely frustrating the schemes of marriage-minded nobles. Foiling a princess's plans, one determined to ingratiate herself with him to get herself in a position to be the next empress, was a pleasant way to pass his morning.

Hellebore did not need an ambitious spouse for their emperor, nor one who delighted in belligerence or violence like the oldest son. Merrick had yet to meet the second son, Alden, but the information gathered and the abundant rumors of drunken debauchery on a near nightly basis was off-putting enough that Merrick was almost ready to believe the River God Adracias was flowing in the direction Merrick was already inclined to go.

There was no fighting the current of fate.

He was close to making a decision, and hoped fate agreed.

Chapter Six

Elia pulled his hair over the bruised side of his face, trailing after the guard sent to fetch him. He kept his eyes down and did not look at anyone they passed as he was led to the High King's rooms.

The guard left him when he reached the sitting room in his father's suite. Alden was already present, hungover and grumpy, face haggard and eyes covered by a damp cloth as he held his goblet aloft for a servant to pour in more watered-down wine.

Elia made a face, thinking Alden would feel better with some plain water and a hearty meal, but he knew better than to say anything. Alden wouldn't strike out at him physically like Everett would, but he'd make a point of verbally flaying him alive with his sharp tongue and sharper wit. Accomplished with a sword, yet he preferred to pierce his opponents with scathing comments and scorn over actually drawing blood.

Hadrix was not present, so Elia took the chance to sit as close to the exit as possible and made himself appear small, hands in his lap and eyes on the floor, though he made sure to keep his attention on listening for the heavy footsteps of the high king and his oldest brother.

Wyle was resting in the tiny valet's room next to Elia's bedroom, secure for the moment as the old man had his nap. Elia was again thankful for Sir Merrick, the Hellion keeping Wyle from drawing attention to himself. He was dreading the day that Wyle drew the wrong kind of attention and the notice of someone who had the power to send him away from Elia.

Sir Merrick's face gave away his lack of knowledge of who Wyle was and his connection to Elia when Elia found them in the hallway, the Hellion helping the old man without complaint. First Sir Merrick helped Elia escape Derrent, and now the Hellion helped Wyle, further proving that Elia's growing infatuation was well placed.

Remembering the Hellion left Elia flustered. He'd been unexpectedly kind and thoughtful, and not at all what Elia expected from the infamous Hellions. The reputation of the Hellions reached even to Meadowtown; they were an elite squadron of warriors tasked with the personal protection of the emperor, his family, and those the emperor deemed worthy of protection. They could only be Hellions by personal appointment by the ruling emperor of Hellebore, and the leading Captain was chosen from the ranks of the Hellions. From what little Elia knew, many of the Hellions were swordmasters, though it wasn't a requirement—what those requirements were was hard to say, a murky set of qualifications that remained a constant source of rumors and gossip.

What made Sir Merrick a Hellion was a mystery as well, but whatever his talents were, they were enough to have him chosen by the emperor. A capable fighter and devoted soldier at the least. That meant Sir Merrick was a dangerous man, and the standards of the Hellions likely meant he was willing to kill or be killed in the defense of his charges.

Elia frowned as he stared at the toes of his thin boots. Usually he found soldiers intimidating, the leashed violence of their duties enough to make him wary, keeping him at a distance. Yet that morning, Sir Merrick put him at ease, and it had little to do with his kindness to Wyle, though that was part of it. His instinctive, typical reaction toward men of arms and soldiers never occurred, even with Sir Merrick in his private space.

Sir Merrick's voice was a smooth rumble, his accent light, his words those of an educated man. He stood tall and proud, as if used to people watching him all the time, unbothered by the regard and judgments of others. Hellions were close to the

imperial family, literally, and it probably meant he was in the public eye all the time in the course of his duties.

Sir Merrick paid attention to him, and Elia had seen the flash of anger in the Hellion's eyes when he saw the bruise on Elia's face, but oddly enough, Elia wasn't able to *sense* that anger. Not like he did with every other person when he wasn't shielded so tightly he was ready to pass out. It was as if Sir Merrick kept his emotions to himself, and somehow Elia was granted peace in his presence. He wondered if that was merely a fluke of his poorly managed abilities or if there was something about Sir Merrick himself that kept Elia from enduring the Hellion's emotions.

It was odd, to rely on his other senses and body language to decipher another person's emotions when he was so used to feeling the intrusive emotions of others. He could sense Sir Merrick, but only when he was standing close enough to touch, and the usual stabbing, violating emotions of another human were utterly absent. It was as if Sir Merrick was a cool, shaded wall of stone out of the reach of the burning summer sun, a welcome respite from the constant barraging of others' emotions.

Only with continued physical touch did Elia sense anything from Sir Merrick, and he had been so utterly lost to the kiss they shared yesterday that he never once felt any intrusive emotions or thoughts, despite the intimacy of the moment. Intimacy without violation, and he wanted more of it. Wanted more from Sir Merrick.

He had no idea what to do about any of it, and he would be worrying until he figured something out, he was sure. Though the thought of needing to be around Sir Merrick in order to learn what exactly was going on was as attractive a thought as anything Elia had had in recent months—Sir Merrick was handsome, and drew Elia's eye like a crow happening upon a lost piece of jewelry in the gardens.

And he kissed like a dream. Elia had to be careful not to get too absorbed in that memory—he was in danger, awaiting his father always carried the threat of potential violence, and

he needed his mind sharp and at the ready to mitigate any fall out from whatever crisis was looming now.

The empathy he was cursed with was still functional, as he could feel Alden suffering in his chair several feet away, as well as the hovering storm cloud that was the high king somewhere off in the distance. He piled more layers of shielding between himself and his family, not wanting to suffer more than necessary if this family meeting went badly.

If his siblings caught him reading them, their reactions were usually sharp and aggressive, and Hadrix would be even worse. Mental walls cobbled together through instinct and trial and error, it was by no means perfect and he struggled when tired or stressed.

The old dream of finding an accepting, kind teacher for his unwanted abilities stubbornly held on despite his more pragmatic nature telling him it was impossible.

There was no escape for Elia, a thought he let slip away as he sensed Everett approaching from the hall.

Everett stormed into the room and went right for the nearest pitcher of wine, pouring himself a full glass and then throwing himself into a chair beside Alden, smirking at their brother when Alden glared at him from beneath the lifted corner of the damp cloth across his eyes. It was the middle of the day, though neither brother cared much for following society's expectations for proper behavior—at least not when their father or sister was absent.

“Must you be so loud?” Alden lamented, dropping the cloth back down and letting his head fall back against the chair.

“Loud?” Everett said, raising his voice enough that even Elia winced. “I’m not being loud.”

He was, of course, and all Alden did in response was make a vulgar gesture at Everett that had the eldest prince snorting into his goblet in amusement. Elia looked away and at the floor when Everett spared a glance in his direction. Not

engaging with Everett when he was instigating arguments was the best way to avoid getting hit.

“Father sent for us?” Everett spoke abruptly.

“Yes? Was that a question? I’m not here in his sitting room at this hour of my own accord. I’ll save that devoted ass-kissing for you and our dear sister,” Alden declared, cutting and impatient. “Honestly, Everett, do you use your brain at all? Is there anything in there except thoughts of sweaty muscles, half-naked soldiers, and inarticulate grunts?”

“I’m not a cocksucker like the runt,” Everett burst out, and Elia heard a muted slap and a grunt as Everett no doubt took out his temper on Alden, though he never hit too hard—Alden could be just as dangerous as Everett with a sword, and he was far more devious in his revenge than Everett—and Everett knew it. “A prince needs to be ready for anything, and that means training with other men.”

Alden hummed, obviously not buying it, and Everett growled insults under his breath. Elia was used to the insults slung his way, and no longer flinched when Everett threw those words at Elia without care or regard. He found it hypocritical to say the least—Everett fucked his fair share of men, and never hid it. Same with Alden, though Everett made sure everyone knew he was always the one topping, never receiving, as if that made a difference in any real way or affected how people saw Everett. He was an asshole, regardless of his sexual exploits, and yet Everett was obsessed with thinking that what he did in private with willing bed partners was important to his standing in court.

Out of all the royal heirs, Elia was certain he was the only one who had no sexual experience whatsoever. Even Aria probably had a kiss or more under her belt, and was courted regularly despite never accepting any one suitor’s hand in marriage. He suspected she had more than just a kiss, though, since she was firmly in control of the royal household, the servants, and the lower echelons of the court. No one would be the wiser if she had a secret lover.

Whatever Everett was going to say or do was interrupted by the sound of their father leaving his bedroom and heading their way. Much like Everett, King Hadrix did everything loudly, and doors slamming was the clearest mood indicator the palace had when it came to surviving the king.

Elia looked up slowly, not wanting to draw his father's eye, feeling like a rabbit anxiously hiding on the edge of a field, watching the sky for a hawk. Drawing his father's attention never went well. Now that he was grown and the looming possibility of an alliance marriage with Hellebore on the horizon, Elia was going to be forced to attend more family meetings, he was certain. And if he was going to be made to attend, he wanted to survive them. At least until Aria was an empress or Hadrix was dead. Or Elia was dead. That last one was more likely.

Alden sat up, tossed the damp cloth on the nearby table, and managed to look alive despite what must have been a raging hangover. Everett gulped down his wine and set aside his goblet just as Hadrix came striding into the room, a frown on his face already.

Elia poured more of himself into his shields, not wanting to feel anything from his father, and he was glad for the precaution when Hadrix sneered at him in disgust before ignoring him entirely. As a small child, sensing his father's disdain had him in tears on a regular basis, and then he was slapped or beaten for being overwrought. Now he knew better and tried to preemptively block it all out before it could slice into his heart and mind. Thankfully his tears dried up years ago.

Everett stood with a boisterous racket and Alden followed in a more sedate manner. Elia did so in time with Alden so that Hadrix would be looking at Everett, who stood first, and not Elia. He kept his head down and hands clasped in front of him as he and his brothers bowed to their father, before rising as one. Elia lifted his head a bit more, hair hanging over his eyes, letting him see the other men without them seeing his eyes. Eye contact provoked confrontation.

“Father, good morning,” Everett boisterously greeted their sire. “How can I be of service?”

“Shut it, Everett, it’s not even morning anymore,” Hadrix waved a hand, dismissing Everett’s ingratiating words without a care. His nose wrinkled. “Did you bathe before coming from the training yard?”

“I thought coming here right away was wiser...” Everett stammered out.

“Bathe first, that’s an order,” Hadrix said with a disgruntled expression. Alden smirked at Everett when Hadrix turned away from them and headed for a side table laden with his favorite fruit and small baked goods.

They waited, silently, though Everett pouted and sniffed his tunic a few times, while Alden side-eyed Everett, smirking. Everett grew red in the face and his eyes promised violence if they were alone, but Hadrix did not tolerate outbursts from his children, regardless of their ages. Everett might be a hothead, but he had enough prudence not to anger Hadrix intentionally.

After a few minutes of Hadrix sampling the food on offer, he turned and sat casually in a large chair that was exclusively his, a whipping on standby for anyone who dared sit in it, even if Hadrix was nowhere near. It was a red and gold monstrosity of a chair, in all manner a throne if not for the upholstery in garish patterns of mounted warriors attacking fleeing peasants armed with pitchforks.

Elia hated that chair. It belonged to a distant great-grandfather, a man much like Everett, quick to punish both friend and family harshly and intolerant of any mutterings amongst the common folk. Ugly and tawdry, it was an eyesore that Hadrix was obsessively territorial about and made sure was kept in pristine condition by the palace servants.

“Your sister is to marry the emperor,” Hadrix stated idly, as if he were commenting on the weather to strangers instead of planning political maneuvers concerning the fate of two kingdoms. “You’ll all be on your best behavior until she secures a betrothal. I intend for her to be wed by the end of the solstice festival.”

Expected outcome, as far as Elia was concerned. Aria was meant for a throne, and it matched with Hadrix's disdain for women in general for their father to get her away from *his*. Handing her off to their neighbor was a way for him to keep a woman off the high throne while also providing access to the political power of the imperial throne.

With Aria angling to be an empress, then that meant Everett and Alden were in the running for crown prince. Elia all but felt the waves of smug satisfaction from Everett, and minor disgruntlement from Alden. Elia ducked his chin a bit more, hiding any chance his grimace might be seen, thinking there could be no worse future than Everett as high king.

There would be violence and upheaval within days of Everett taking the throne.

“No incidents, no distractions, and you’ll not monopolize the ambassador’s attention or time in any way. No public whoring, no drunken brawls with the court, and no dueling,” Hadrix stressed that last order, skewering Everett where he still stood at attention in front of his chair. Hadrix continued. “Do not antagonize the Hellions; I want the ambassador to be considering your sister as a bride for his emperor and not whining about dead bodyguards.”

Captain Talen was a swordmaster, and Everett, while skilled, was repeatedly denied when he attempted to earn that rank for himself. Elia doubted a duel with a Hellion would end well for Everett, but Hadrix's ego was such that he couldn't even contemplate his own son losing a blatantly unequal match. Derrent, an actual swordmaster, was soundly defeated by the Hellion captain with an ease that intimidated enough people that the usual hotheads in Everett's group of cronies were uncharacteristically quiet, and Everett was exercising restraint, unusual in itself.

He felt Everett's frustration, a sick burning sensation that clawed at the edges of Elia's mental shields, signaling Everett had been contemplating picking a fight with one of the Hellions already, and Elia was glad their father was savvy enough to forbid it outright before violence erupted.

“Emperor Heremis won’t be in the Holy City until a few days before the solstice, so your sister has a small window to secure the ambassador’s endorsement for a betrothal. It’s a treaty year so the expectation for an alliance marriage is high, and that’s to my advantage. We get your sister in place as empress and we get access to Hellebore in a way we haven’t had in generations,” Hadrix made sure to spear Everett and Alden with his sharp-eyed expression, warning of severe repercussions if they failed to help their sister secure the desired result.

Elia wasn’t even a thought. Hadrix never even looked at him, as if Elia had no sway on the destiny of two kingdoms. And he didn’t. That was true. Elia would be a footnote in the history of Eistrea, a forgotten name and a poorly rendered portrait shuffled into a corner in some mismanaged gallery of a far-off estate after he was sold in matrimony to a rich family for power and influence.

Elia focused on staying small and uninteresting, and maybe he might get out of the whole debacle with only a few bruises and a chance to be invisible for several days as his sister drew all eyes her way.

Hadrix wanted more access to Hellebore, though Elia wondered why—they already shared so much between their two countries. Trade, religion, language, and ancient history spanning centuries. What else did Hadrix want from Hellebore that he didn’t already have? Power? Wealth? He was high king—and the emperor of Hellebore had his own heirs. Giving Aria to the emperor was surely redundant in all ways—there was nothing left to gain for Hadrix except grandchildren not in the line to inherit unless a serious tragedy befell the imperial family.

Though that in itself was probably the answer. Those with power hoarded it like a dragon hoarded gold, refusing to part with any bit of it and always seeking more. Taking advantage of the treaty-year expectations of intermarriage between the two dynasties to secure more power over the continent of Velanta wasn’t out of the realm of possibility with Hadrix.

Grandchildren from Aria and Emperor Heremis would be three heartbeats from ascending the imperial throne.

Sickness swirled in his belly at the realization that both his father and his siblings were utterly capable of planning for a takeover of the Hellebore Empire through marriage and murder.

Justice under High King Hadrix was brutal. Many crimes received the harshest sentences for even minor infractions that under previous rulers were treated with mercy and leniency—Hadrix saw no point in mercy, and sneered at compassion.

Even if the high king's plans weren't nefarious and his goal truly was marrying off his daughter to the best possible match in the age-old manner of royalty, and not with murder—Hadrix having more power across Velanta through the bonds of family was frightening all on its own.

“We leave tomorrow,” Hadrix declared, jolting Elia from his thoughts. He went cold when his father's regard finally landed on him. “You'll be quiet and stay away from the ambassador while we're on the road. You're of age now so I can't leave your useless carcass here without facing questions. We've got appearances to maintain. You're going to be as invisible as possible, understood?”

Elia never had any intention of going near the ambassador unless required, so he nodded once and kept his face tilted down.

“Yes, Sire.” He made sure to be quiet enough that he wasn't going to draw too much attention but not so quiet that his father would get annoyed. A hard line to navigate.

“I'll be riding with the ambassador during the day, and that leaves your sister to work her wiles during the evenings. She gets priority time with the man. Everett, leave him alone, and leave his guards alone. Alden, keep your mouth shut unless you're complimenting your sister. Do not attempt to seduce him or any of his guards.”

Everett burst out laughing at the last bit, quickly choking it back when Hadrix glared at him, Alden glowering as well.

Though Alden did have a habit of sleeping with everyone he found even remotely attractive, and Elia supposed the Helleborian Ambassador was handsome, for an older man, so the warning wasn't unfounded. And the Hellions.....they were all attractive. Especially the Captain and Sir Merrick.

Elia was not looking forward to the journey, but he supposed it could be worse. At least he'd been ordered to be invisible and was not part of the plan to make Aria an empress. And maybe during the weeklong journey, Elia might get a chance to see a certain Hellion in the course of his duties.

Chapter Seven

The Eistrean royal carriage was made of thick, ancient timbers that came from trees that once grew in the far, far north of Eistrea. Nothing so huge grew anywhere south of the glaciers in these modern times, the ancient forests long cleared out for crops and grazing lands. What remained of the once huge swaths of forest were preserved behind the ancient boundary walls of the noble estates scattered throughout the countryside, out of reach of most of the citizenry of Eistrea.

A huge monstrosity of old-fashioned excess, the royal carriage was an inescapable and lumbering reminder of the power wielded by Hadrix and the dynasty that stretched back to the founding of Eistrea. It was also the first time Elia had even ridden in it, and the novelty wore off within an hour of departure.

The antiquated carriage spent most of the year covered in linen cloths, the wood oiled, and the upholstery kept free from moth damage. It was only brought out whenever the royal family made the pilgrimage to the Holy City. Pulled by a team of eight horses, it was large enough to hold the entire royal family, with space for two drivers and two footmen. Kept warm inside by a footwell brazier and lanterns for light, the carriage would be a welcoming space in the winter, cozy and solid. Too bad it was never used in the winter.

In the summer, it was an oven, reducing the passengers to cranky, sweaty, bickering antagonists. Elia was trapped inside with his sister and Everett, Alden having been banished to ride

with the guards after he vomited up a flagon of wine, stalling the entire convoy as the carriage was cleaned.

Elia was surrounded by hundreds of people, from courtiers to servants, and he was exhausted, mentally and physically. The heat was brutal, the lack of fresh air stifling, making him feel smothered, and his sporadic and often insufficient mental shields were barely fielding the waves of frustration and resentment pouring off Everett, nevermind the dozens of humans enduring the summer heat in the royal convoy.

Those riding were lucky—the height on horseback gave them more exposure to the breeze off the river, plus the ability to choose where they wanted to be in the convoy, relative to their ranks and tasks at least.

The day was bright, the clouds fluffy and few, and the wind was just strong enough to cool the skin and blow the inevitable travel dust away from the middle and rear of the convoy.

The high king rode his prized red roan stallion near the front of the convoy with the ambassador, allowing the people dotting the countryside to see their king as he passed, dressed in golden finery and a gleaming gold circlet that flashed in the sun. Riding at the front of the convoy spared his father from the dust and the less than pleasant scents from the horses, though how Hadrix wasn't sweating through his royal finery left Elia amused and a bit wary. Hadrix was probably going to be in a bear of a mood that evening when they stopped to make camp.

Elia tried to ride with the guards as well when Alden was ordered out of the conveyance by their sister, but Everett caught him by the scruff of the neck and tossed him back into the carriage before he could slink off and accost the horsemaster. They had the mounts to spare—each of the royals had a few horses brought along for just that purpose—but Aria refused to let him out of her sight, as if afraid he would do something to embarrass her in front of the ambassador.

Hadrix was reluctant to share the ambassador's attention during the ride, determined to enact his part of the plan to

manipulate the ambassador, and through him the emperor.

Aria was set to work her wiles on him once they camped each evening during the journey. Though how she expected to impress anyone when wilting from the heat was beyond Elia. At least those riding had the benefit of the breeze coming off the river.

Elia never disagreed with his sister or defied her orders, not since he was a small child, but he had caught sight of the dashing Hellion guard riding with the ambassador earlier—and he was sorely tempted to rebel and make a fuss for the first time ever. But refusing to obey his sister gave Everett another excuse to hurt him, and he'd learned that quickly.

Sir Merrick was mounted on a fine gray mare with a braided mane and tail, the Helleborian colors of his uniform and the horse's tack vibrant against the horse's shoulder. There was something about the older man that left Elia flustered and eager to see him again, even if it was merely a glimpse.

The day was their first on the road, following the Heartline Branch of the Adracias River, which would take them all the way to the Holy City where the three main branches of the mighty Adracias converged, surrounding an island city where the mutual faith of Eistrea and Hellebore was centered. The first day of a hellish journey for Elia, even with their slow pace, short travel durations, and the early stops in midafternoons to set up camp. Surrounded by so many people, and unable to escape.

Here in the vast, sprawling, flat valley that made up most of the country, the Heartline was wide and ponderous, feeding hundreds of aqueducts and irrigation canals siphoning off the water that came down from the glaciers hundreds of miles away in the vast northern reaches of the Velantan continent. Even this far south, the water was still cooler than the air, though not as frigid as it was closer to the headwaters. Deep enough for small boats and flat-bottom barges to navigate up the Heartline all the way to Meadowtown, and a short way beyond. The Heartline made trade possible—both coming and going, as the three largest branches of the Adracias River converged then flowed south into the sea, and there were no

rapids to impede travel, not unless one was traveling west into Hellebore. That country was hilly and grew more mountainous the closer one got to the capital, Vastok. That city sat nestled in the heart of the Helleborian Range, a wedge of volcanic mountains that pierced the sky and were full of old-growth timber forests, and wild beasts Elia could only dream about.

According to some of his previous tutors, Hellebore was home to both dragons and gryphons, though his family scoffed at such fanciful thinking. There had been no such creatures seen in Eistrea for over a hundred years, if not more, and though a dragon skull the size of a pony was displayed in the High King's hunting lodge in the north, it was older than the royal family and Elia had trouble countenancing such a creature existing. The skull was falling apart, dusty and ill-kept, and it was hard to picture a living creature from the remains displayed grotesquely over the huge fireplace in the lodge. Elia wished to one day see a dragon in flight, or a gryphon soaring gracefully around a mountain peak.

Even seeing a mountain, and not a gently rolling hill, would be a sight he'd cherish for the rest of his life. His homeland was rather flat and uninteresting, all the wild places razed for farming and grazing. The entire country was practically one huge pasture and tilled field. Farming villages and trading posts popped up at road and river convergences, and there was nothing left of the once-dense forestland that stretched from river to ocean in the distant past. The crops were traded to a variety of neighboring kingdoms, most of the produce going to Hellebore, and the high king's coffers were overflowing with gold as a result.

The carriage rocked ponderously down the well-tended road, though at such a slow pace there was hardly any breeze making its way through the windows. Seeing his sister sitting in the rear-facing seat watching the world pass backwards made his stomach roll in a dreadful way just thinking about it.

She was busy with a flimsy piece of needlework, her thin cotton gown the only concession she made to the intolerable heat within the carriage. Both were damp from sweat, and Aria was surely suffering the most, since Everett and Elia were able

to remove their jackets inside the carriage, and she was bound by modesty to remain fully dressed.

The carriage rounded a slight bend as the road followed a curve in the river and the view outside the window shifted too far for Elia's comfort, and his stomach roiled in complaint. Elia groaned, wrapping an arm around his stomach, and he tried breathing through his nose and out his mouth, hoping not to get sick.

"Not you too," Everett snarled in disgust. Their brother was also dressed for the weather, the fancy jacket covered in gold threads tossed aside on the seat between them, his thin cotton shirt sticking to his chest. Everett was a disagreeable soul to begin with and the heat only made him crankier. "If you get sick in this carriage, I'll make you walk the rest of the way."

"Everett, silence," Aria sharply commanded. Everett shut up quickly, though he kept glaring at Elia. Aria reached up and knocked on the trap door in the roof, which opened a second later. "Please stop the carriage and inform the horsemaster that Prince Elia will need his mount readied immediately. My brother will be riding the remainder of the trip."

"Of course, Your Highness," the footman replied, closing the trapdoor. A call went up, and the carriage slowed and a minute later stopped.

He heard a footman clamber down, who then shouted to the rear of the convoy, more shouts answering. Aria sighed dramatically, eyeing Elia with distaste. "You'll be riding the rest of the way to the Holy City. I'll not share a carriage with you or Alden if you can't control yourselves in a fitting manner. Best hope it doesn't rain."

"Thank you, sister," Elia gasped out, too grateful to be out of the carriage to find insult in her words or tone.

His stomach cramps eased once the carriage stopped. The door beside him opened unexpectedly, nearly causing Elia to fall out of his seat, lurching against the doorframe and arresting his fall before he hit the dirt. Elia grabbed his jacket before he jumped, or rather fell in a somewhat controlled

manner, from the tall carriage to the dry, packed earth of the road. He shrugged back into his coat, and breathed in the fresh air, a noticeable breeze coming off the river he could see through the sparse trees and bushes hugging the banks between water and road.

“I want to ride, too!” Everett complained, outrageously petulant for a grown man.

“I’ll not risk Father’s wrath by having all three of you out of my sight causing mischief! Cease complaining. At least I know Elia isn’t going to be antagonizing the ambassador’s guards hoping for a brawl. Alden is too drunk to be a nuisance, practically tied to the saddle so he doesn’t fall off.” Aria’s strident tones were muffled when the footman closed the door after a brief bow. When Aria was sufficiently aggravated, she dropped all pretense of prim and proper behavior and became a terror. Everett would be at her mercy for a while, a pleasant thought that brought a smile to Elia’s face despite the mental strain he was experiencing.

Elia moved to the side of the road, the footman climbing back to his post, and the carriage rocked to a slow crawl again. The air smelled of rich green grass, water, and sun-warmed earth, and Elia couldn’t help tipping his face back to the sunlight and breathing in deeply, the earlier queasiness fading away.

The convoy continued past, outriders of armed guards nodding to him as they followed the carriage, though only the outriders assigned to the carriage perimeter bothered. Soon enough the bulk of the convoy was moving past, Elia an unexpected sight on the side of the road to many of the riders and carriage drivers for the nobles and courtiers relegated to the middle and rear of the stream of bodies and livestock. He suffered the flares of surprise from the servants and indifference from the mounted guards, but most people never really saw him, a short, slim figure standing in the grass, well below the sight-line of most of the convoy.

Elia waited on the side of the road until he caught sight of Lord Calla, the Royal Horsemaster, riding up from the rear of the convoy, leading a bay gelding with a shiny coat. Elia raised

his hand over his head until Calla saw him, cutting through the other riders, carriages, and wagons all making the journey to the Holy City.

The blood bay had a shiny coat, a frame heavy with defined muscles, and well bred to the high king's standards. The gelding's coat flashed ruby in the intense sunlight, mane and forelock black and shiny like obsidian.

Calla pulled his sorrel stallion to a halt near Elia, keeping the massive animal under control in the subdued chaos. "Your mount, my prince. One of the high king's personal mounts, as your horses are near the middle of the string and couldn't be saddled in time."

"I'll take good care of him, Lord Calla. Thank you," Elia said, taking the reins of the bay gelding from the horsemaster with a deep nod, along with a pair of riding gloves that would fit him. He tugged on the gloves one by one while keeping ahold of the reins.

He rarely sensed anything from Calla, the man in control of himself, his emotions. Mind tempered and controlled, and Elia saw it as a result of his lifetime of working with animals. He enjoyed the respite of Lord Calla's company with undisguised relief when he was younger, and was grateful the horsemaster never brought it up when tutoring him. He assumed Calla saw it as Elia enjoying being away from his family. The servants gossiped, as did the courtiers, and the entire court and those connected to it likely knew how Elia was treated by his family, even if they didn't have specifics.

Calla was a good man, more concerned with the animals in his care than politics or power, and he would be taking a bit of a risk if Hadrix took exception to Elia riding one of his mounts. But stopping the entire string of mounts, which was likely in the dozens, just to single out one of Elia's mounts would have caused havoc in the animals and their caretakers. The high king's mounts were kept separate and ready to ride with little preparation, so Lord Calla's decision had less to do with currying favor with Elia and more with a concern for the animals, and Elia appreciated that decision.

“I won’t say a word to His Majesty.”

Calla nodded once, jaw tight, though not from disapproval. Elia may not be worth anything as a soldier, but he was accomplished at riding. Lord Calla himself began tutoring Elia when he was thirteen until the horsemaster trusted his abilities. “I’ll have your mounts ready for the rest of the journey in the morning, Your Highness. The gelding’s name is Farra. Enjoy your day.”

Elia nodded in acknowledgment and waited for Lord Calla to guide his horse back into the mass of moving bodies, wagons, and horses before he mounted the bay. Farra danced a bit under him as he got himself settled in the saddle, boots quickly in the stirrups with the ease of practice, the saddle not one of his own but adjusted for a rider his size. Lord Calla missed nothing.

Farra moved a bit but settled down quickly, dark ears pricking forward and back as he decided about Elia. Animals liked him—always had, from little wrens in the tiny wooded park near the palace to the barn cats that haunted the stables. Learning to ride had been a joy and one escape Elia took to without censure from his family. Being an accomplished horseman was a requirement for a royal.

Elia stroked the arched neck firmly, unobtrusively sending calm energy to the horse through the touch, and he eyed the traffic for a break, clicking gently to get him moving when they had an opening. Farra moved like a dream and soon they were amid the convoy, the sun warm on his face and the wind cooling the back of his neck as it lifted the hair away from his skin. The gelding had an easy pace, smooth and attentive to every gentle touch of his heel and reins, a responsive mouth that made riding him a pleasure.

He could feel the horse’s enjoyment at being pulled from the string, and Elia stroked the gelding’s neck again, the horse pleased at the attention. Happy ears flicked back as he murmured soft words to the horse, and Farra sent a curious glance back at Elia from one eye over his shoulder, and he felt Farra’s pleased surprise at having a gentle hand on the reins.

Lord Calla trained them well, nurturing the best aspects of an animal's nature. Elia grinned, and matched himself to the horse's rhythm, the sun on his face and the clop of hooves in his ears.

Chapter Eight

Merrick thought he saw the youngest prince in the mess of riders behind the royal carriage, catching a glimpse of hair so black the highlights were blue in the bright sun, strands lifting in the gentle wind. He took a second look back over his shoulder, trusting his horse to follow her nose.

It was Prince Elia, a bend in the road allowing Merrick to see past the bulk of the Eistrean royal carriage. He lost track of the young prince again, but he had a general idea of where he was.

Merrick turned back, gesturing to Talen who rode at his side, just behind the Ambassador and the High King. Talen eased his own mount back a few steps, the passage of so many animals and people helping to muffle their voices. "I'm going to fall back."

Talen arched a brow at him but said nothing, merely nodding slightly and focusing ahead, allowing Merrick to rein in his mare just enough to let the others pull ahead. Talen objecting to his decision would draw more notice than was wise, and Merrick knew his friend would chew him out for it later that evening when the convoy stopped for the night.

Merrick had made a choice the night before, cemented when he woke early that morning, thinking of the young prince with the bright blue eyes. He'd had some vague hopes and plans when he set out from Vastok, and it didn't take much for him to decide on a new course of action. Merrick could please his heart and the kingdom, if all went to plan.

He'd have to inform the Hellions of his choice later that evening, but they were all intelligent enough to guess correctly from his actions, especially Talen and Sitka. Cormand urged his mount forward, assuming Merrick's place behind the ambassador, none of the other Hellions drawing attention to Merrick's movements.

There were over a hundred Eistrean mounted guards in the convoy, an extravagance that left Merrick with the impression that the High King was attempting to show off to Foryne. The Eistrean countryside along the Heartline branch of the Adracias River was heavily farmed, with small towns dotting the crossroads of trade routes. This far from the coast and the main branch of the Adracias, the population was tightly bound to farming life, very few people doing anything other than raising livestock or crops, and the few trades directly related, like wool spinning, butchers, and leather workers. It left very few places for bandits or vagrants to hide, and the people of Eistrea had little in the way of weapons, aside from serviceable knives and daggers, perhaps some axes, and sharp farming equipment, and were unlikely to have anything more dangerous than a bow for removing nuisance critters. There were forts dotted along the river and near the largest of towns and villages, but the only people equipped with dedicated weaponry were soldiers and nobility. Hence the huge, obscenely over-armed contingent accompanying the king was absurdly unnecessary.

It was a power imbalance that made Merrick a bit uneasy.

He knew better than to underestimate assassins or poverty-stricken farmers with families to feed, but the Hellions, at least the veteran Hellions—knew what to watch for as they traveled, far better than he would on his best day pretending to be a guard. So far no one suspected, and he had yet to sense anyone attempting to see past the illusions he maintained to hide his identity. To his knowledge, the High King had not brought along any of his enslaved mages, and the few times Merrick or the magic-born Hellions risked checking with their gifts, they sensed no magic-born people among the convoy at all—except for Prince Elia.

The youngest Eistrean prince's magic was strong enough, and untaught, that Cormand, Kell, and Sitka were able to confirm that Prince Elia was indeed magic-born. His magic was a wild thing, taking up space around him, interacting with the natural world in such a way that it left ripples and disturbances of energy fluctuations behind itself, easily detectable by those with magic of their own.

Merrick caught a pause in the flow of riders and conveyances when the royal carriage passed, and Merrick cut his gray back into the mass of riders when he saw Prince Elia at last, riding a lovely blood bay, mane as black as Elia's own hair. They made a striking pair, the slim prince atop the noble steed, and Merrick was grinning appreciatively when Prince Elia noticed him in the throng. His high cheeks flushed prettily, bright blue eyes reflecting the sunny summer sky above.

The mark on his cheek had faded enough to be visible only up close, and the cut lip was healing nicely. His hands were gloved for riding, so Merrick could not determine if the injury to his hand was healing too, though the way he held the reins indicated he was well enough. Perhaps his youth accounted for the healing, or maybe it was his magic. If Merrick could get away with an extended period of staring at Elia he might be able to parse out some of the young man's magic and what it was doing, but Merrick wasn't a teacher like they had at the Hellebore magic academies, or even at a level of skill comparable to his younger sister Marion, who taught her own children and her nephews in the early stages of using magical gifts. He could see and sense Prince Elia's magic, but deciphering it in fine enough detail was a skill he fell short in, and unless the prince was trying to use it for something specific, it remained too ephemeral for Merrick to parse.

"Your Highness," Merrick nodded in greeting as he guided his mare alongside the gelding, the horses eyeing each other politely, though the gray did arch her neck a bit and toss her head before Merrick gently reminded the mare of her manners with a slight touch to her neck with one gloved hand. The mare settled immediately, though there was a bit of a teasing flick from a braided tail at his heel.

Elia saw the gesture and a smile broke free, the prince's eyes bright with approval. "You're good with horses, Sir Merrick."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Merrick replied, and took the chance to align their mounts close enough that they could speak comfortably without raising their voices. Neither mount objected, and they fell into an easy, matching rhythm. "How fares your family on the trip thus far?"

Prince Elia bit his lower lip, and Merrick was certain the young prince was trying not to roll his eyes. Aside from an occasional bored glance from a passing guard or servant, no one was paying them any attention, which further proved to Merrick that the youngest prince was not favored by the king or court.

A foreign guard talking in such close quarters to a prince should not be treated with such casual disregard, and in any other circumstance could be dangerous. Though in this case it assisted Merrick in his goal to get to know the younger man before they arrived in the Holy City, and he would continue to exploit the Eistreans' lax attitude concerning the youngest prince.

"My siblings are unaccustomed to such a long journey in the summer, and the heat is...challenging." Barely concealed humor laced his words and Prince Elia shrugged one slim shoulder. "I am grateful to be allowed to ride—the carriage, while impressive, is truly not the best means to travel in the height of summer."

He imagined it was stifling and the heat nigh on unbearable inside the monstrous conveyance. Merrick was of the opinion that the High King ordered its use merely to show it off—the antiquated carriage was a ridiculous show of wealth and wasted resources, though he spoke none of his real thoughts out loud. "Understandable. The breeze off the river is invigorating, and to enjoy it while astride a beautiful steed is a fair trade, then."

Prince Elia smiled at him. "It is indeed."

They rode in easy silence for a time, the creak of tack and the low drone of people speaking and the clop of hooves on the hard road the only sound to be heard for a few minutes. Prince Elia kept casting curious glances at him, and he waited patiently for the young prince to speak.

“Sir Merrick?”

“Your Highness?”

Prince Elia shifted in the saddle, though his hands remained firmly on the reins. “May I ask about Hellebore?”

Surprised by the hesitancy and touched by the polite manner, Merrick nodded. “Of course, Your Highness. What would you like to know?”

Eyes wide with delighted excitement, Prince Elia’s questions poured out of him. “What’s it like there? I’ve never seen mountains before. Are they truly so tall the peaks cannot be seen through the clouds? I read Vastok was built on the side of a cliff, bracketed by waterfalls, thousands of feet above the ground. Is it true gryphons live in the imperial palace? I’d love to see a gryphon. Are they dangerous? I imagine they must be! Are they truly the size of a house?”

Merrick couldn’t contain his chuckle at the stream of words, and Prince Elia snapped his mouth shut and his cheeks flushed, embarrassed. “I am so sorry, that was quite a lot of questions. Do ignore me.”

“No need to apologize, I’m sorry for laughing, that was rude. I’m delighted to see how curious you are about my homeland.”

“The closest I’m ever likely to get to seeing a mountain is the foothills across the river at the Holy City,” Prince Elia replied mournfully. “I’d love to travel, but…” His voice trailed off with a faint grimace, his yearning to travel hanging in the air.

Merrick understood. A royal, despite having all the privileges of the position, did have limitations, though wealth and power went a long way toward mitigating the downsides. Elia did not have the options that Merrick did—and Merrick

grimaced, realizing he was even more privileged than he first thought. Elia was at the mercy of his father and family, trapped by abusive people and lack of power, even as a prince.

No one told Merrick what to do and hadn't for a very long time.

“In the wild heart of Hellebore are mountains so tall that their peaks cannot be seen past the clouds,” Merrick began, Elia brightening immediately. “Vastok is indeed perched high amongst mountains, and its nickname is the City of Waterfalls. Several large waterfalls dot the many terraces of Vastok, and there are hundreds of small waterfalls, streams, and smaller rivers that flow through gardens and even inside private homes of the wealthy and poor alike. The water systems are controlled by a complicated series of levees, dams, locks, and canals to prevent homes from being flooded, and every building in the city has access to fresh, clean water. The sewer system is a marvel of engineering and magic, ensuring that waste does not poison the waters within the city, and keeps the Old King branch of the Adracias clean downriver.”

“What about gryphons?” Elias asked breathlessly. Eyes wide, Prince Elia leaned forward in the saddle, gaze intent on Merrick.

“Gryphons are native to the mountains around Vastok and the western and northern ranges, but we don't tame them anymore. Not since the Hellebore army modernized combat magic. Feathers are flammable, and fire is one of the easiest spells for a mage to master, and non-magical weapons can now throw fire, and they have more range and are easier to replenish during battle than a mage. There are a few families in the south near the Corainian border with gryphons, but as pets or personal mounts, not for combat. Thankfully we never managed to breed the wildness out of them, so they never went feral—they were wild to begin with, and the gryphon populations returned to the mountains easily.”

“Do they cause trouble for your people? Such large beasts must eat an incredible amount.”

Merrick nodded in agreement. “They’re fierce predators, with sharp beaks that can rip a man in half and talons long enough to pierce through an entire bull,” Elia’s eyes grew big at his description. “There’s an occasional missing sheep or goat, but the gryphons don’t bother with smaller livestock, preferring the highland oryx, a huge species of mountain goat that can grow as large as a knight’s courser. I’ve heard that in Pyrderi armored knights have ridden them into battle. The oryxes I’ve seen are cantankerous creatures, so that would be horrifying to try and face on the field of battle. Regardless of their fierce nature, the oryxes are numerous, and the herds are more than sufficient to sustain a large breeding population of gryphons.”

“I’d love to see a gryphon one day, but that’s as likely as me seeing a dragon,” Elia lamented.

“I don’t know, you may see one or the other someday, perhaps even both,” Merrick said, trying to encourage the lively energy radiating from the young prince. “Hellebore is lucky enough to have both species call the wilder places home.”

“Truly? Have you seen a gryphon?” Elias asked, eyes wide.

“I have, and a dragon, too.”

A sharp gasp from Prince Elia had the gelding dancing a bit in alarm, and the young prince was forced to calm his mount before turning to face Merrick once more, something akin to fear in his eyes and embarrassment reddening high cheeks. Merrick pretended not to notice, and the redness faded quickly when Prince Elia realized that Merrick would not chide him or react badly.

Prince Elia was used to people punishing him for the slightest thing. Merrick hated it, and he chafed internally at the need to maintain his subterfuge.

If they were in Hellebore, Prince Elia would be wholly safe and cherished, and Merrick would do anything in his power to help Elia learn his true worth and potential.



Elia calmed Farra, trying not to show how embarrassed he was at startling his mount. Sir Merrick made no note of it, kindly pretending he saw nothing, and that kindness gave Elia the courage to go on as if nothing happened.

“Tell me of the dragon? Please?” Elia asked, knowing he sounded young and eager, but the thought of hearing about a dragon from an eyewitness was too much to resist.

Sir Merrick obliged him immediately, with a soft smile and an easy manner.

“I was a lad, traveling with my father, on a ship in Egret Bay,” Sir Merrick began, eyes taking on a faraway look as he recalled the tale. “Dragons migrate when their populations grow too large for an area to sustain, and dragons were leaving the southern ranges of Hellebore for territory in Arcanta. They flew over Egret Bay in a cluster of twenty strong, the leaders of which were taller than the ship we sailed upon, and three times as long as they were tall. Their wings were so wide they blocked the sun, like a storm gathering on a horizon. Wings like thunder, birthing winds that carried hints of smoke and sulfur. Scales glittered like gems under the sun, a kaleidoscope of blues, golds, and greens, and a few brilliant reds. The largest of the dragons was a deep, rich black, like a raven’s feathers, so black the scales flashed blue in the sunlight. Each beat of his wings buffeted the ocean surface far below, rocking the ship, billowing sails in opposition to the natural wind and shaking the boards beneath our feet.”

Elia could all but see it in his mind’s eye as Sir Merrick described it, and he ached with longing, wishing he could have seen it too. Maybe one day, when his father was dead and dust, and Elia too old and used up to be of value in political maneuverings, he could slip away as younger generations fought over power and influence.

“A treasured memory, for certain,” Elia murmured, Sir Merrick riding close enough he could hear Elia over the

sounds of the convoy around them. “I envy you that experience, Sir Merrick.”

“One day you’ll have a comparable experience, I have no doubts about it,” Sir Merrick replied in a devastating show of casual encouragement. Elia sucked in a sharp breath, unaccustomed to someone offering any sort of kindness or hope for his future, and he battled back stinging tears, blinking rapidly as he pretended to get road dust in his eyes.

The rest of the day was spent in idle conversation, and it was the best day Elia could remember in years. Even with the sun burning the tip of his nose and his rear complaining about sitting in the saddle for hours, Elia was nothing but smiles and windblown hair, all due to being away from his family and with someone who treated him with kindness and respect.

Sir Merrick was educated and quick-witted, with endless patience as Elia peppered him with questions about his homeland. It sounded so very different from Eistrea that the desire to travel there and see such wonders for himself was an ache that settled beneath his heart, and Elia rubbed absentmindedly at the spot as he left Farra with the capable stable boy waiting for him to dismount.

He lost track of Sir Merrick in the controlled chaos of setting up the royal encampment, but that was to be expected; the Hellion had his duties to perform, and Elia hoped the man wouldn’t get in trouble for spending the entire afternoon with him. It wasn’t until the call came up from the head of the convoy that they would be stopping for the night that he realized Sir Merrick had spent hours at his side, letting him pester the Hellion with so many questions that Elia was faintly embarrassed at himself. He spoke more to Sir Merrick in those few hours than he had in the last year to anyone else, of that he had no doubt.

He kept looking over his shoulder for a glimpse of the Hellion, but he was denied, the crowd too thick. Elia bit his lip, trying not to give in to the ache in his chest. He was used to loneliness and it was the height of folly to miss a soldier bound to another kingdom. Sir Merrick would be out of his

life in a matter of days, and he could not afford to lose any part of himself to the Hellion.

Even as he sternly told himself off, Elia felt the truth of it—he was going to miss Sir Merrick when the man returned to his homeland.

A stony-faced royal guard appeared in front of Elia before he got more than a dozen steps, the unspoken command for him to follow apparent in the tense frame of the guard. He did so without a word, the soldier leading him deeper into the encampment. The pavilions set up for the royal family were taller than the surrounding tents by several feet, flags dancing in the strong, early evening wind bearing the crest of Eistrea.

His father's tent was easy to distinguish from the others—it was pale gold linen and trimmed in reds and more gold, a heavy and extravagant square box of fabric, wooden support beams, and furniture more suited for the palace than the road. Hadrix refused to be parted from his comforts and would spend the rest of the trip alternating between complaining and snapping at the servants and hosting overdone and wasteful dinners in his tent with the courtiers who were making the trip with them to the Holy City. Loud carousing and shouting were to be expected long into the late-night hours, and Elia was betting on a delayed start to their journey come morning.

The guard directed him to a smaller tent behind his royal parent, and he grimaced when he ducked inside.

“Wipe that look off your face, brat,” Alden grumbled from the floor next to his travel cot, far more sunburned than Elia and covered head to toe in road dust. Alden was clearly in no state to be a threat, hungover and dehydrated. His clothing was askew, and he looked like he fell more than once from the saddle before someone tied him to it.

At least he wasn't bunking with Everett—as the eldest son, Everett had his own tent right next to the High King's, and Aria would be situated somewhere nearby as well, though likely far enough that she could sleep with relative peace when Hadrix was entertaining courtiers long past any decent hour for socializing.

Elia ignored his brother and headed for the travel cot set up on the farthest side of the tent, knowing he would need the additional distance from Hadrix's tent to increase his odds of getting any sleep that night. He sat on the edge, pleasantly surprised at the depth of the mattress stuffing, and he hoped it was a sign that he wasn't being singled out for the usual harassment whenever traveling with his family. Usually when they traveled as a family unit it was to the royal hunting lodge in the north, though Aria rarely accompanied them.

Elia was occasionally dragged along on the long day's ride to the hunting lodge. He'd been forced to participate, but thankfully all that meant was riding out with the hunting party at dawn with hungover and drunk noblemen and then falling behind enough to justify turning back to the lodge. No one gave him a weapon—though that was all prior to his father forcing him to learn to fight with Derrent and the palace regiment. He shuddered to think what future hunting trips might be like now that he was considered an adult—his lack of enthusiasm for the violent side of royal life might draw unwelcome attention. He'd never killed an animal before and knew he would refuse if given a bow or a spear. He was anticipating the pain from a blow that would likely follow his refusal, but he figured it would be worth it in the end.

His brothers were obeying their father's edict to be on their best behavior so Aria could secure a match with the emperor, and hopefully Everett and Alden would continue to do so for the remaining days of the journey.

Servants came in and out, barely sparing either prince a glance as they deposited travel chests of their belongings and set up a wash stand with jugs of clean water, folded cloths, and a travel tub for bathing.

Elia would fit easily in the travel tub, though his siblings and parent would be hard pressed to even sit in the cramped confines of the wooden tub.

Aria, Everett, and their father likely had full-size tubs in their tents. Aria got her own tent, an envious advantage due more to her utter refusal to share with her brothers since she was a young girl than to her gender. Hadrix handled his

daughter by letting her do as she pleased, and if it wasn't for her sharp wit, undeniable intellect, and charismatic influence on the court, their father probably wouldn't pay attention to her at all. She was too overwhelming a personality to be ignored, even for a high king and man who had little use for women. Her position as eldest child was unassailable, and she wielded the authority that came from her presumed place in the succession with a precision Everett and Alden struggled to replicate. The majority of the courtiers in Meadowtown flocked to Aria and hung upon her every word and gesture, and a few canny nobles saw the benefits of having Aria as Hadrix's successor.

Elia didn't even bother trying to play the political game of the Court. What he knew about the court came from listening to his family as they talked over him like he didn't exist, or from the servants, gossiping with Wyle or each other as they went about their duties, ignoring him like he was furniture.

Apart from Wyle, the servants treated him with the same level of respect as his family, though they never got physical. He was ignored.

If he were alone, Elia would sneak off in search of Wyle, worried about how the old man was handling the travel. His place as valet to a prince gave him a comfortable seat in one of the wagons near the rear of the convoy, but Elia told Wyle not to attend to him during the trip. He did not want his siblings to notice his servant's age and force him into retirement and certain death. Wyle had no one, and even traveling was difficult, but staying behind meant that it was far too easy for Wyle to have an accident or grow ill, determined to overdo it. Wyle also refused to be left behind, proclaiming he was more than fit to make the trip.

While Elia was roughly ignored by the servants, Wyle was respected, having worked for the royal family for over thirty years, the longest by far out of any of the servants, and the majority of those who worked in the palace were kind to him in an offhand manner and willing to avoid talking about his situation to anyone who might raise objections.

Alden heaved himself off the ground and flopped onto his cot, breaking Elia from his musings. Alden threw an arm over his eyes and groaned, ever dramatic. “Why must we go on this horrid trip? Surely our god does not require our presence in the Holy City for the solstice when the river is outside our front door. And Aria can manipulate her way onto a throne without us.”

“It’s the twenty-year mark,” Elia answered carefully, though he agreed with his brother regarding Adracias. Surely so divine a being didn’t need such festivals to reassure himself of his power and place in the world.

When Alden was tired, he was vocal in his complaints, and keeping him focused on his many problems meant he wouldn’t pick on Elia. Alden in a lazy mode was the safer version of his brother.

“A treaty year? I think that is what it’s called. You went the last time, remember? I wasn’t born yet.” It was a tricky balance—let Alden feel superior for knowing more, and yet Elia had to be careful he didn’t appear too ignorant, lest his brother grow annoyed and lash out. Alden was easier to manage than Everett, especially when their older brother wasn’t around. Everett made everyone tense and irascible.

“I think it’s all ridiculous,” Alden dropped his arm, limp and miserable, staring up at the pitched roof of the tent. “All I recall from the first time I went is countless droning on and no one to play with, itchy clothes, and boring old priests.”

“The peace banquet must be fun? I’ve heard it’s a spectacle, with dancers, singers, acrobats? Maybe even some magic?”

“The Helleborians love their magic,” Alden replied scornfully. “Put on a show every time they go. Father fumed last time but couldn’t say a thing since the high priest is magic-born. Lots of dancing, which I’m looking forward to.”

And the drinking.

A treaty year referred to the long-standing custom of reaffirming the mutual treaty between the Hellebore Empire

and the Kingdom of Eistrea—usually through a symbolic re-signing of the same treaty signed a thousand years before, and even more importantly, a marriage between the two royal houses. It could not be done too often, as inbreeding was a worry, so it was established that a marriage be only an option if two conditions were met: there was no marriage within three direct generations, and any royal of either house was eligible if they were unwed, unbetrothed, and had attained their legal majority. Both countries held that age to be eighteen. No child brides, and no breaking of betrothal pacts to accommodate the expectation of a treaty marriage—such stipulations further limited the rare marriage between the two houses, and the last treaty marriage had been a few hundred years earlier.

Expectations were high that a treaty marriage would be announced during this year's festival. Generations overdue and with a handful of eligible participants, courtiers and commoners alike were placing bets and laying wagers on who might end up wed by festival's end. Elia was not counting himself among that number, and he had no idea who the emperor might put forward if he wasn't willing to marry again. He might not be—he may have no interest and put forth a cousin or sibling instead. His twin sons were small children barely out of leading strings, and not eligible for consideration.

Ambassador Foryne came to Meadowtown himself to ride with the High King and his family to the Holy City, and Elia was certain that was to determine which of the High King's children would suit the emperor best in a treaty marriage. The ambassadors for their respective countries usually resided in the Holy City, only coming to the royal courts in the capitals when there were issues to resolve, and a brief visit once a season to maintain relations.

His Grace, the Emperor Heremis was a widower this treaty year, and all four of the High King's children were of age and unattached. The emperor wasn't much older than Aria, perhaps in his thirtieth year. Hadrix would never consider a marriage for himself, not after his last. No, it would be his children who were offered up in place of the high king.

And that was not by accident, but rather careful planning. Not the death of the late Empress—as far as Elia knew, her passing was a tragic accident not long after she gave birth to her twins. Hadrix keeping his children all unwed, particularly Aria, was deliberate. Elia struggled to think of any women close enough to the emperor to be considered as matches for Everett and Alden, but he had limited knowledge of the Imperial family, and he was sure there was a sister, but she was already wed with children of her own. Aria was already the favored choice, and Elia was certain she would be leaving for Hellebore at festival's end, a throne and imperial crown waiting for her in Vastok.

Hadrix refusing to name his eldest child his heir all these years likely meant he'd planned for her to be bartered off to Hellebore since the late empress's passing. Elia thought that unfair—Aria might not be his favorite person, but he figured she would make a decent enough High Queen of Eistrea. She was more emotionally stable than their father and Everett and put some surface effort into showing compassion for other people. And she never raised her hand to Elia, not even at her most aggravated.

A splash of water landed on Elia's boots, and he leaned down to take them off while Alden struggled to fit himself in the too small bath. Clothes were strewn about the tent, fallen where Alden tossed them with utter disregard for Elia or the servants. Elia shook off his boots and tucked them between his cot and the tent, out of range of further drenching. Elia lay back on his cot and turned toward the tent wall, ignoring the muffled complaints of his older brother and the careless sloshing of bath water.



The next morning, decamping started as late as Elia had predicted, closer to noon than dawn. Alden was a heavy sleeper, and Elia was able to rise with the sun, wash, dress, and leave their shared tent all without waking his brother. By the time the majority of the camp was active and breaking down

the tents, Elia had been awake for hours, the time spent with his favorite personal mount, a sweet young chestnut mare he'd named Rose.

He went to find Rose himself that morning, Lord Calla nodding to him in approval when he spied Elia leading his mount from the herd. Lord Calla waved at a stable hand and ordered them to fetch Elia's personal tack, and then they helped Elia saddle Rose. He had been taught how to get the combined gear on Rose, but the saddle was awkward for him, and he was grateful for the help.

Lord Calla stopped long enough in his duties to do a swift check over her tack. A few tugs and a tiny correction to the girth, and the horsemaster left with a slight nod and not a word spoken, which Elia took as approval. Lord Calla was hard to impress and earning even the slightest amount of approval from the horsemaster made Elia feel like he'd won a grand prize.

Rose was far from the flashiest of mounts, but her temperament and ready affection for Elia outweighed her common coloring. Chestnut horses were thick on the ground in Eistrea, and Elia was beyond thankful for that fact, since she was overlooked and unclaimed when Elia was allowed to choose his own mount from the royal stables when he turned fifteen. She was young when he first saw her, just barely past a yearling, and they practically grew up together. Lord Calla deemed her fit and grown enough for regular riding earlier in the year, and Elia took every chance he could to get out of the palace and explore on horseback. Rose was now in her fourth year, and Elia was excited to see how she handled the journey.

Elia spent the morning with his mare, mounting to warm her up before the convoy took to the road again. He took her for a brisk walk down the length of the road to the rear of the convoy and then back again, riding toward the front, nodding to servants he passed who were also warming the mounts for their noble employers. The early morning was cool, mist coming in from the river, wisps of cloudy air that caressed his face and neck as he urged Rose into a canter, the mare tossing

her head and eager to run, but he held her back, not wanting her to exhaust her stamina too early in the day.

Elia eventually returned to the horsemaster's position in the convoy, dismounting and loosening the girth so Rose could relax while they waited. He slipped away from her company only long enough to grab some food from the mess tents before the portable kitchens were broken down, feeding her one of the apples he nabbed before the produce was boxed up and put away.

He didn't grab much, a small sack with a couple stuffed cheese and meat rolls, spicy beef jerky, and some additional apples for his horse, plus a large waterskin with a strap that hooked around the pommel of his saddle. Riding on a full stomach would be misery; nibbling all day was the best option to avoid hunger pains as well as potential embarrassment on the road.

The royal carriage came with a chamber pot, and that was a nightmare of epic proportions. He would rather be trampled by the convoy than use the chamber pot in the carriage. He made use of the bushes along the river behind the many strings of horses and washed on the riverbank before mounting Rose.

Rose was a bit smaller than Farra, but more than perfect for Elia, whose buttocks rejoiced at the proper fit of his own tailored saddle and the smaller barrel of her ribcage beneath his thighs. Riding her felt like riding the wind, her dainty hooves picking over the road with precision and elegance. She was gifted with deep wells of endurance and stamina, and was a fair jumper, and if Elia held any desire to hunt, she'd make a stellar mount for the endeavor.

He had yet to see or talk to Wyle, though he did stop one of the older footmen of the royal household, a man who was friendly with Wyle, and ask after his old valet. After glancing around to make sure no one heard them, the footman assured him Wyle was fine so far, and then continued his duties as if Elia didn't exist. Elia hoped Wyle stayed hale and hearty the remainder of the trip, and did his best to conceal the relief he felt knowing Wyle was all right so far on the journey.

Enduring loneliness when he wasn't actually alone was not new for him, though it could be difficult to bear sometimes. Wyle made it bearable—he was to Elia what he imagined family was meant to be.

Loud shouts came echoing through the sparse trees along the river, calling the convoy to the road. The high king was moving out, and the rest of the convoy awkwardly left the riverbank and made its way to the road in a scramble of wagons, carriages, and mounted riders. Shouts and muffled swearing filled the air between the clops of thousands of shod hooves and a few excited whinnies from hot-blooded mounts.

Elia mounted and guided Rose through the more composed group of servants and court administrators near Lord Calla, not wanting to risk being accidentally run over by a noble's carriage as the driver strived to find a spot in the convoy closer to the royal carriage, as if they were a duckling trailing after mother duck.

Murmuring affectionate nothings to his mount, Elia surreptitiously glancing around for signs of Sir Merrick among the crowd without much luck. After the first hour of travel, he feared the Hellion might not be able to spare him the same amount of time he had the day before. Perhaps it had been Sir Merrick's time off in guard rotation and today he was expected to fulfill his duties to the ambassador.

It was late afternoon when Elia finally saw Sir Merrick, and the sight of the handsome Hellion sitting tall in the saddle lifted his spirits immensely. He urged Rose into a trot, guiding her through the crowd with ease, her tail held high, and her ears pricked forward in interest, sensing Elia's desire to be near Sir Merrick. Sir Merrick's gray mare snorted in greeting and arched her neck, and Rose snorted back, tossing her head, mane flying as the mares did their best imitations of dragons.

Elia laughed and gently stroked Rose on the side of her neck, sending wordless reassurance to his mount that he loved her best and she was the head mare of his heart. Sir Merrick seemed to be having the same sort of conversation with his horse, and Elia grinned over to the Hellion once their mares quieted. Once again, their mounts found a matching rhythm in

their strides, and that pleased Elia a great deal, thinking it was less about the well-trained animals and fancying that it somehow spoke to the growing familiarity between him and Sir Merrick.

“Your Highness, a pleasure to see you again,” Sir Merrick greeted him warmly, hazel eyes bright with some emotion that stung Elia near his heart.

“Hello again, Sir Merrick,” Elia couldn’t help the blush on his cheeks or the eager smile that lit up his face. “And Elia, please. No one calls me Highness, not even my own family,” Elia offered unthinkingly, and he slapped a hand over his mouth, glancing around to make sure no one heard him.

Sir Merrick made him feel so at ease that his mouth ran away with him. Offering a foreign guard such familiarity would be outrageous and surely start a scandal if heard by the wrong party. Thankfully the roadway was loud enough their words were lost a few feet beyond them and no one appeared to hear his unwise comment.

Sir Merrick only made a slight shake of his head and when he spoke his tone was nothing but kind. “A compromise, then. Prince Elia when it is just the two of us, and Your Highness if there’s another present to object to the gracious offer of using your given name.”

“Thank you,” Elia replied quietly after dropping his hand from his mouth.

“You’re welcome,” Sir Merrick brought their mounts closer together, and the mares allowed it, Rose all but dancing beneath him, the arch of her neck playful.

“What is your mare’s name? This is Rose, my most treasured horse.”

Sir Merrick’s gray was larger than Rose and with longer strides, though she held back on her pace and seemed to do so without any prompting from the man on her back. She was clearly well socialized and used to traveling with other mounts of different gaits and paces.

“She is Glaciere. She’s a bit harsh and her teeth are sharp, though she tolerates me well and only causes me trouble when I’m not paying attention. I’m ashamed to say that happens on occasion, though I haven’t been unseated in a while. I’m afraid I’m due for a dumping to the dirt any day now.”

Elia laughed, unexpectedly, and it felt like he was flying. Merrick’s smile was full of amusement at his own expense, and it was refreshing to talk to another person who had no arrogance or ego to maintain or cater to in case they got violent. He had no idea what it was about Sir Merrick, but he sensed that the man’s first reaction to potential embarrassment wasn’t anger or violence. His father and brothers wouldn’t know what self-deprecating humor was if it smacked them in the face.

Laughter eased off into chuckles. “Is she named for the glacier fields in the far north?”

Sir Merrick nodded. “An old legend names the mother of Adracias, but it’s hard to pronounce, and Glaciere is the closest translation from the old tongue. The most widely told version of the story in Hellebore holds that she was a goddess of immense power with a nature that could be both capricious and fond, nurturing and cold.”

Elia frowned, thinking. “I’ve never heard that story. In Eistrea, Adracias has no mother, and the course of his waters shaped the earth as he saw fit.”

Sir Merrick shrugged one shoulder. “It’s an old story, and perhaps unique to the folklore of Hellebore. The glaciers come farther south in the Empire due to our mountains, and the prevalence of them in the old stories can perhaps be seen as a natural consequence. There’s a very old statue in the Holy City in the private gardens of the high priest that depicts the birth of Adracias, held in the arms of Glaciere at the foot of a towering wall of ice. It’s rumored to be over a thousand years old, made long before the sundering of Velanta into our disparate kingdoms.”

“We share the same religion, yet it sounds like there are differences I never considered,” Elia stated carefully, not

wanting to offend. He was not pious by any means, though he maintained a public façade of worship to appease the court and family. None of his siblings were devout either, and his father tended to conflate the worship of Adracias with his own personal wants and opinions, more interested in using the religion of their land to maintain power and control than in piety. “The high priest let you see the statue? That was very kind of him. I hope that means he’s not like the priests in Meadowtown—they’re a dour bunch of old men who like to look down their noses at me, and any treasures they hold are kept from curious eyes.”

Sir Merrick took a moment to answer, and Elia looked over after a heartbeat of quiet, wondering if he was too forward in his question. Sir Merrick gave no indication that Elia’s question bothered him, his expression affable and hands relaxed on the reins.

He spoke after a moment, and Elia relaxed at the ease in his tone. “The ambassador had a private meeting with the high priest when we stopped in the Holy City on our way to your capital. I was able to see the gardens while we were there.”

“Oh, of course,” Elia sighed, having forgotten entirely about the ambassador and Sir Merrick’s duties. “Can you tell me about the Holy City? I’ve never been. The last time the whole royal family went was before I was born, at the last treaty year festival.”

Sir Merrick gave him a short, searching glance, then nodded once, returning his gaze to the road and riders ahead of them.

“The Holy City of Adracias is an island which rises from the convergence of all the major branches of the Adracias River. There the river is wide enough in some places that no bridge can span the distance. The island is a rocky protuberance that rises from the center of the convergence, much like a peak of a mountain, the top carved up into a temple with multiple terraces for the priests and visitors flowing out from it. The wall around the city reaches the very water’s edge in many places, a sheer wall nearly forty feet high, without doors or windows, and there are only two gates

to the island, on the west and east side, connecting to both Hellebore and Eistrea by the huge bridges that reach from the borders of our kingdoms to the island. On the northern side there's a few small wharfs and piers for smaller boats, where the island is flatter with fewer cliffs, and they're used by traders and servants who work on the island. The temples are carved from solid rock, dark granite everywhere, and a few stubborn trees dot the sheerest cliffs. Around the base of the hill, it's flatter and the terraces are wider, filled with gardens and residence halls for the priests, students, artisans, staff, and the few traders allowed residence, all of whom call the Holy City home. It's an unusual place—a mixture of temple and personal housing, buildings for learning, artisans and their crafts. A small market on the south side of the island lends it a port-like atmosphere. Not as busy as a true port city, like those on the southern shore of Hellebore and Eistrea, as its main function is as a place of worship, and as a symbol of enduring peace between our two kingdoms.”

Sir Merrick had to be nobly born. He spoke as an educated man, no simple soldier promoted through the ranks. His manner was eloquent and evocative, the way he described the city enough to bring it to life in Elia's mind, as if he were standing on the shore of the great lake and looking across the waters at the high walls.

“Thank you,” Elia murmured, touched by Sir Merrick's detailed description. “I cannot wait to see it for myself.”

“A few more days and you shall,” Sir Merrick promised him. “I hope your first visit is memorable.”

Elia hoped his first visit wouldn't be his last, and that he managed to escape the solstice festival without trouble. Maybe once Aria was wed to the emperor, he could go with her? Perhaps their father would be glad to see him go, two children out from under his roof with one marriage. And Elia could dream, since it was unlikely that he would ever be allowed happiness. A dream all the same, and he refused to look at Sir Merrick, knowing his heart would be in his eyes.

Chapter Nine

Merrick stretched his back, glad the day of travel was over, and he watched as Elia dismounted with more ease than the day before. The young prince was getting better at enduring the long hours on horseback, showing proof of dedicated hours in the saddle prior to the journey to the Holy City.

The Eistrean horsemaster approached and took charge of both mares, an honor Merrick did not take lightly. He nodded in thanks to Lord Calla, who nodded back without a word, leading the horses away to get rubbed down and fed, and then settled down for the night.

“He is a man of few words,” Prince Elia murmured shyly, standing awkwardly now that he wasn’t in the saddle keeping a matched rhythm with his mount.

“I can sympathize,” Merrick teased gently. “I haven’t spoken this much in weeks.”

A fetching blush raced over high cheeks and summer-sky eyes flashed with a hint of magic before Elia ducked his face, black hair falling over his eyes. “If keeping me company is bothersome, please don’t feel pressured into riding with me.” Elia looked up quickly, alarmed. “I haven’t gotten you in trouble with the ambassador or your captain, have I? Riding with me isn’t part of your duties. I’m sorry if I’m making things hard for you.”

He wondered when or if Elia might notice the amount of time Merrick wasn’t spending guarding Foryne, and he didn’t

want the young prince to be upset or call too much attention to the fact that a Hellion was befriending an Eistrean royal. The Eistreans' habit of ignoring and overlooking Elia was working in his favor and he wanted it to continue until the solstice.

Merrick took the few steps needed to stand right next to Elia, who looked up at him with wide, bright eyes full of tangled emotions. He made sure to maintain eye contact with Elia, hoping he could assuage some worry. "I'm on duty from dusk to midnight, and my days are free to spend with you on our journey. The ambassador knows I've been keeping you company, and is pleased I'm helping to cement relations between our peoples."

A lush pink lip twitched in amusement, and Merrick bit back a groan when the blush returned, Elia's eyes slightly hooded in what had to be arousal.

"Relations?" A breathy, slight gasp on the end of the word, and Merrick resisted the nearly overwhelming urge to lean down and kiss that soft mouth. Not now, surrounded by countless guards and servants who would absolutely notice if a Hellion kissed the youngest Eistrean prince.

"You are kind, charming, and sweet, Your Highness," Merrick said quietly. "A joy to be around. Your company makes the long day of travel pass with ease."

A sharp inhale parted those enticing lips slightly, and Merrick burned with the intense desire to reach out and cup that sleek jaw, brush a thumb over that tempting mouth, and taste the young man standing in front of him. Yearning and desire swirled in sky-blue eyes, and Elia was leaning forward the slightest amount, as if aching for the same kiss that Merrick wanted to take.

There was no doubt in his mind that if he were to kiss the young prince, Elia would respond in kind, sweetly passionate. He wanted to lean down and take those soft lips in a slow, languid kiss. He remembered how Elia's lips tasted from their too-brief kiss days prior, and he wanted to taste them again.

"Sir Merrick."

Elia jumped, startled by the call, and he stepped back a bit, embarrassed. Merrick grit his teeth but schooled his expression, and turned to greet Talen, the Hellion captain watching from nearby, stiff at attention in his blue and silver uniform. Talen was wary but hiding it well.

“Captain Talen, may I introduce His Royal Highness Prince Elia, High King Hadrix’s youngest.” Merrick gestured between the captain and Elia. “Your Highness, Captain Talen of the Hellions.”

Talen nodded in greeting and bowed, sharp and measured and the perfect depth for greeting a royal. “Your Highness, it is an honor.”

“Captain Talen, the honor is mine. The reputation of the Hellions is well-known and respected, even in the heart of Eistrea. Ambassador Foryne is blessed to have your escort during the journey away from your homeland.” Elia’s greeting was smooth and polished, perfectly executed.

Merrick smiled, pleased and touched by Prince Elia’s efforts with the Captain. A part of him wondered if he might’ve underestimated the young prince’s courtly graces and his ability to use them. He might not be allowed much opportunity to exercise them, but he obviously had the skills required to be a royal in public life.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Talen bowed again, a bit flustered at the gracious introduction. He steeled his face before looking at Merrick, expression revealing nothing. “The ambassador would like a word, Sir Merrick.”

“Are you in trouble?” Elia asked in a whisper, a hand lifted like he wanted to reach out to Merrick, but he curled in his fingers and dropped his hand back to his side, eyes darting between Merrick and Talen, biting his bottom lip.

“I’m not in trouble,” Merrick promised. He wanted to reach out as well, to take Elia’s hand and squeeze it, reassure the young man that everything would be all right. Just a few more days and then Merrick would be free to act. “I enjoyed your company, Your Highness. I hope I can see you again during our journey for another conversation.”

“I would like that,” Elia replied, hushed. He fidgeted, restless, words and tone reluctant. “I should retire to my tent, see my family. Thank you for our conversation, Sir Merrick. Good night.”

Merrick bowed, in the Eistrean style, keeping eye contact, slow and elegant, and was rewarded by another bright blush and a stirring of magic in crystalline eyes. “Goodnight, Prince Elia.”

Prince Elia walked away, slowly, reluctance in every inch of his frame, until he was lost from view in the crowded camp. Merrick watched until he couldn't see Elia anymore, and then turned to join Talen, the Hellion captain saying nothing as they made their way toward the tent bearing the Hellebore flag at its peak, the mountain and waterfall crest snapping in the twilight breeze.

The tent was large enough to house the ambassador, the Hellions, and a few servants who came with them from Vastok. A bit crowded, but the center area was kept clear with seating around a low table and cushions for comfort. Individual beds were set up along the walls of the tent with hanging partitions for privacy.

Too warm even at night for braziers, there was more space available than there would be once they were back in the mountains in Hellebore. The elevations made for cool nights, even in the height of summer. The temperatures in Eistrea were warmer than they were accustomed to, though Foryne had more experience with the weather in the flatter country. Not enough trees, not enough shade, and the river was flat and sluggish, without the heavy, blanketing fog banks that came from waterfalls and canals, and the mountain winds.

Vastok was miserable in winter, and the people relied heavily on magic to protect the city from the high winds and ice storms. The capital was a delight in summer, with warm, windy days, fountains for amusement and cooling, and sunlight breaking through the swift clouds among the mountain peaks to warm the granite foundations of the city.

Sweat ran down his back under his armor, and Merrick waited until the tent door was closed behind Talen before turning in silent entreaty for the other man to help him undo the laces at the base of his neck. Talen huffed in amusement but began helping him remove his armor. “Not used to wearing armor all day still. It’s been weeks since we left Vastok,” Talen teased. “You should be used to this by now.”

“I didn’t account for the damned heat,” Merrick grumbled, sighing in relief as the gambeson was lifted over his head and removed, cooler air reaching the soaked linen tunic that clung to his skin with sweat. “This country is hot enough to bake an egg on the bare ground.”

Merrick unbuckled his sword and dagger, wrapping the belt around the scabbards and handing them off to a waiting servant. “If it weren’t a treaty year I’d have stayed home,” Merrick groaned as he stretched his shoulders and twisted at the waist, trying to loosen his muscles. “Longest I’ve been away from the twins their whole lives, too.”

“Damned priests making such a fuss about it being a treaty year,” Talen complained, a familiar refrain. Merrick turned around and began helping Talen remove the top layer of his own uniform, the sweat having made laces difficult to manage, road dust covering every inch of leather and fabric. “I still say you should end this farce and go home. Hasn’t been a treaty marriage in a couple hundred years, and we don’t need one this year. You’ve got your heirs.”

“The treaty is too important to not maintain,” Merrick sighed, regretting the truth as well as the necessity of his ruse. “Trade is too essential to both our countries and the treaty ensures open borders and minimal taxes on the exchange of goods. And I don’t want either of my sons forced into a marriage for the sake of maintaining the treaty. Plus, if it goes another generation, I fear the ramifications from the priests. They still hold too much sway over the people of Hellebore, and the growing secular movement isn’t helping either. Things are tense, and with ties of marriage to the current Eistrean royals, I can get more work done dismantling the slave trade. The Eistreans are more devout and are careful to show no

outward signs of enslaving the magic-born, so they seem objectionable to many, and their religious views are going to cause us trouble if we don't play nice with the treaty marriage tradition. I don't want to marry again, but it's a tool I can use to calm political waters and maybe even stop the slave trade."

Talen grimaced, but he agreed with Merrick's goals. "I can't see either of the twins going along with an arranged marriage, despite them being wee brats barely tall enough to push over a goat. They might run away and hide in the livestock pens again if the idea was ever brought up to them."

Merrick snorted out a laugh. His sons were a handful. Sola and Seth were trouble, in all the best ways. Precocious, stubborn, quick-witted and funny, his boys reminded Merrick of himself at that age, and he wished it was easier to get word from Vastok about how they were handling their father's extended absence.

Sola was the more outspoken of the two, and Seth was a plotter, the one planning and creating the mischief while Sola distracted the grownups. They unfortunately read a bedtime story once about a young prince who ran away to escape his evil parents, and despite Merrick not being a thing like the villains in the tale, the twins delighted in running away to avoid every lesson from their tutors and built little hideaways in the most inconvenient of places in the palace. Like a water closet and the dry pantry off the main kitchen. The latest invasion by the imperial twins was in the goat pens near the stables.

His sister was minding her nephews while Merrick was spying on the Eistrean royal family, and if anyone asked, His Grace, the Emperor Heremis of Hellebore was on a private hermitage before the summer solstice, preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice and seek a marriage with the Eistrean royal family according to ancient tradition.

"Speaking of the twins, any word from my sister?" Merrick asked quietly, cautious despite the sound-dampening spells ensuring privacy around the tent.

“It’s why I came to fetch you early,” Talen replied with a grin. “A message arrived just as we finished setting up the tent.”

“Thank you,” Merrick replied, gripping Talen’s shoulder in thanks.

“Foryne has it, get going,” Talen grinned and gently pushed Merrick toward the rear of the large tent where Merrick’s bed was set up.

Foryne heard him coming and was holding out a gray glass orb that hummed with energy when Merrick took it in his hand. He grinned, feeling the familiar touch of his sister’s magic. “Thank you,” Merrick said and Foryne clapped him on the shoulder as well and then left without a word, tugging a cloth partition closed behind him, a privacy spell settling in place around Merrick so he could listen to the message without being overheard.

Merrick sat on his cot and released the spell in the orb, setting it on bedding as he struggled to get his riding boots off.

“Papa!” a pair of sweet voices rose in tandem from the orb, and Merrick sucked in a sharp breath at hearing his sons. Tears pricked at his eyes, and he let them fall unashamedly as he listened to his children. “Papa, Auntie Marion says you can hear us! She’s been teaching us magic and said we can show you when you get home.” That was Sola, ever outspoken. “It’s a talking stone,” another little voice interrupted Sola. That was Seth, the little know-it-all. Sola never minded though—Seth knew things and made sure Sola knew them too. It was safer using the talking stones away from Meadowtown, since there were concerns about the mages nearby sensing their use and informing Hadrix. It was one of those issues that was difficult to navigate, and they didn’t want to give Hadrix any excuse not to allow Foryne and the guards access to his family. On the road with no one on the Eistrean side able to sense them, he was more comfortable using the stones to talk to his children.

Well, not talk to them, but hear them, yes. The distance was too far for an actual conversation to be held, but the stones could receive and hold spoken messages for many days, and

any stones connected in person would always be able to send messages between them regardless of distance, though there would be a delay of a few hours if the distance was great. If Merrick were closer to Vastok the ability to communicate would be nearly instantaneous. It was an ingenious invention that mages in Hellebore created a handful of years earlier, and it was a closely guarded asset.

“Auntie Marion took us to the menagerie, and we got to pet the baby animals,” Sola declared in a mad rush of excitement. “Seth got to hold a baby porcupine and it didn’t stab him!”

The menagerie was created by Merrick’s great-great grandmother, who married into the Imperial family with an entire stable full of animals she rescued and raised, and the emperor of the time converted her passion for helping animals into an actual private menagerie in the palace complex. An entire garden terrace was made into a haven for various animals native to Hellebore and was beloved by the imperial court and the children of the city. Open to the public most of the year, it was closed only when the seasons were too harsh for the animals to be outside, or in the spring when newborn season arrived. Merrick spent a great deal of time there in his free moments as a child and young man, and he continued that tradition with his sons.

“Baby porcupines are nice and like to snuggle,” Seth declared with authority in a way only a five-year-old could achieve. Merrick grinned, wiping at his face. He missed how the twins would run into his office and tell him all about their adventures during the day.

His sons spent most of the day with their cousins, his sister Marion’s children—they were all a similar age and were taught together by the same tutors and teachers, all raised within the imperial household. They were never far, and he welcomed their random interruptions during the day when the staff needed a break from the chaos of managing a handful of children all under the age of ten.

His sons continued to ramble on about their day in the menagerie until he heard them grow bored with the novelty of

speaking to a shiny stone, and then his sister Marion took over the message. He listened to the stampede of tiny feet as his sons took off to create mischief, and the put-upon sigh of his sister before her voice came from the stone.

“Brother dear, I hope your adventure has been fruitful,” her wry drawl made him chuckle. She was not a fan of his subterfuge, of the opinion much like Talen that the marriage portion of the treaty year traditions could be bypassed entirely. “Your little demons are hale and hearty, and my own brood are just as devious,” she exhaled with an exaggeration he could see clearly in his mind’s eye, complete with a fake frown and eye rolling. They were very much alike in temperament, though she had the freedom of not being the emperor, a “mere imperial princess,” as she liked to claim quite often when Merrick voiced his own few complaints about their family and the attendant duties that came with the name.

“You’re missed dearly,” Marion continued, softer now. “The court is well in hand, and no one has questioned your hermitage story. Many are praising you for the choice to take the marriage tradition seriously, and are complimenting you on setting aside your grief and doing what’s best for the country. I won’t mention the betting that’s currently ongoing, as I know that will annoy you to no end.”

His widower status had been in place for several years now, and a few faint hints were dropped in conversations that the Imperial Court wanted their emperor happily married. It was unusual for an emperor to be his age of twenty-nine and unwed, even if he already had legitimate heirs.

His wife, Estelle, died of a blow to the head when she fell not long after delivering the twins. Merrick had been with the boys in the nursery while his wife took a long break from minding their newborn children, and the healers said her body was still recovering from the long labor, and that her slip in the bathing room was a tragic accident.

Merrick had his doubts, as Estelle was treated by the healers immediately after labor. Yet there was no evidence of foul play, and no one was seen in her private chambers or bathing room before or after her passing. Her ladies in waiting

were sent away for the evening while she recuperated in a long bath, so she was alone when the accident occurred. The healers found no injuries aside from the blow she suffered when she slipped in a puddle of water on the stone floor of the bathing room, cracking her skull and leading to a large bleed in her brain. The only solace he took from it was that her passing was quick, and she was unconscious when the end came.

He carried guilt for her loss, an irrational emotion that haunted him still, despite the years since the accident. Merrick had vowed to her when they wed that he would be an active father and spouse, that he would give his family as much of his time and energy as he did the empire.

That fateful day Merrick had firmly sent her off from the nursery so his wife could rest and take care of herself, minding the babes as they slept after a feeding. She went happily, and he still saw the tired, fond smile on her face as she kissed the boys' heads while they were cradled in his arms, and the way she left the nursery, glancing over her shoulder as she left.

Estelle was dead two hours later.

Paranoia was an unfortunate side effect of being part of the imperial family, as machinations for removing impediments to people getting what they wanted from them happened regularly. Removing his wife so he would be forced to marry again was far-fetched, but not impossible, and he guarded his children as best he could as a result.

His wife was gone, his children without a mother, though Marion fulfilled that role with an enjoyment that he appreciated. He made sure his sons knew how much their mother loved them and how happy and proud she was of them, even though she died days after their birth and never got to know them as Merrick did.

“Come home soon, Merrick,” Marion continued, her voice making the stone shiver on the bedding. “I hope to see you smiling when you ride into Vastok in a few weeks' time. We love you.”

The message ended, the spell fading away. He picked it up and wove the answering spell to send his own message in return. “Seth, Sola, all my love to you both. I miss you very much. I’m so glad you’re having fun, and please mind Auntie Marion until I come home. I can’t wait to see what you’re learning, and I’m very proud of you both. Marion, thank you for everything, and I love you as well. And I am pleased to say I have made my decision, and I hope to convince him to accept my offer during the solstice festival. I’ll be home soon, and hopefully I won’t be alone.”

He fed the spell power, and it coiled within the glassy gray orb, tension rising. It held for a heartbeat, then released, a soundless snap as the message was sent winging through the ether toward the matching stone, far away in Vastok.

Obscure enough his sons wouldn’t be confused if he failed in convincing Elia to marry him and returned without a husband in tow, but clear enough he hoped Marion picked up on the fact that it wasn’t Princess Aria that Merrick had his eye on.



Everett dragged Elia to the far corner of the high king’s tent, where the servants had a narrow opening and partition set up to allow them to come and go without using the main tent entrance, so it was out of view of anyone sitting at the high king’s table.

The first blow made him cry out, and Everett slapped a hand over his mouth, slamming Elia against one of the huge support poles in the corner of the tent that was obscured by the servant partition. Everett held Elia in place with the grip on his face while pummeling him with his free hand. Elia tried to cover his torso with his arms, but Everett managed several blows to Elia’s right side. Elia struggled to breathe and fought not to vomit as Everett punched his belly, suffocating him with his big hand. Tears ran from his eyes, and Elia scrabbled at Everett’s arm with both of his hands, convinced he was going to die mere feet away from his entire family. His nails bit into

Everett's wrists, but the tiny stings did nothing to deter his brother and his abuse.

It took Aria calling for something from the servants to prompt Everett into abruptly stopping his beating and dropping Elia to the floor of the tent. He said not a word, but then he rarely did if their father wasn't dictating the brutality.

Everett spun away from the partition and went back toward the buffet table, and a couple of servants eyed Elia in confusion as they entered the tent, stepping around him as he gasped and coughed on the ground. They knew better than to ask if he needed help—drawing attention to Elia's treatment would get the servants in trouble.

His gasping breaths and soft moans were quiet, the tent large enough and the racket made by the camp hiding the sounds of his pain, and even if his family heard him, they would ignore him or demand he be quiet. They were no help, and he expected nothing from them, and he made himself bite back the involuntary groans as pain radiated out from his ribs.

Elia forced himself to his feet, clutching at the support pole and climbing it one-handed, struggling to draw in enough air to clear the spots floating in his vision. He wiped at his mouth, blood and spit smearing across his hand. Elia held onto his right side, shaking, his torso pulverized from shoulder to hip, throbbing with his hectic heartbeat.

He stumbled out of the high king's tent through the servant door, thankful it was dark, and the area off limits to the rest of the court. A few servants near the cooking fire looked toward him and then immediately away, pretending not to see him. Used to their deliberate ignorance, Elia pretended they weren't there too, and focused on staying on his feet.

Each step was agony, knives of pain digging into his ribs, each breath short and shallow enough to make him feel as if he were still suffocating, and he leaned against a table covered in bowls and plates, forcing himself to pull in a deep enough breath to keep from passing out. It was excruciating, but he managed it, and his head ceased swimming enough for him to

orient himself in the darkness, allowing him to set out for his own tent.

Elia winced, holding his side and limping into the tent he shared with Alden. He was struggling to breathe deep or take a long stride with his right leg, his side pulling with a sharp pain with each attempt. He coughed again, and a glob of blood and spit fell from his lips to the trampled grass. He was in too much pain to spare concern for the fact that he was coughing up blood.

Thankfully the tent was empty when he stumbled inside.

Alden would be in the high king's tent until the early morning hours, along with the rest of his siblings, eating supper with their royal sire, the ambassador set to join them for drinks after they ate. Elia had managed a few bites before Everett pulled him away from the table to take out his frustration at being cooped up in the carriage.

Aria refused to let Everett out of her sight, making him bake in the carriage along with her during the intolerable heat of the day again today, and since Everett couldn't retaliate against their sister, and Alden was too good at fighting to pick on, Elia was his target.

Elia fell to his cot, hissing in pain, fearing ribs were broken. Stabbing pains in his chest made it hurt to move, and every breath felt like glass was scratching at his insides.

There were no healers with them—Hadrix hated them, refusing to utilize them unless an injury or illness was dire, and he would never contemplate sending for one from the college on the palace grounds for a broken rib, especially not for Elia. Nor would he ask for help from the priests at the Holy City. The only time Hadrix ever considered using a healer was if he needed medical care, or one of the favored siblings did. Elia wasn't worth the effort.

Elia wasn't going to be able to ride with a broken rib. And being stuck in the carriage with Everett? Impossible.

Out of options, Elia closed his eyes and reached for that part of his mind that made things happen without Elia lifting a

finger. His magic was shy, untouched by training, and many times it only worked if Elia was talking to an animal like his horse, or a few birds in the orchards. He'd never tried to heal himself before, as he was terrified of it being noticed, and earning himself a beating he couldn't fix on his own.

Yet he also feared a day in the saddle, or even worse, days in the carriage with Everett, with broken ribs, more than he feared a beating from his father. Either way lay pain.

He struggled, tears running down his cheeks, and the magic slipped away, since he was unsure of how to wrangle it into fixing a problem he couldn't see. The pain was consuming him, and Elia feared he might be dying as the spots returned, black dots eating away at his vision.

Chapter Ten

Merrick sat up on his cot, tossing aside the thin sheet he was using to cover himself. Magic stirred in the camp, and it was unmistakably coming from Elia. It felt like him—shy, unsure, his identity lacing it as surely as his voice or scent, and yet there was something off about it, something chaotic.

Sitka swore, and Merrick heard them rustling in their cot as they sensed the magic just as he did—something was wrong.

Merrick slid from bed and tugged on a thin pair of sleeping pants and his boots, leaving his cot alcove for the center of the tent. Sitka joined him, tugging on a shirt, Talen following behind them in a similar state of undress. He paid no mind to the fact that his best friend was fucking a fellow Hellion—their personal lives were not his concern. Prince Elia was, and there was something wrong.

Kell and Foryne had left minutes earlier for the high king's tent for drinks, and Cormand lay snoring off to the side behind the fabric wall hiding his cot. He was a heavy sleeper or else he would be up at the magic disturbing the camp.

“Prince Elia is trying to use magic,” Merrick spoke quietly, but with urgency. “It’s not working, whatever he’s trying to do. Something is wrong—I don’t see him using magic at all considering how his father feels about it unless it was dire.”

“He’s got no training, and there’s a chaotic feel to the energy, like he can’t focus,” Sitka confirmed, eyes distant as

they felt for answers with their own magic. “Feels like the prince may be hurt, or sick.”

“Fuck,” Merrick swore, and he went back for his weapons. He fetched his dagger, tying the scabbard to his waist, and pulled on a long tunic, one without the Hellebore colors, tugging the long end over the weapon. He returned to Sitka and Talen.

“You can’t go marching into their side of camp and barge into Prince Elia’s tent,” Talen hissed in warning, frustration clear in his expression and tone. “How will you explain your presence without revealing your magic or his?”

“Glamour,” Merrick replied, locking eyes with Sitka, who nodded once in agreement. “We sneak in, and if we don’t touch anyone on the way through, we should be in and out without trouble. Sitka, I need you with me—I have no experience with healing spells, and if Prince Elia is hurt, I need you to help him.”

“I know some field medicine spells for combat, I’ll do what I can,” Sitka said without hesitation. “I’m not a healer, but I should be able to do something.”

“If he’s hurt beyond what either of you can fix?” Talen sharply demanded.

“Sir Merrick will disappear after the prince has been seen by the temple healers, and His Grace, the Emperor Heremis will end his hermitage early,” Merrick answered, meaning every word, determination setting his jaw and nerves.

Talen stared at him for a long moment, then sighed, tension leaving him. “Always so dramatic when you get angry,” Talen shook his head, but there was a glimmer of affection in the twist of his lips. “Don’t get caught by the guards, I don’t want to explain to Princess Marion that I let you get murdered trying to rescue a foreign prince. She scares me more than you.”

Merrick gripped Talen’s shoulder in thanks and then headed for the door of the tent, Sitka beside him. Talen went to

wake Cormand, the sleeping man waking with a muffled curse and they could hear Talen's urgent tones as he filled him in.

Merrick wove the glamour that would hide them both from sight and sound, and if they avoided physical contact with another person, it should hold in the short trip to the tent where he sensed Elia struggling.

They slid out of the tent, the illusion in place, and followed the chaotic energies that sang of pain and despair.



Elia gasped when the tent door shimmered and lifted to the side, a weird blur of energy shifting in the air like heat over the road in the height of a hot summer day. The gasp turned into a horrible cough, and Elia coughed into his left arm as blood filled his mouth. He spat most of it out to the side, uncaring of the stain it left as it ran down the wall of the tent.

The flap of the tent door closed, and as soon as the disturbance began it ended. Elia jumped when Sir Merrick and another Hellion appeared in his tent out of thin air. Pain radiated out from his side and tears fell from his eyes, his whole body shivering with the stabbing sensation under his hand.

"I...what...how..." Elia stammered, short on air, suddenly mindful of the blood on his lips and the tears on his cheeks. He was a mess, and blatantly injured, and he lacked the fortitude and imagination to pretend otherwise in that moment.

Sir Merrick took in a sweeping glance of the tent before lifting his hand to the entrance, making a gesture with his fingers, and magic moved in the tent. Far more controlled and effortless than the failed, instinctive attempts Elia had been attempting. The boldness of the Hellion using magic in front of others, in front of Elia, left him speechless along with the pain.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," Sir Merrick said, quickly coming to kneel in front of Elia where he sat on his cot, intense hazel eyes landing on the blood smeared on Elia's lips.

Sir Merrick took in the panting breaths, wet cheeks, the sweat on his face and the pallor of his skin, and the way Elia shivered, cradling his side. “I felt your magic from our tent, and I’ve come to help. What happened?”

Elia nodded once before his brain caught up to him. “Sensed my magic? But I don’t...” he tried to deny it, afraid, fear of discovery rising with the pain.

“My prince,” Sir Merrick reached out and gently took Elia’s free hand in both of his own. “Magic is accepted and trusted in Hellebore, as common among my people as brown hair and eyes. I’ve known you were magic-born since the moment I laid eyes on you, and there is nothing to fear from me or my people.”

Tears escaped and ran freely down his face at the conviction in Sir Merrick’s words. He wanted to believe him, but years of distrust made it hard. Yet everything inside him battled the wariness he learned amongst his family, to never show weakness. Something shouted from deep inside that Sir Merrick was to be trusted. Empathic skill left unchecked is what told him when his brother was going to snap, or that his father was going to order him to be punished. Again, Sir Merrick and the other Hellion’s emotions weren’t assailing his mind, and it was odd enough that he almost lost his mind and said something about it—but another burst of pain radiated out from his side, stealing his breath and keeping the reckless question behind his teeth.

The gentle hand on his face gradually opened a conduit between Elia and Sir Merrick, and he felt echoes of sincerity, worry, and not a hint of disgust or fear. The incredulity at sensing those emotions from someone who knew of his magic left him even more vulnerable, and a pain more agonizing than any broken bone cracked open in his heart.

The pain also prompted him to believe, and he was not foolish enough to deny he needed help. Elia nodded once, biting his lip, ready to fall over.

“What happened?” Sir Merrick moved the instant Elia acquiesced to their help. Big, strong hands carefully gripped

his shoulders, steadying him as he swayed on the cot.

“I...” Elia gasped at the pain and effort of talking, wishing he could breathe deeper. Talking hurt, so he kept it short. “Everett, he...” Intense hazel eyes went dark with anger, and he somehow knew that was due to Sir Merrick touching him, letting him sneak past the mysterious wall between Elia and the man’s emotions. Sir Merrick knew what Elia couldn’t say, that his oldest brother nearly killed him with a casual, cruel indifference. “My ribs.”

“Sitka knows some healing magic, can they look?” Merrick asked gently, still holding Elia’s shoulders. An odd, rare emotion came not from the other man but from within Elia, and he realized it was a deep surety that he was in good hands, that the man holding him so carefully was not a threat. The novelty gave him a burst of energy, helping him ask for what he needed.

“Yes, please,” Elia said quickly, sucking in short gasps of air. “Thank you.”

Merrick moved to the side, one hand on Elia’s right shoulder, helping to prop him up, and Sitka knelt in front of Elia as well. A gentle hand felt along Elia’s side, and he moved his right arm out of the way, hissing when probing fingers found the source of the stabbing pain. Merrick switched his grip from shoulder to elbow, both big hands holding his arm out away from his torso so Sitka could access the worst of it. The new position hurt like hell, but Elia suffered it quietly, tears running freely from his eyes.

Energy stirred in the air around them, a slight shiver that Elia felt down to his bones. Not unpleasant, just new. He sensed that the power came from Sitka, but that was all—the Hellion was a mystery to him, blocked even more so than Sir Merrick, despite the physical contact between them. What was so different about the Hellions that kept their emotions from swamping Elia’s mind and thoughts? Whatever it was he was glad for it, because he doubted very much he would survive the physical pain of the beating and the invasive emotional loads of two relative strangers, no matter how kind and compassionate.

“A few ribs are broken, and one of the shattered ends has cut a lung,” Sitka whispered, and Sir Merrick squeezed Elia’s hand. “Your Highness, you’re bleeding internally where the sharp edges of bone are cutting your lung. I can realign the worst of the breaks, and attempt to stem the bleed, but I can’t stop it completely. You’ll need a healer at the Holy City as soon as possible. Waiting will see you grow weaker, and I cannot make the injuries heal—I can only align the bones and temporarily seal the wounds until we get you to a healer.”

“My father won’t allow a healer,” Elia whimpered, tears burning his eyes. Even with Merrick supporting him, he felt like he was going to fall. He coughed, blood dripping from his bottom lip, and Elia was ready to pass out, but it was important for the Hellions to know what to expect from the High King. If they went asking for help for Elia from the High King, he worried what might happen to them, and him. “No healer, not for me, not for this. He won’t be pleased if the emperor learns of this...incident.”

Elia was going to die. Everett had killed him at last. And a fierce, tiny part of him was happy to see it happen before the festival, days before Aria’s campaign to wed the emperor and Everett’s presumed ascension to crown prince. His death would mar their perfect plans, and he indulged in a heartbeat of petty satisfaction at the thought.

“Sending a rider out for a healer will take too long,” Sitka murmured to Sir Merrick. “A day there maybe, but two days back for sure, since whoever we manage to summon back won’t have experience traveling like we do. Prince Elia doesn’t have that time.”

“...my father won’t let that happen,” Elia interrupted, gasping for air between words. “Don’t summon a healer.”

Merrick frowned, fierce and angry, but after a long moment, the Hellion nodded once.

“Do what you can now,” Sir Merrick said to Sitka, who nodded and closed their eyes, and magic stirred again within the tent.

Soothing warmth bloomed under Sitka's hand, and Elia jerked when things moved within his chest, a sensation both alien and frightening, blinding pain rising and then receding just as quickly. He gagged, panting, Sir Merrick holding him upright the entire time until Sitka pulled away after a tense moment.

Sitka and Merrick eased him back on the cot, and the warmth spread deeper into his torso, allowing Elia to take a slow, deep breath for the first time since Everett beat him. His head swam woozily, and he shut his eyes, trying not to pass out from the sudden influx of air.

"I've sealed the bleeds and realigned most of the larger bones. A healer or magi skilled in healing spells is needed to do the actual repairing," Sitka said, pulling their hand away. "I'm not a trained healer, the set spells may not hold if it goes too long without an actual healer. Some of the breaks are full fractures, the bone pieces separated. I've dulled what pain I can, but pain alleviation isn't something I'm all that good at, I'm sorry."

"Elia?" Merrick spoke softly, gently, but urgently enough that Elia had to respond. Merrick speaking his name was a gift he never expected, and he wanted to see the man's face.

Elia blinked his eyes open to see both Sitka and Merrick leaning over him, worried. Elia reached out, catching Sitka's hand and squeezing it once before weakness forced him to let go. "Thank you," Elia breathed out in gratitude.

"You're most welcome, Your Highness," Sitka murmured. They looked to Merrick, quickly, then stood. "I'm going to check the spell at the door, make sure no one has noticed."

Sir Merrick leaned farther over Elia, brushing hair out of his eyes, a big hand cupping Elia's face as a thumb swept along his jaw. He pressed his face into the touch, needing the kindness and care like he needed air, and that odd ache returned to his heart. It felt so wonderful to be touched gently, to not know pain when someone touched him. Other than Wyle, no one ever touched him.

There were fleeting hints of emotions in each caress, and Elia found himself in the odd position of wanting to experience more from Sir Merrick, but each time it was too quick, ephemeral, and beyond his current abilities to seek out.

“Elia,” Merrick said softly. “How do you feel?”

“Sore, and tired,” Elia murmured, a slight thrill running through his core at Sir Merrick—no, *Merrick*—using his name.

“Healing uses energy, even when done with magic,” Merrick told him gently. He paused, jaw tightening. “Elia, we need to get you to the Holy City as quickly as possible. On horseback we can make the journey in less than a day and have you in a healer’s care by sunset tomorrow. I can fashion a spell to immobilize the bones, and it’ll be painful on horseback, but I think the necessity outweighs the risks. Sitka can reapply the sealing spells over the internal bleeding if travel reopens them. Keeping pace with the convoy means several more days of travel.”

“Don’t get in trouble helping me,” Elia whispered, eyes heavy. Fear for Sir Merrick stirred Elia into trying to sit up, but he gave up almost immediately, gasping for air. Merrick gently held him by his shoulders, hands warm and solid. “You can’t abandon your duty to the ambassador.” he urged.

Each word hurt something fierce but he refused to let Sir Merrick endanger himself in a noble attempt to help Elia.

“Foryne will kill me if I ignore your situation to protect myself,” Merrick said with a tiny smile. “I won’t get in trouble, I swear it. Let us help you.”

He felt nothing but sincerity from the man, something he could sense with his wild magics, as if Merrick were letting him in and wanting him to believe him. Elia was struck by the deep conviction that Sir Merrick was willing and able to help Elia—that he *wanted* to help Elia.

No one wanted to help him, not enough to take action and actually do something. His thoughts were as chaotic as his emotions, so he took a chance on the Hellion.

“Yes. I accept your help, Sir Merrick.”

Merrick’s answering smile was dazzling, and it warmed Elia better than even the healing from Sitka.

Getting to the Holy City before his family meant several days without them. A joy and freedom Elia never got to experience, and he would be with Merrick. He would face the consequences of his decision when they came, whatever they were—he wanted the time. A chance at a tiny bit of freedom and all of it with Sir Merrick—a dream. And if his first and only trip to the Holy City ended in his death, at least it would be in the company of Sir Merrick. He wouldn’t be alone.



Under the cover of the strongest illusion Merrick and Cormand could weave, they snuck through the camp, Prince Elia wrapped in a heavy blue and green Hellion cloak, face hidden, safe in Merrick’s arms. The spell rendered them invisible to sight and sound, though not touch, and they moved with an abundance of caution to avoid brushing up against other people or tents. The late hour helped, and few people were moving around the camp.

The prince was half-asleep, exhausted and in agony. Even after the quick field medicine Sitka managed, Elia was still in pain, and the spell Merrick fashioned and then set in his side to hold the bones immobile sucked Elia of energy and strength.

If Elia slept, he might be spared the worst of the traveling. Merrick did not know how to keep someone unconscious without hurting them—his training was defensive, in case of assassination attempts—and only those skilled in the deeper healing arts knew such spells.

Merrick was maintaining the stabilizing spell and the illusion in tandem with Cormand, the Hellion most adept at the more delicate works of glamour and other finicky magic. Sitka and Cormand were behind him in the dark, Sitka coming in case Elia needed further emergency care and Cormand for his deft touch with more complicated workings. Merrick was

focusing most of his energy and attention on the spellwork he had on Elia, and was grateful for the help from the magic-born Hellions.

Foryne, Talen, and Kell saw them off, and Merrick was again reminded of the ambassador's courage and steel spine. Foryne was prepared to cover for their absence. A story of Elia being kicked by a horse and carted off to the Holy City for urgent healing was ready to go, and Merrick hoped the High King had the sense to go along with it, since the truth was that Prince Everett hurt his brother severely enough that he could have died. A punctured lung could kill anyone.

Confronting the Eistreans with the truth while their party was split between Foryne and Elia was dangerous—Merrick entertained the idea of evacuating the entire Hellebore contingent and making a break for the Holy City as a group, but Foryne wisely advised caution and not putting the Eistreans on the defensive before the solstice festival. Merrick conceded without a fight because Elia needed help, and as soon as possible.

He would deal with Prince Everett at the Holy City.

Merrick would see Everett held accountable for the abuse but getting Elia to a healer took priority. The royal asshole would experience his wrath once Elia was safely healed and ensconced at Merrick's side.

Cormand and Sitka moved with ease in the shadows, casting minor glamours to hide their actions and obscure any sounds made by their horses. No one was the wiser as they found their respective mounts and pulled them from the herds, and they melted into the shadows by the river under the thin line of trees that hugged the shoreline, far enough away from the camp that they could prepare the horses without being interrupted.

It astounded Merrick that there were no guards posted on the camp perimeter, but then they likely feared nothing from their own people or the small contingent of Hellions. Such a lax attitude worked in their favor, as it meant they would get out of the camp with minimal risk of being seen or stopped.

Merrick sat Elia gently at the base of a tree as he helped the others tack up their mounts, tying small packs holding rations and water skins to the saddles, along with weapons and the official paperwork from Foryne explaining their presence with the Eistrean prince if the guards or priests wondered why Prince Elia wasn't under the care of the Eistrean royal guards.

The "accident" happened when Elia was admiring the Hellion mounts with Sir Merrick, and they left immediately once the severity of the injury was discovered, not stopping to gather anything aside from what they had on them at the time. It would be the same story Foryne would convey to Hadrix in the morning, and close enough to the truth that lying would be the easiest route to take to prevent an aggressive confrontation with Hadrix and his other three children while on the road.

Hadrix was bound to know it was a lie, since Everett hurt Elia, but Merrick was sure that Hadrix wouldn't call Foryne's bluff for the sake of pleasing the emperor. Regardless of how futile Hadrix's scheming was, keeping Eistreans from hurting Elia further was essential, and the solstice festival devolving into violence would be a disaster for Merrick's current aspirations and plans, nevermind the upheaval it might cause Elia.

Merrick swung up onto his gray mare, Glaciere snorting softly, and held out his arms for Elia, Cormand gently lifting the smaller man into Merrick's arms. Merrick checked the spell on the prince's side, then reinforced it with another layer to keep the bones immobile and Sitka's first aid intact. The drain on his power was significant, but once they were away from the convoy the glamours could be dropped and his energy spent entirely on Elia. He gathered Elia to his chest, holding him securely in his arms, and took the reins from Cormand in the hand not holding Elia to his chest.

Cormand and Sitka mounted up as well, and Cormand crafted a tiny spell, directing moonlight to illuminate a path through the underbrush until they reached the road. Another spell muffled the sound of hoofbeats as they urged their mounts into a trot, aiming their noses for the Holy City. No

calls of alarm rose behind them, and the shadows swallowed them entirely in seconds.

Chapter Eleven

The sun rising behind them cast long shadows on the road, the loping strides of their horses a soothing rhythm that lulled Elia into a trance-like state, one where he was mentally distanced by exhaustion, the pain not quite close enough to the surface to overwhelm him. A fuzzy part of him knew it was probably shock, but he was too tired to care.

He was in Merrick's arms, and if he were to die, he had that memory to cling to as his soul departed downstream on the river god's current.

The morning air was cool, not yet the baking heat of the midday sun, and resting on Merrick's chest was comfortable. He was muscular and his strong arms held Elia gently and securely. He reveled in the closeness to another man. He'd never gotten to experience such closeness before, and it was a memory he would treasure and hold close despite the urgency of the situation.

"How do you fare, my prince?" Merrick said quietly, sensing he was awake enough to hear him. His words drifted over Elia's ear, and he shivered, the pain in his side at the movement worth the experience.

"Tired," Elia said, blinking slow and heavy. "Hurts."

"Sleep, if you can," Merrick ordered softly. "We'll be there soon."

Even though the pain was muted from Merrick's spell, it was enough to keep him awake despite the exhaustion wearing

at the edges of his mind. Elia's gaze wandered to the Hellions riding alongside Merrick. Sitka drew his eye, the Hellion riding closest to them, but Elia's vision was blurry enough that he had trouble getting his eyes to focus on the other Hellion riding with them. What Elia saw was enough to fascinate him despite pain and exhaustion nipping away at his waking mind.

Sitka rode to Merrick's left, their mount keeping pace with ease, the Hellion moving in easy synchronicity with it. Occasionally they would glance over at Elia. Once in a while their gazes would align and Sitka would smile in a reassuring way, compassion and worry on their expressive face.

Now that Elia was fully awake, he struggled to distract himself from the pain, thinking back to when Merrick introduced Sitka in the tent. The effortless way Merrick spoke of them made it clear that the lack of defined gender on Sitka's part was deliberate and accepted by their peers. It was not apparent by how they dressed, the uniform merely showing strong shoulders and arms, and the lean grace of a person used to wielding a sword. They were not overtly feminine or masculine, purely themselves, and there was a kindness in their dark eyes that was at odds with the antagonistic history Elia had with other warriors, like Derrent or Everett's cronies.

One of the last tutors Elia had before Hadrix sent them packing told Elia ways of life outside Eistrea. Such tales fascinated him, adding to his desire to leave his oppressive life behind and see the world and all the other people within it. Elia knew different ways of being existed—to claim neither gender, to strike out on a new path—though he'd never met someone who so openly embraced such a way of being themselves. It was not a life that was welcomed in Eistrea, though the priests had little issue with it, at least the ones that came from the Holy City and not the locals who curry favor with Hadrix. Highly ranked priests in the palace and temples in Meadowtown tended to take up the high king's prejudices, and whatever Hadrix could not understand, he rarely tolerated, and the devout followed his lead.

Sitka smiled, as if aware of the complicated thoughts Elia was having, and it was open and confident, unafraid and full of

charm. Elia smiled back, for a moment delighted despite his pain. Someone was living their life without shame or censure, and that made Elia happy in a way he lacked words to explain. He typically could sense something from another person if they were as close to him as Sitka and the unnamed Hellion were, but he felt nothing. Maybe his injuries were severe enough that his wayward magics lacked the strength to function.

Sitka brought their mount close for a moment, calling over the sound of shod hooves on tightly packed gravel, “Rest if you can, Your Highness. Please.”

“Sleep, Elia,” Merrick joined in, and Elia sighed at the gentle urging, ready to listen.

It was a relief to feel trust in another person, and he trusted Merrick, and Sitka, to keep him safe, and that profound realization let him succumb again to sleep. An arm tightened around his waist, and the feeling of safety followed him into sleep.



Merrick let Elia sleep through the day, and it was a blessing that they soon outpaced the royal convoy, and they could drop the illusions, the drain of the comprehensive glamours no longer sapping their strength. Cormand fed energy to the horses, letting them maintain an otherwise impossible pace at a relentless canter, eating up the miles between them and the Holy City, smoothing their strides to ease the rocking of being in the saddle.

Sitka cast a solar shield, holding off the worst of the summer sun and the heat rising from the surface of the road, so they were able to escape the baking heat of the past few days. The horses were unfazed by the magic, well accustomed to it, and they were enjoying the ride, unfettered by the pace or the weight of their riders. Such spells were common in Hellebore, and horses and other animals used as mounts were trained with it at an early age. It wasn't healthy to use daily, as it gave the

animals the unrealistic expectation that their stamina and reserves were endless, and that could be dangerous—but they didn't bolt and dump riders when magic worked on their bodies in situations where a nonstop pace was essential.

Their pace ensured that anyone pursuing them from the royal convoy would be unable to catch up with them. With no mages in the Eistrean party, not even the best-bred horse in the royal stables would be able to overtake them.

They stopped once early in the afternoon to relieve their bladders and get the horses water. Sitka kept the solar shield up, protecting them from the midday sun, and as a result they weren't as miserable as they could have been had they stayed with the convoy. The pace the convoy kept was a slow amble, and it only traveled for a few hours each day, since the king's late mornings slowed the pace significantly.

"We're making good time," Merrick said quietly as he set an exhausted Elia on an old stump high on the bank beside the river, careful not to jostle the young prince too much. He held a waterskin to Elia's lips. "Sip slowly, I don't want you to get ill."

"Thank you," Elia whispered, pale with dark circles under his eyes. He sipped carefully, managing a few mouthfuls before he shook his head.

"How do you feel?" Merrick asked and reached under the cloak to check the spell holding the bones in place. It was intact, and he breathed out in relief. He feared the bones might slip and puncture the lung even more before Elia reached a healer.

"I'm tired," Elia said, so softly Merrick strained to hear. Elia listed to the side, and Merrick caught him up in his arms, feeling the second the prince lost consciousness, limp as a child's rag doll.

"Sitka!"

Sitka ran from the riverside and went straight to Elia, slipping their hand under the prince's tunic to touch the injury,

eyes going distant as they used their magic, swearing under their breath.

“Fuck! The bleed resumed. I’ve resealed it for now, but it bled a lot before I did. The seal should last until we reach the city, but he’s lost a lot of blood and his pulse is too fast.”

Cormand was already with the horses, weaving spells as he passed each horse, touching each of their flanks in turn, the horses snorting, tossing their heads and stamping their feet, energizing them for the remainder of the trip.

Sitka took Elia in their arms, and Merrick mounted Glaciere, who was vibrating beneath the saddle with the desire to run. Sitka passed him Elia, and Merrick waited just long enough for the others to mount before releasing Glaciere, his mare slipping into a gallop with a loud snort and a toss of her mane.

Elia remained unconscious, even at a gallop, and that terrified Merrick more than he had been since the day his wife died. This close to the Holy City the road was flat and wide, entering the massive river basin along the border of the two kingdoms, which aided their speed.

The river widened as well, and there were numerous travelers on the road, most heading toward the city due to the approaching festival. Cormand caught up, and tossed ahead a spell to encourage people to move aside, and they hugged the side of the road that overlooked the river, racing in a single line with Cormand in the lead.

With Cormand clearing the way, and Sitka behind them holding the solar shield, they devoured the remaining miles and cut the time down by half. The horses would be fine, though if they ran into a delay, the spells might release, and reapplying them to their mounts could be dangerous, so Cormand kept the road in front of them as clear as possible. The Eistreans likely had no idea why they suddenly had the desire to all move over, until a small trio of riders blasted past at a gallop. The travelers likely thought they must have subconsciously heard the pounding of hooves approaching from the rear and decided to move all on their own.

The first hint of the Holy City came with a sudden drop of temperature, the air full of the scents of wet earth and stone, like the ground after a rainstorm. The huge convergence of the main branches of the Adracias resembled a lake, if not for the strong currents that twisted near the southern edge of the island, and the subtle roar of the rivers that filled the air for miles. The East Bridge was crowded with people, wagons, carts, mounted travelers, and animals. The walls of the city rose behind the bridge, the high priest's temple on the hilltop a golden crown above buildings carved from dark gray granite.

“Move aside! Riders beware, move aside!” Cormand shouted, voice loud with magic, startling both the people ahead and a flock of birds from the reeds along the river. They were coming up on the bridge, a span a quarter mile long, wide enough for twenty mounted knights to cross in a line, though it was currently packed full of pilgrims and merchants.

Their pace slowed on the bridge, hooves ringing over stone, but enough people moved that they were able to bypass most of the traffic, and they headed right for the guardhouse built into the wall of the city that manned the Eistrean Gate. The Eastern gate was guarded by the Eistrean army, and the Western gate by the Helleborian army.

“What's all this ruckus?” a guard in Eistrean colors demanded, holding up a hand and stepping in front of them, forcing them to stop. “Why are Hellions coming from Eistrea in such a state? And who is this?”

Merrick urged Glaciere right up to the guard. “Prince Elia was gravely injured in the night, and we've been sent ahead to seek healers. Let us pass,” Merrick nodded at Sitka, who dropped the spells as they reached into their saddlebags and produced the letters from Foryne.

The guard gawked at the young man in Merrick's arms, and Sitka tossed the packet to the man, who struggled to catch it, too distracted by Merrick's declaration. Using the man's confusion to his advantage, Merrick spurred Glaciere past the guards and into the Holy City, the vast wall's shadows welcoming them in a cold embrace. Shouts rose behind them, but a glance proved the crowd was too thick in their wake and

the guards were stymied in their pursuit. Hopefully they would read the packet from Foryne before sending soldiers after them in earnest.

“Cormand, ride for the healers’ temple closest to our consulate, we’re going to the residence,” Merrick ordered, and the Hellion nodded and spurred his mount down a narrow side street as Merrick and Sitka continued down the main avenue toward the hill in the center of the city.

They turned north once they hit the first terrace, and took the winding ramp up to the next level of the city. Merrick guided them toward the estate his family maintained in the Holy City even when they weren’t in residence. It was both consulate and residence in one, and usually occupied by the Helleborian ambassador and a few nobles allowed the privilege. Foryne used it as a base when he wasn’t in Vastok or Meadowtown, and the last time Merrick was there was when he was escorting Foryne through on this visit to Meadowtown. No one knew his face at the consulate, not his real face; the only face people knew was the glamour of Sir Merrick, humble Hellion guard newly assigned to the unit.

Merrick checked on Elia, the young man still unconscious, and Merrick nearly forgot to restore the glamour of his alter ego a block from the estate. He settled the now-familiar glamour in place and just in time as they reached the gatehouse and a Helleborian royal guard met them with a wide smile.

“Sir Merrick, Hellion Sitka, you’re back early? What’s amiss?” she asked, spotting Elia immediately.

Sitka dismounted and helped Merrick get down while holding Elia. Sitka pulled the cloak around Elia’s face and Merrick nodded in thanks at their forethought. “An injured noble from Eistrea, hurt on the road last night. Foryne sent us ahead to seek help from the priests. Sir Cormand has gone for the healers, see them in immediately once they’ve arrived.”

Servants came pouring out from the gate, heading to tend to the horses and take their gear. Some, upon seeing Elia in Merrick’s arms, ran back to the main house, and the rest

ushered Merrick and Sitka inside. “Of course, Sir Merrick!” the guard called to his back as Merrick walked fast enough that he was nearly jogging.

The servants who rushed ahead came back and guided Merrick to the closest guest suite, the bedroom being prepared for occupancy even as Merrick swept inside and gently placed Elia on the wide bed. The housekeeper bustled into the room and went right to Merrick. “Sir Merrick, tell me what you need,” he said, eyeing Elia with dismay. He bent down and gently tugged Elia’s boots free and handed them off to a waiting servant, and Merrick stepped aside, letting the staff take over as they competently stripped Elia down to his underwear, the huge bruise on his right side a red and purple monstrosity that made those present wince in sympathy and gentle their movements. The housekeeper, a man whose name he’d forgotten in his current state of worry, tucked Elia under a thin silk sheet and ordered a nearby servant to fetch fresh water and bandages.

“Sir Cormand is coming with healers, see them in straight away. The young man was injured and is in dire condition. The rest of the convoy is still days behind us.” He didn’t want to reveal Elia’s identity, in case it caused trouble for the young prince with his father that Merrick took him to the Hellebore imperial residence and not the Eistrean royal residence on the southern end of the city. Elia had been hurt by one of the Eistrean royals and from everything he’d learned, he doubted Elia would receive proper care with the Eistreans.

“I’ll have your rooms prepared, and staff are already awaiting the healers and Sir Cormand.” The housekeeper gestured, and two servants ran out the door to dispense his orders. A chime sounded through the house, and the housekeeper nodded. “That means they’ve arrived; they should be here in moments.”

Merrick sank to the edge of the bed, one hand on Elia’s shoulder, wishing he would wake. The young man’s state frightened him, eating away at Merrick’s resolve. Cormand had made good time and that helped settle some of his worries.

Running footsteps sounded from the hall and Merrick turned to see Cormand burst into the guest room with a gray-robed mage on his heels. The mage was a tall, thin woman with dark brown skin and long, silver braids tied back at the crown of her head and tumbling down her shoulders, and Merrick recognized her with relief.

A frequent presence in Vastok, Magi Cora was the representative of the Mage Guild to the imperial court. She was a mage of incredible power and had a reputation in Hellebore for boundless skill and talent that was unassailable. Healing magic wasn't her preferred discipline, but was well within her capabilities. Whereas healers had an innate, natural ability to heal and work magic within another body, mages relied on spells to replicate that process. It was difficult and finicky, and usually most magic-born avoided that discipline entirely, unless they had need of it, like Sitka and their emergency field medicine. He had no doubt Magi Cora was skilled in healing spells and she was the best choice if a gifted healer wasn't nearby.

"Magi Cora, you're a welcome sight," Merrick said, and Cora came to the bedside as the servants withdrew to the edge of the room to await orders.

"I saw Cormand on the street caught in the crowd and offered my assistance once he explained the situation." She sent Merrick a narrow-eyed glance, able to see through the glamour, and he knew the second she recognized him. An arched brow was all the reaction she made, and he was thankful for her discretion. "Sir Merrick, I need the room to work."

"Of course, my apologies," Merrick said and quickly stood, joining Cormand off to the side. Cormand must have informed Magi Cora of his alias's identity, as she had never met him as Sir Merrick.

"You made good time," Merrick told Cormand quietly, tension leaving his body as Cora set her hands on Elia and her magic rose in a powerful wave, eliciting gasps from those sensitive to magic in the room.

“I swear Cora sensed me coming and found me before I even made it half a block.” Cormand whispered as they both watched Cora heal Elia. “I’d still be trying to reach the nearest healers’ temple in the crowd out there if she hadn’t found me.”

“Thank Adracias she’s here in the city for the festival,” Merrick said, mindful of the mixed company.

Cormand wiped a gloved hand down his face and Merrick saw the exhaustion the Hellion was feeling, even though he was doing an admirable job of hiding it. He nudged Cormand with an elbow. “Get some rest, you and Sitka both. I’ll stay with our guest.”

Sitka ambled over while shaking their head. “We’re fine, we’ll stay until Magi Cora gives us an update.”

“You’re both quite stubborn,” Merrick said in a quiet sigh with a great deal of fondness.

“Stubbornness is a requirement for a Hellion,” Magi Cora declared as she sat back, hands falling away from Elia. The energy in the room calmed, and a gentle sense of peace and a soft, cooling breeze swept through everyone present. It danced over Merrick’s skin, ridding his body of the sweat and tiredness from the hard ride, easing aching muscles, and replenishing his depleted reserves of magic.

Cormand and Sitka felt it too by the way they stood taller, shoulders going back, hints of their day-long flight to the city erased as he watched.

“Thank you, Magi,” Merrick said as she rose to her feet and joined them where they stood along the wall closest to the bed.

“Your young man is lucky,” Magi Cora stated, eyes a swirl of magic that obscured the actual color of her irises. “Sitka’s work kept him alive. The bleed was extensive, and if left untended much longer, it would have been extremely dangerous. He will recover.”

Her gaze was sharp, searching, and Merrick realized she wanted answers. Merrick addressed the housekeeper and the

servants still in the room. “May we have the room, please? Thank you all for your help, it was invaluable.”

“Of course, Sir Merrick,” the housekeeper declared, and clapped his hands for attention. “Back to your duties, please. His Grace will be here soon, and we must finish our preparations! Sir Merrick, if you and your guest need anything, please use the chimes to summon a servant.”

The room emptied quickly, and Sitka shut and locked the door behind the last of the servants, placing a privacy spell on the doors with the flat of their hands to muffle sound.

“Your Grace, this is certainly unexpected,” Magi Cora said with a hint of sly snark and a sharp smile, and her bow was elegant and mildly sarcastic. “For a man on a private hermitage, you’re having an exciting adventure. Pretending to be a Hellion and absconding with an Eistrean prince is not what I imagined you might be doing.”

Merrick dropped the glamour on his face and shrugged one shoulder. “I wanted to meet the people I might be marrying, and how better to see who they really were when not on their best behavior around His Grace, the Emperor Heremis, than by disguising myself? Though, I was not expecting to stumble upon such a difficult situation.”

The fact that she knew exactly who Elia was wasn’t surprising in the least. Cora always seemed to know everything.

Merrick went to the bed and sat beside Elia, who looked far stronger, the pallor gone from his skin, the dark shadows under his eyes not as deep. He must have lost a lot of blood. “How is he, truly?”

Magi Cora came to stand at his shoulder. “He lost a good amount of blood to internal bleeding and getting his body to reabsorb it took a lot out of him. I’ve encouraged his body to work harder to replace what was lost. Even with me supplying the brunt of the energy, he will need several days to recover. I realigned the broken ribs and began the healing process. The fractures are repaired but he will be sore for a while yet, and exhausted while the spells finish the healing process over the

next few days. I've taken care of the extensive bruising as well as the other remnants of what appears to have been a brutal beating."

Magi Cora's expression hardened and a hint of the powerful mage who'd never lost a duel or battle leaked through her impeccable control. "He's been abused for a long time, Your Grace. Broken bones, torn ligaments, sprains. By whatever luck he was born with, those injuries managed to heal well enough that there's no lasting damage; it was likely his own magic, answering desperation as best it could without the framework of structured spells. He has power, though it's untrained. He has cobbled together an ability to shield, protecting his mind, but it's sporadic and unreliable. That needs to be fixed, and soon."

Anger stirred in his heart but being so near Elia calmed him in a way he appreciated, and he let the anger simmer and then fade. Merrick made sure Elia was tucked in and the young prince sighed in his sleep, rolling over toward Merrick. A slim hand came out from beneath the covers and Merrick took it gently in his own, squeezing. A tiny smile curved soft, pink lips and Elia snuggled down into the bed, tugging Merrick's hand to his chest, curling around his hand. Magi Cora hummed in surprise, and she patted Merrick on the shoulder.

"I see how the wind blows, Your Grace," she murmured quietly. "You will deal with his abusers?"

Merrick nodded once, his focus almost entirely on Elia and the grip the young man had on his hand, and his heart. "They will be dealt with."

"Good." Satisfaction filled her voice. "I will return tomorrow to check on him. He needs training. And his spirit may be battered, but it is unbent. Do not underestimate him further, Your Grace. Tell him the truth before someone else does."

"My ruse has held a bit too well," Merrick grimaced, though he agreed. Even if Elia refused his hand in marriage, giving Elia the opportunity to learn how to use his magic

would go a long way toward making sure he was safe and able to protect himself. And Elia deserved the truth before Merrick made his offer. “I’ll tell him when he wakes. I don’t want him to be alarmed if he sees me without my glamour, and I want his trust. My ruse was meant to learn the truth of the Eistreans, not to lie to someone I want in my life.”

Magi Cora chuckled, shaking her head, her long silver braids rustling over her robes. “Your ruse was not as effective as you think, Your Grace.”

“Oh?” Merrick asked, a bit piqued at her amusement. He was quite talented at the smaller glamours, even if he wasn’t wasn’t able to manage large, complicated illusions without assistance.

“He has seen your true face the entire time,” Magi Cora declared primly. “His gifts are varied; the strongest of them is empathy, and he possesses a peculiar version of what appears to be True Sight. No glamour can withstand him, not when coupled with his empathy. Those two talents were probably the very first to appear. Not at all surprising considering his life so far—learning to see the true nature of a person was how he survived his childhood. From the way it is so reactive, always engaged, it’s clear he has no idea how to control it, and it is pure instinct. You never stood a chance, Your Grace.”

Cormand snorted out a laugh, and Sitka grinned widely, both Hellions deeply amused at the consternation on Merrick’s face, and he took the sting with good humor. “I never expected True Sight, much less empathy,” Merrick admitted, eyeing Elia with an equal measure of surprise, pride, and pleasure. “In truth, I did not expect magic from any of the Eistreans, and that is my failing.”

Elia was protecting himself, if not overtly. While True Sight let a mage see through illusions and glamours with ease, it also gave the wielder insight into the true nature of a person, and the emotional and mental facets that made up a person’s personality. Many mages called it aura-reading, and the most basic form of the ability was indeed the reading of an aura. But the more powerful version of the ability allowed those with the gift to see past spellwork meant to manipulate the senses. An

incredibly useful skill, and one highly desired by spy networks across the known world. He knew of several agents within his own spy network with the talent, and they were effective to a devastating degree.

True Sight paired with empathy was a powerful combination of abilities, and with training, Elia would be formidable. Impossible to lie to, and even harder to fool.

A solid thunk next to the bed broke him from his contemplation. Cormand shifted the huge armchair a bit closer, and Merrick smiled in thanks. Cormand smirked and waved a hand. “We’re gonna go get cleaned up and see to the horses, take the spells off them before we get some food. We’ll send in something for you and His Highness. Don’t forget your glamour. The boy may not need it, but we don’t need the staff realizing their emperor is several days early, and have them feel woefully unprepared.”

“I won’t, and thank you,” Merrick replied quietly. Magi Cora patted his shoulder once more and then swept out of the room, Sitka and Cormand following. The doors shut softly behind them, and Merrick spared the thought to restore the glamour with Sir Merrick’s face before he gave in to the day’s turmoil. Reluctantly, he let go of Elia’s hand, needing to set himself to rights. He tugged off his boots, set his weapons to the side within arm’s reach, and shrugged out of the heaviest bits of his uniform, though he kept himself clothed in his thin undertunic and leather trousers so as not to startle Elia should he wake.

He forwent the chair, and lay down beside Elia, a polite distance away and above the covers. Merrick’s heart jumped when Elia stirred in his sleep, murmuring fitfully until Merrick slid his hand across the bedding and slipped his hand back into Elia’s. The young prince relaxed, tugging Merrick’s hand closer to his face, all but nuzzling his sweet face into the palm of Merrick’s hand before he eased deeper into slumber.

Merrick lay there, watching Elia sleep, content and pleased to see the young prince’s face peaceful, and free of pain and fear.

Part Two

THE HOLY CITY OF ADRACIAS

Chapter Twelve

T *he Holy City of Adracias*

The bedding was soft and deep, his whole body appreciating the comfort. Such a relief from the last few days of travel and sleeping rough. Elia snuggled deeper into the bedding, burying his nose in his pillow.

“Are you awake, my prince?”

Elia hummed, reluctant to wake fully. “A few more minutes, Wyle.”

A chuckle, rich and warm, vibrated through his whole body. “Not Wyle, though I will let you sleep some more.”

Elia frowned and hugged his pillow closer to his chest. An odd pillow, a bit too hard and weirdly shaped. And giving off its own warmth.

Lids heavy, Elia opened his eyes and blinked to clear his vision, blurry from sleep and exhaustion. Muted light left him confused as to the time, and it took a long moment for his eyes to focus on the man sitting beside him on the bed.

Sir Merrick eyed him carefully, as if afraid Elia might object to his presence, and Elia blushed hot when he realized he was holding tightly to Sir Merrick’s left arm, and it was not a pillow at all.

Elia reluctantly let go of the other man's arm, and he lifted his head, squinting as he took in the strange room and the distinctly non-Eistrean decor. Body still heavy from slumber, he moaned at the effort of trying to sit up, and fell back to the bed, head swimming.

"Easy, easy," Merrick murmured, hands slipping under his shoulders and helping him sit up a bit, allowing him to look around, fluffing pillows behind him until he was comfortable. Merrick then tugged the blanket up, making Elia feel pampered and cherished. The blush on his cheeks was hot and he couldn't help the silly smile he gave the other man.

"What happened?" Elia asked softly, enjoying the attention.

Merrick settled beside him, long legs stretched out on the bed, boots off, barefoot, and dressed in a long tunic in a light blue shade that matched the rest of the cool colors in the room. His trousers were a soft, comfortable-looking fabric, and there wasn't a bit of armor to be seen. Barefoot, relaxed, and enjoying the privacy of one's own bedroom, away from the judging eyes of court.

Long, dark hair was braided back from his face and the thick braid swept over his pillow like a cat's tail. Elia wanted to touch the long braid, run it through his fingers and play with the end. Merrick watched him carefully, Elia his sole focus; if it were anyone else watching him, the attentiveness would make him nervous—yet nothing Merrick did made him afraid. Merrick watching him with such focus made him feel safe, important.

Elia idly noticed that he was too tired to keep his mental shields raised to protect himself from the other man's emotions, but he felt nothing intrusive from Sir Merrick. It was as if there was a wall already up, but around Sir Merrick's mind, not Elia's. He was too tired to protect himself and was thankful that whatever was keeping his mind safe from another's private emotions was working. He was not one to question good fortune.

“The bleed worsened, and you lost consciousness. We’re in the Holy City, at the Hellebore consulate, the residence area to be exact. A Hellebore Guild mage has healed your injuries. You’ll be just fine, but the healing and your body’s efforts to replenish the blood you lost are going to leave you drained and tired for a few days.”

Elia marveled at the lengths Merrick went through to help him. “You saved my life.”

Merrick lifted a large hand and gently caressed Elia’s cheek. Elia sighed helplessly. He leaned into the caress, unable to resist. “I wish you weren’t in need of saving. Your brother almost killed you.”

The tears came unbidden, and Elia tried to bite back the sob that welled up from his chest. Merrick rolled toward him and then Elia found himself gathered into a powerful embrace, and the sobs burst free in the face of such comfort, so selflessly offered.



Merrick held Elia as the young man cried, sobs wracking his slim frame, tears soaking Merrick’s tunic. He cared not, concerned only with protecting Elia, and letting him release what seemed to be years of misery and pain. Elia clung to him, hands gripping his tunic so tightly the fabric crumpled, and Merrick held Elia tighter, understanding the need to be held when such an emotional storm broke.

Merrick rubbed Elia’s shoulders and back, offering what comfort he could, and pressed a cheek to his soft black hair, squeezing Elia when the young man tightened his own grip. Slim legs tangled with his, Elia trying to get as close as possible, and Merrick let him. He didn’t blame Elia one bit for latching onto comfort when it was offered, and he doubted there was anyone back in Meadowtown who held Elia when he cried. Maybe his old servant, but no one who shared blood and bonds with Elia. Family should care for him and love him without reservations.

Prince Everett would pay. The man's casual brutality would not go unanswered. Magi Cora said Elia bore signs of years of abuse, and the thought of a young child being abused, defenseless and without a champion, made his blood boil. It was his anger that would get him into trouble, and Elia didn't need it from him—not now. Elia needed support, comfort, and whatever else he went without in his lonely, painful childhood.

Merrick was prepared and willing to give Elia whatever he wanted, whatever he needed.

The storm of tears lasted for a while, and Merrick kept rubbing a hand along Elia's back, soothing him as best he could. Eventually Elia stiffened as if embarrassed, and Merrick eased back enough to gently grip the back of Elia's head. "Look at me, Elia."

Summer-sky eyes wet with tears and red from crying met his, shy and vulnerable. "Your tears are a gift. Sharing your emotions with me is a gift. One I treasure."

Elia bit his lip, and a pair of fresh tears dripped from his eyes. Merrick caught one with his thumb and brought it to his lips, kissing the warm, salty droplet. Elia blushed hot, eyes ablaze with something significantly more passionate than delayed grief and pain.

Elia eased back into his arms, asking without words for more. Merrick held him to his chest, Elia nestling under his chin, curling into his body like he was born to rest there.

Dawn broke in the Holy City with a bright, yellow splendor that caressed them with warmth and comfort, the daylight filling the room from the huge windows that opened over the private gardens of the Hellebore consulate.

A soft knock came at the door, and Merrick let Elia go when the young man jolted at the interruption. He gave Elia a reassuring smile and rolled off the bed, pausing a moment to give Elia time to retreat under the blankets, a tuft of blue-black hair all that was visible among the white bed linens.

Merrick touched the door briefly to remove the privacy spell before opening it a sliver, checking who it was before opening it further. Sitka and Cormand stood outside the door, and Merrick opened the door the rest of the way, gesturing for them to enter. Sitka carried a tray laden with plates and bowls, smelling deliciously of home-cooked meals from Hellebore.

“Your Highness, I’ve brought you breakfast,” Sitka announced softly, noticing that Elia was hiding under the covers. “Enough for Sir Merrick to share as well. How are you feeling?”

Merrick shut the door behind the Hellions, restoring the privacy spell. He removed the glamour from his face, since he didn’t need it, and Elia saw past it without seeming to realize it was even present.

Elia sat up slowly, throwing down the blanket he had been hiding under, hair an adorable mess. “Hello.”

Elia fussed with his hair a moment, pushing back the strands covering his eyes. “Thank you for helping me. The three of you saved my life. I recall your names like a dim dream from the road, but I am most pleased to meet you again with my wits restored. Thank you so much.”

Elia went to get out of bed, but Sitka reached the bed first and put the tray beside Elia, keeping it steady for a moment until Elia settled. Sitka shook their head and briefly touched Elia’s shoulder in a gentle acknowledgment of his thanks. “You are welcome, Your Highness. I’m glad to see you’re recovering. Eat now, so the healing can continue to do its work.”

Cormand said nothing though he did put a hand over his heart and bow at the waist, acknowledging Elia’s gratitude.

Elia nodded to the quiet Hellion and blushed at the attention, and it hit Merrick again with a pang in his chest that Elia needed care and concern from others like a flower needed sunlight. Elia was a rainforest bloom growing in a desert, struggling to survive. When given even the most basic care and attention, he absorbed it like that same neglected, thirsty flower under a misty rainstorm.

“You need to eat as well, Sir Merrick,” Sitka chided, arching one brow. Merrick grinned and sat in the armchair beside the bed, Elia adjusting the tray so Merrick could reach the food easily. His Hellions were enjoying the rare chance to order him around and he didn’t begrudge them their enjoyment.

“Anything I need to know about?” Merrick asked casually, grabbing a pear and taking a bite.

“No word from the Eistrean convoy or Foryne, but then we did move at a pace they wouldn’t be able to replicate,” Cormand offered as he prowled between the various windows overlooking the gardens, plainly checking for anything of concern. Having Elia in their care meant that he had no security but them, and Cormand was taking his duty seriously and without explicit orders, which Merrick appreciated. Cormand knew him well and saw how he felt about Elia, and that Merrick would want him guarded. The consulate and its attached residence were well-guarded, but that never meant perfectly safe.

Sitka leaned against the wall nearest Merrick and the bed so neither of them would need to strain their necks to see them while they spoke, crossing their arms. “Magi Cora sent word that she’ll be by this afternoon.”

“A mage?” Elia spoke quietly, looking both excited and nervous.

“Magi Cora is a Helleborian mage, the representative of the Mage Guild to the imperial court; she is the mage who healed you last night,” Merrick explained between bites of the pear.

“Someone so important healed me?” Elia asked, eyes wide. He stopped eating, surprised, and Merrick nudged the tray, snapping Elia out of it. He resumed nibbling on some fruit, and curiously lifted a cover off a bowl on the tray, sniffing appreciatively at the steam that rose from the contents.

“Of course she healed you,” Sitka said with a soft scoff. “You needed help.” Sitka gestured to the bowl Elia was

eyeing. “That’s fried eggs with sausage and potatoes, flavored with native Hellebore spices. Delicious. You’ll like it.”

“Smells wonderful,” Elia grabbed a fork and lifted the bowl, diving in with an appetite Merrick was glad to see. Elia needed to eat. There were no signs of pain in his movements, and Merrick felt more of the tension he’d been holding since entering Elia’s tent release from his core.

“The gear we left here in the barracks can hold us over until we can get the belongings we left behind with the convoy,” Cormand shared, eyeing the private garden space outside the guest room. “We’ve got a few days until we can expect the convoy to show up. And there was a message left at the gatehouse from the Eistrean commander in charge of the Eastern gate, a response to Foryne’s letter that we left with the guards when we arrived.”

Cormand left the window and went to Merrick, pulling out a thin sheet of folded paper, which he gave to Merrick. He flipped the paper open and snorted in amusement as he read. It was short and to the point.

“What’s it say?” Elia asked after he finished chewing, though he didn’t sound all that interested, too absorbed with his food. He seemed to be enjoying his breakfast, as the bowl was half empty already.

“The Eistrean commander asks after your health,” Merrick explained, and he leaned forward enough to pass the note to Elia, who blinked at him in shock and took it with a look of disbelief on his face. Surprised that Merrick let him read the note? That showed how rarely his own family shared information with him, if at all. “I think they’re either convinced we’re pulling some prank on them and you’re not who we said you were, or they want to remove you from our care.”

“You’ve all been perfectly wonderful,” Elia stated firmly, frowning at the note. He looked up and shyly met Merrick’s gaze. “I should go to the Eistrean consulate. I don’t want to impose or cause trouble between our people.”

He sighed and put the fork down, staring at his half-eaten breakfast, shoulders drooping.

“Nonsense,” Merrick declared. “You’re recovering still, and you are more than welcome to stay here until your family arrives in the Holy City. And asking Magi Cora to make such a long trip to the south side of the island when she’s so close to the Hellebore residence seems a poor way to repay her efforts.”

Magi Cora could walk into the Eistrean residence uncowed and unbothered, but Merrick was struggling with how to tell Elia that he feared for his safety if he was left alone with no one to watch over him, surrounded by Eistrean guards. Those same guards who did nothing when Everett hurt Elia, turning a blind eye to the abuse for Elia’s entire life. Who knew how many of the soldiers and servants in the Eistrean complex were culpable and complicit in Elia’s abuse over the years. It was a risk Merrick was loath to take, especially with Elia still needing to recover.

“I’d like to stay with you until my family arrives,” Elia said hesitantly, glancing at Merrick with flushed cheeks and hope in his eyes. Merrick smiled back, unable to resist, and he knew he was in trouble.

He had to tell Elia the truth.

Elia’s whole face lit up, happiness impossible to mistake for anything else, and he resumed eating, eyeing the note from the Eistrean guards. “If I might bother someone for paper and ink, I can pen a reply. I’ll assure the Eistrean commander that I am well and not in need of rescue.”

Sitka promptly went to a small writing desk along the wall, and a quick search of the drawers revealed a thin stack of paper, a quill, and an inkwell. Sitka helped Elia move dishes about to make room for him to write, and Elia frowned at the paper as if wondering what to write. But before Merrick could offer any suggestions, Elia wrote out a couple of lines before signing his name. Without fanfare, Elia held it out to Merrick while Sitka took back the stationery implements, and Elia

went back to eating, unconcerned with Merrick seeing what he wrote.

The note was a mere two sentences long, confirming his identity, that he was recovering under expert care, and that he would remain at the Hellebore consulate until the Eistrean convoy arrived in the city.

Merrick folded it and handed the letter to Cormand. “See that sent out as soon as possible, please.” Cormand took it with a nod and slipped out of the room, Elia watching him leave with a slight frown on his soft lips.

“I don’t have a signet,” Elia fidgeted with his fork for a moment, poking at his food. “I’ve never had one, so I’m not sure if my signature is enough proof for the commander. I’ve never written to anyone.”

“I’m sure it’s more than adequate, Your Highness,” Merrick assured him. “You’re not a prisoner here, so if the Eistrean commander has further issues, we can invite him over to see you for himself, or if you want, we can escort you to the Eistrean complex. Though I would feel more confident of your safety if we could be nearby in case you need us.”

“You called me Elia earlier,” he said softly. “Please don’t start with calling me Highness again. I enjoy hearing you use my name.”

A jolt of want and satisfaction coursed through his body, echoing in his core, and Merrick wished circumstances were different and they were alone, and Elia fit enough to match the heat Merrick felt at the want he saw in the young man’s gaze.

Yet he couldn’t, and wouldn’t, make overtures of that nature with Elia still unaware of Merrick’s true name and station.

He had to tell him the truth.



Merrick’s face went from open and full of good humor to reserved and wary, and Elia wondered what he’d done to make

Merrick react in such a way. “Is that too presumptuous of me?” Elia stammered, setting the bowl down on the tray.

Here he was asking Sir Merrick to use his name as if they were close friends, and he;d given no thought to how uncomfortable that might make the Hellion.

Elia went to get up, but his legs were weak and the tray was in the way, so all he managed was to almost upend the tray, dishes clattering and a glass of juice about to tip over. Merrick reached out and took the tray off the bed, and Sitka took it from him just in time for Merrick to stop Elia from throwing himself out of the bed and to the floor.

“Easy, Elia. It’s alright,” Merrick breathed out, hands rubbing up and down Elia’s upper arms. “We need to talk, though. Are you done eating?”

Elia stared up at Merrick, worried about what the Hellion needed to say to him. Did he regret saving Elia’s life? Maybe he was truly in trouble for abandoning his duties and the ambassador was going to punish him? Terror for Merrick swamped him and he was dizzy from it, afraid to say anything as if speaking his worries aloud would breathe life into the worst outcome and make it reality.

“I’m done,” Elia whispered, unable to look away from Merrick’s face.

Sitka swiftly murmured their goodbyes, reading the sudden anxious tension in the room, and withdrew from the bedroom, taking the food tray with them.

Merrick sat on the bed next to Elia, and took both of Elia’s hands in his own, a slight frown pulling at his full mouth.

“What’s wrong?” Elias asked after a long moment of silence. A strong thumb was rubbing the back of one of his hands, and it soothed him despite his concern.

“I owe you a deep, sincere apology,” Merrick said, shocking Elia into silence. “I have been lying to you from the moment we met, and I am so very sorry for it.”

“I...what?”

Merrick nodded, lips thin, expression grim. “I am not who you think I am. Sir Merrick is an alias, a ruse I used with the intent to travel to Meadowtown and meet your family before the festival, all without being known by my true identity. I’ve been disguised as Sir Merrick for weeks, since we left Vastok, pretending to be one of the Hellions assigned to Foryne’s protection detail.”

Elia said nothing, mind a blank. He blinked rapidly and narrowed his eyes at Merrick, who made no signs of playing an ill-mannered joke or prank. Hazel eyes somber, big hands holding firmly, but gently, to his much smaller hands. Elia waited for Merrick to explain further. Merrick said nothing, as if waiting for a reaction from Elia that wasn’t forthcoming just yet... “Why? Who are you, then?”

“The why is simple, but simplicity doesn’t excuse my actions,” Merrick took a deep breath then continued. “It is a treaty year, and the pressure for the two royal houses to recommit to the alliance is enormous, and the connections to the Eistrean royal house would help with a dire problem I’ve been working to resolve. I wanted to know what any prospective spouses were like before contemplating taking that step.”

None of that made sense to Elia, since there was no way Merrick would be asked to partake in the marriage tradition unless he was of the imperial family. And if that was the reason he came to Eistrea disguised as a guard, and why he was spending so much time with Elia...

“Who are you?” Elia asked again, afraid he knew the answer before Merrick even opened his mouth.

Merrick took in a long, deep breath, held it, and then with a set jaw and wary eyes, shattered Elia’s nascent dream of first love. “I am Valore Merrick Heremis, known as His Grace, the Emperor Heremis since I ascended the Imperial throne of Hellebore eight years ago.”

Chapter Thirteen

Merrick expected anger, maybe yelling, some shock for certain and maybe nerves at being ambushed with Merrick's true identity, or perhaps even outright disbelief. And all of it would be justified and deserved. What he was not expecting was for Elia to take the news like a wound to the heart, grief filling his summer-sky eyes, and the tears that fell in a single, lonely track from one eye down a cheek washed paler than usual from shock.

"Elia, I'm sorry," Merrick said, but Elia made no sign he heard, hands trembling in Merrick's. "Elia? Breathe."

Elia sucked in a sharp breath, and Merrick hid a wince at the sudden, surprising strength in Elia's grip as his fingers tightened on Merrick's. Merrick made a show of breathing in deep, and releasing it slowly, hoping to avert the panic attack Elia seemed to be barreling toward. Breathing too fast, Elia's trembling was starting to scare Merrick, and he silently cursed at himself—he should have waited to tell Elia the truth. The young man was not even a day past nearly dying. Merrick was a fool, in more ways than one.

Merrick lifted one of Elia's hands and slid it under the loose collar of his tunic, moving it down until he pressed Elia's hand flat to his chest, right over his heart. He leaned in, prompting Elia to make eye contact with him. "Elia, slow your breathing. In slowly, out slowly. That's it."

He breathed with Elia, holding his hand flat so he could feel the heart beating in Merrick's chest, using his senses to help ground him and stop the panic spiral. Eventually Elia

calmed, breath slowing and his trembling relaxed, but the tears continued to fall. Elia dropped his head and stared at the bedding, hand still pressed over Merrick's heart, a thick curtain of black hair obscuring his face from view.

"Is that why you've been so nice to me?" Elia asked, voice broken and nearly a whisper. His hand was limp, as if he'd divorced himself from his arm, leaving it a deadweight in Merrick's grip. "Become my friend so you can get closer to my siblings? They despise me, and only spend time with me when they can't avoid it. That was a wasted move on your part. And there's no need for that regardless. Aria would marry you sight unseen. In fact, that's her entire plan. She's been scheming to charm Foryne, and then the emperor...well, you."

Elia spoke woodenly, without inflection, head bowed, hair covering his eyes.

Merrick had no idea what to say, but tried nonetheless. "I've no doubt she'd jump at the chance to become an empress, but I won't marry someone who would scheme and manipulate others for personal gain. There's nothing wrong with ambition, but the morality of it comes from how one wields it. I'd respect her more if she merely stated what she wanted outright, even if it's not what I want."

Elia said nothing, but at least the tears had stopped falling. "Elia, can you look at me?"



Elia wished he never let himself feel for Merrick...no, not Merrick, Emperor Heremis...How strange that he did not doubt Merrick told the truth, that this was not some cruel prank on a failure of a prince for amusement, yet the pain remained the same.

Elia lifted his head, free hand wiping away tears and pushing the hair back from his eyes. Merrick gazed at him earnestly, and Elia saw regret and remorse, and even more so, with the big hand holding Elia's over Merrick's strong, beating

heart, he could feel the barest hints of those emotions coming from Merrick, and every moment they grew stronger.

Every time they touched, Elia got better at sensing and reading Merrick's emotions, as if the barrier between them faded with each brush of their skin. If not for his heart breaking, Elia would be thrilled to have his hand on Merrick's firm chest, the heat of his skin all but burning, his whole body vibrantly aware of the other man.

There was no mask in place—Elia saw the shame crinkling the corners of Merrick's eyes, the stress apparent in his furrowed brow, hazel eyes darkened with pain and worry. And the heavy ache in Merrick's chest, the guilt a crushing weight.

"I am so sorry," Merrick said softly, meeting his gaze. Elia felt each word land in his chest, an answering ache near his heart rising up to meet each syllable, mirroring what he was sensing from Merrick.

"Why tell me at all?" Elia murmured, then his brain caught up to his emotions and he winced. "I guess you didn't want me to cause a scene if you were recognized while here in the Hellebore residence and I didn't already know who you were," Elia guessed. "Or maybe since I was going to meet the real you in a few days anyhow, telling me now keeps me from blowing up during formal introductions."

"All logical," Merrick agreed with a slight nod and quirk to his full lips that may have been the tiniest hint of a smile. "But not why I'm telling you now, and like this."

"I don't understand," Elia said, figuring his confusion was as obvious as his hurt. He was so tired of feeling pain. Why couldn't it stop? His first real dream, first real hope in years, and it was taken from him as surely as the stars were out of reach. He wasn't foolish enough to wish for a future with a handsome man to call his own and quiet life of peace and safety, but he dared to dream of meaningful kisses and honest affection, maybe some memories to cherish in private moments in the cold future awaiting him.

"My ruse has served its purpose," Merrick replied, catching Elia's free hand, and then pulling his other away from

his chest. Elia missed the hard muscles and heat under his palm, but then Merrick held both of his hands between his much bigger ones and squeezed gently but firmly.

“I guess you got a really good idea of what my siblings are like in the last several days,” Elia made a sarcastic snort and shook his head, looking down at their hands. “Aria’s cold and ruthless, but really smart and educated. Knows a lot of languages and runs the country when Father isn’t interested. She’d make a good empress if she wasn’t planning on stealing the throne. Watch out for my father, he wants Aria to marry you for a lot of bad reasons, all of them about power.”

No need to ask Merrick if he thought about Everett or Alden. Everett was a bully and mean, a horrible choice to be anywhere near two young children, and Alden spent all his time carousing, drinking, and whoring. Maybe with Elia warning him now about Aria’s plans he could prevent them from taking root after Merrick and Aria wed.

A sharp brow went up and Merrick shook his head once, eyeing Elia with a touch of incredulity. “I’ve no interest in Princess Aria. Without a doubt she is talented and ambitious, but I’ve made up my mind already on who I’d like to propose to, and it’s not your sister. Thank you for the warning as well. I suspected they might be pushing her for more than an alliance. The high king’s plots are fruitless, since I won’t be marrying her. I’ve chosen someone else, and all that’s left is for him to agree.”

“Not Everett, he’s a bully,” Elia said, growing more confused. “Everett wouldn’t hesitate to hurt your sons if they annoyed him or he got upset. You can’t mean Alden? I guess he’s fun if you like parties and drunken arguments. He can’t stand to be wrong or shown up, so that’s gonna be a difficult relationship. And he’s drunk all the time. Alden is handsome though, and he’s had as many male lovers as female, so I guess if that’s where your interests lie it’ll work out?”

It embarrassed him a little to speak that plainly, but some slight awkwardness was nothing compared to the discomfort of a broken heart.

“No, I don’t mean either of your brothers, and not your sister,” Merrick said firmly. “Elia, I want to marry you.”



Merrick was sure Elia’s heart stopped right along with his thoughts, his eyes wide and startled, his whole body freezing and his breathing halting. Elia blinked after a tense moment, shaking his head once, leaning back a bit like he needed to take a better look at Merrick to comprehend what was happening.

“I...what?” Elia stared at him, incredulous.

“I came to Eistrea to find the best match for peace and for stopping the Eistrean slave trade.” Merrick was going to lay it all out and hope Elia didn’t storm out of the room when he was done. “Eistreans are kidnapping magic-born along the river border between our two countries, as well as on the coast, and enslaving them. I wanted to satisfy tradition and the expectations of our peoples for a treaty marriage, commit to the alliance, and urge your father to stop the slavers. He’s letting them operate unchecked, since most of their victims are magic-born or the vulnerable without resources. He’s also getting revenue from the worst offenders in the form of taxes, treating their victims like merchandise, and he’s buying mages with useful gifts to enslave at the ill-named Mage College in Meadowtown. Even vulnerable Hellebore citizens have been taken along the border between our two countries, and his own people are suffering the brunt of this barbaric practice.”

Elia shook his head once, expression disbelieving. “Marrying me won’t help you. My father hates me. I have no value to him or my country. I have no clout or power, no leverage to apply to my father to further your plans. Marry Aria; if you can outwit her schemes to get her own offspring on your throne, that might actually get you somewhere.”

“Maybe,” Merrick shrugged one shoulder, his own anxiety over convincing Elia giving him a false sense of calm. Years of training in controlling his emotions were warring with his

earnest desire to convey the truth of his actions and motives to Elia. “My plans weren’t concrete, nor are they ruined if I can’t influence Hadrix as his son-in-law. I’ve an alliance in place with Corainia and Pyrderi to deal with the slave traders, and while not working with Eistrea is going to make things more difficult, we’ve accounted for it, and our course is set.”

“Then why did you bother doing this?” Elia asked, confusion and a hint of impatience sharpening his tone.

Merrick refused to give up, and reached for the patience he developed raising two very rambunctious children. Not that Elia was a child, nor was he acting childish—patience was patience, in the end, and Elia’s upset was justified.

“I love my sons, and I refuse to bring someone into our family who isn’t good for them,” Merrick explained as plainly as he could manage. “Marrying again has been expected of me since my wife passed, and the treaty year has merely made it even more of a certainty.” He paused and smiled a bit despite the tension between them. “You are honest, caring, kind, and understand the need for a gentle hand. I’m not looking for another parent—I am more than adequate, and my sister is in charge of my sons when duty interferes. But I would love to marry someone who will come to care for them, and if not become family, at least be their friend. And to have a companion, a helpmate who I can care about and who might one day care about me in return? And in my most private of hopes, I wish for a potential lover, in the end. Someone I can devote myself to as a man, not as the emperor. I want that, very much.”

Elia was thinking, brow furrowed a bit, and his cheeks went rosy at Merrick’s mention of a lover. He nibbled on his lower lip and settled into a more relaxed position, some tension easing. Merrick took that as a sign of hope.

“I don’t know a thing about children,” Elia told him hesitantly. “I was alone growing up, and I didn’t know any other children.”

“You had no interaction with the children of nobles in your father’s court?” Merrick asked, finding himself angry on

behalf of tiny child Elia. “What about your siblings?”

Elia shook his head. “Father kept me from everyone except the servants, and I never got to interact with anyone outside of the family. My siblings were all older. Alden was in the nursery with me for a few years, but he was much older than me and he was never interested in playing with a baby.”

“I’m sorry, that must have been very lonely,” Merrick said, squeezing Elia’s hands. Elia blinked and looked down at their hands, as if surprised to find they’d been holding hands this entire time and he was only just noticing. He didn’t pull his hands away though, and that gave Merrick even more hope.



Elia had no idea what he should do.

Merrick, who wasn’t a Hellion at all but the most powerful man on the Velantan continent, was sitting atop the bedcovers with him, holding hands and talking about marriage. Maybe he died on the road and he was dreaming as his soul floated downriver to his final rest. What an odd dream to have, though. Surely he should be dreaming about what it felt like to be kissed or loved by the man sitting with him. The kiss they shared before was like a dream itself, a hint of potential, the memory of it etched on his flesh, but fading with time and misery.

At that his cheeks went hot—if he married Merrick, kisses might be an option. Merrick spoke of wanting to wed someone with the potential to become a lover, and that ignited the fading embers of Elia’s own private dreams.

Their hands were still connected, and with that touch, Elia used his wayward magics, instinct telling him that Merrick was sincere, honest, and genuinely cared for him, though what form of emotions that care manifested as was outside his experience in recognizing. It stymied him, and he struggled not to be distracted by everything he was feeling, both from himself and from Merrick.

Elia wasn't able to give Merrick more children, yet it sounded like that wasn't even a concern for him in deciding who to marry. Aria never stood a chance, since she was counting on Emperor Heremis requiring more heirs.

In Eistrea, the more children a wedded pair produced the better—children died at alarming rates, even among nobles and royals, and the dominance of the farming culture meant the more hands available to work, the better. Hadrix's aversion to magic extended to healers, as well, so few families had access to the care needed to raise healthy children. Perhaps the expectation of many heirs wasn't as prevalent in Hellebore as it was in Eistrea since they seemed to have a much different view of magic.

The high king had plenty of bastards, and four true-born children, and that was the norm for the Eistrean royal family as far back as Elia could recall from his genealogy lessons as a child. It appeared the Hellebore Imperial family was smaller, with fewer children produced, and a part of him wondered how that worked in the event of accidents or assassinations, not that he recalled any murder attempts in either country in the last few generations. It felt odd to him, to have so few people in the line of succession, a bit of anxiety crept in, but that was his cultural bias and personal experience coloring his opinions and he knew it. Different didn't mean wrong.

"I'm alone all the time," Elia finally replied to Merrick. "Except for Wyle, I've been alone my whole life. I'm not used to dealing with, well...people."

"I would do my best to make sure you're never lonely again," Merrick said, their gazes locked. "I want you to be happy, safe, and healthy. And as my consort, you need not do anything that makes you uncomfortable. I want you happy and safe."

"Only if I marry you," Elia sighed. Everything came with strings, even dreams.

"No," Merrick disagreed, startling Elia.

"What?"

“You are magic-born, Elia of Eistrea. Even if you turn down my hand in marriage, I would have you trained so you could learn to protect yourself, keep yourself safe. With your magic trained, you could keep Everett from harming you ever again, and you could even leave Eistrea. Trained mages are valued and can find meaningful, rich lives in most of the world. It’s only Eistrea that spurns the magic-born. Everywhere else, skilled mages make a comfortable living and are respected for their skills.”

“You would train me, even if I don’t marry you? Why?”

“No one deserves what you’ve been through, Elia,” Merrick said, jaw clenched. “You don’t deserve anything that’s been done to you. And while I’m competent enough with my magic, training others is outside my skill set. Magi Cora, the mage who healed you, has volunteered to train you while here in the Holy City.”

He meant it. Elia could feel the other man’s emotions, and they were as comforting as they were novel and distracting, and Elia was spiraling between disbelief and a yearning so strong he struggled to focus on Merrick’s words.

“Train me? Someone so important?” Elia sputtered. “Surely she’s got more important things to do. I couldn’t...”

Merrick’s smile was both fond and a touch exasperated. “At times, Elia, I think you forget you’re a prince, son of a high king. Having the premier mage in Hellebore tutor you in the basics of magic is hardly outside the bounds of what’s proper. And she volunteered.”

“She did?”

Merrick nodded. “She’ll be here later today to check on you. You can ask her about it then if you want.”

Elia had no words, his emotions a riotous mess that left him anxious and drained, but there was a single, sharp feeling that inched its way forward, impossible to ignore.

Hope. More concrete than a daydream, and impossible to banish. It hurt, in a way he couldn’t quantify or deny.

What he did know was that he was overwhelmed and exhausted, and he was battling to stay awake.

Merrick was astute enough to notice it without Elia saying a thing, and got up. Elia lay down on the bed, ready to pass out the moment his eyes closed. Merrick fussed with the covers then stood beside the bed for a long moment, looking down on Elia with a tender yet worried expression.

“I’m just tired,” Elia said quietly, eyes struggling to stay open.

“Sleep some more,” Merrick said, giving him a small smile. “I’ll wake you for food and a bath before Magi Cora arrives. We can talk more after you’ve gotten some rest. You’re safe here, I promise.”

Elia believed him. Merrick saved his life. Risked exposure and Hadrix’s wrath, and despite knowing there would be a reckoning with his father to contend with in a few days, Elia wasn’t as scared as he normally would have been—and that was due to Merrick.

Chapter Fourteen

Merrick made sure his glamour was in place before he slipped out of the bedroom where Elia slept. The hall was empty, except for a single Hellion, Sitka, standing guard. Sitka pushed off the wall next to the door where they had been leaning, and looked Merrick up and down, taking in his casual, slightly messy appearance. A single brow went up, silently asking.

Merrick grimaced. “I told him most of it. He took it both better and worse than I was expecting, though he didn’t give me an answer. I’ll leave it be for now, let Magi Cora talk to him.”

“Magi Cora sent word she’ll be here right after lunch,” Sitka replied. “Elia needs more sleep. He’s got a few hours.”

“He was asleep the minute he lay down,” Merrick assured Sitka.

“How are you?” Sitka asked, and Merrick tried to smile at the blatant concern, touched, but it came out more a grimace.

“I’ve been better,” Merrick touched the door, sealed it with a hint of magic. It would only open at his presence or that of a Hellion, or if Elia opened it from the inside. “I need a bath and some new clothes.”

“The carriages with Emperor Heremis’s belongings have been delivering chests for the last few hours,” Sitka said. “Maybe you can find something in there?”

“His Grace’s household servants are escorting his belongings, and I’d get caught out for sure, even with the

glamour. They know me too well. I'm not ready for my presence to be revealed." Merrick shook his head once. "I'll use what we left behind during our first visit until it's time for me to change identities."

"They're clean and in the guards' quarters at the end of this hall," Sitka pointed to Merrick's left. "Cormand left them in a stack by the door, and anything you don't have you can borrow from us. There's a bathing room in there, too, fully stocked. Cormand is in the garden outside Elia's room, and I'm fine here in the hall. He's safe. Go take care of yourself."

Merrick nodded, accepting the well-meaning and not so subtle order from the Hellion. The Hellions were handpicked by the previous reigning emperor, Merrick's late father, and all of them were decent, hard-working, and selfless people with more compassion and honor than anyone Merrick had ever met. "Thank you, Sitka. You and Cormand have been extraordinary."

"Just doing our jobs," Sitka murmured with a swift wink. "Now get. You need a bath."

Merrick snorted out a laugh and saluted Sitka with a jaunty wave, heading in the direction of the guard quarters.



Refreshed, wearing a clean uniform and a Hellion overcoat emblazoned with the imperial crest, Merrick made sure his glamour was intact before walking through the Hellebore residence toward the gatehouse on the main street.

He'd been to the Holy City a few times over the years, though not since his wedding to Estelle nine years earlier. He and Estelle wed the year before Emperor Valore died of a sudden stroke, one deadly enough that the healers were unable to repair the damage before he passed. He missed his father, and he still wished that his father had lived long enough to meet his grandchildren.

His mother retired to her family holdings after his father's death, relinquishing her place in court, despite being the

dowager empress and the highest ranking woman in the Imperial family after Estelle's passing. His parents' marriage was not a love match, though they got along well enough, and were fond of their children and each other. Dowager Empress Kela retired from court life and handed her responsibilities over to Marion, who was still a teenager at the time. Marion rose to the occasion and soon had the imperial court well in hand.

Suddenly bereft of both parents, Merrick newly wed and dealing with ascending the throne at the unexpected age of twenty-one, the three of them banded together and set about calming the empire in the wake of Emperor Valore's sudden death.

So much had happened since that last visit to the Holy City. He'd lost his father, become emperor, gotten married, then had become a father and a widower, and suddenly found himself tasked with raising two sons while running an empire.

The gardens were spruced up, new plantings in progress, fountains and benches scrubbed and bright under the sun. He saw a huge, fluffy orange and white cat with a red leather collar sunning itself on a low, wide brick wall alongside some dense hedges, its tail flicking lazily, eyes closed. He was happy to see the spells laid into the collar to keep both the cat and the local wildlife safe, and it looked healthy and lovingly spoiled, perhaps even too much judging by the size of its belly. Merrick approached and the cat spared him a glance from one eye, and promptly rolled to its back, yowling in demand for attention and belly rubs. He chuckled, gently scratching, the cat's purrs loud in the quiet garden in the front of the complex that was meant to welcome dignitaries and royals.

The gate, with its sturdy gatehouse built into the wall, was shut at the moment. A guard saw him petting the cat and lifted a hand in greeting.

"Sir Merrick," the guard called, stepping out the gatehouse door that was propped open in deference to the warm summer day. It was cool in the shadows of the wall and the trees, but the sun was at an angle to light up the interior of the garden in a swath of golden rays. Another guard lifted a hand in greeting

through the open door, yet remained at their post, keeping an eye on the street. The official Imperial Residence was not on the main thoroughfare but the crowds were such that even lesser traveled streets were exceptionally busy.

It was the same guard from yesterday who met them at the gate when they arrived with Elia. “Thank you for your help yesterday,” Merrick said, clapping her forearm in a soldier’s greeting when she joined him by the cat.

“Sergeant Rena,” the guard introduced herself. “Pleasure to assist a Hellion, sir. Can I ask how the young man is doing?”

“He’s well, Magi Cora healed him. Should recover in time to rejoin his family once the Eistrean convoy reaches the City.”

Merrick refrained from giving Elia’s name or making one up. He didn’t want to lie about Elia’s identity and he didn’t want Elia’s presence here to be widely known, to avoid giving Hadrix excuses to punish Elia. Merrick knew he would need to let Elia rejoin his family once the high king was in the Holy City, but he wanted to delay that as long as possible in case Foryne wasn’t able to manage the volatile man.

And if Foryne reported that it wasn’t safe for Elia to join his family at the Eistrean complex on the southern end of the city? Merrick didn’t want to start a war, but everything in him rebelled at the thought of Elia in danger. He might do something drastic if he couldn’t keep Elia safe before he could toss aside his alias as Sir Merrick.

“How’s the situation here? The Hellions are unfortunately unable to help guard the entire complex, as it’s just the three of us and our guest is under our protection, but we can send a message to Vastok requesting more guards and staff. They’d get here in a week or so if needed.”

“Magic-born, huh? That’s lucky,” Sergeant Rena grumbled good-naturedly, referring to how the Hellions would reach out to Vastok so quickly. “We’re alright, I think. The commander on the western gate is a good officer, he’s got us covered, and

we've a full complement of guards on rotation. Should be able to handle things once His Grace arrives and the festival starts."

"Good," Merrick made a mental note to have the commander contact him once he was Heremis again. "Magi Cora will be by to check on our guest sometime after lunch. I should get back."

"I'll keep an eye out for her," Sergeant Rena replied with a brisk nod. "Enjoy your break until the ambassador arrives."

Merrick nodded in thanks, and then returned to the house, and the orange-and-cream ball of fluff jumped down from the low brick wall and followed him, absurdly fluffy tail curled at the tip, flicking. "Are you coming inside, sweet fellow? I don't have your food."

The cat *mreowed* and pranced ahead, a tiny golden bell tinkling against a silver, coin-sized tag on the cat's collar. He followed the cat, losing sight of the fluffy beast once he was inside, and he returned to the guest suite where Elia was staying. The halls were full of servants carrying fresh linens, dusting every surface, and generally cleaning the building from floor to ceiling in preparation for the emperor's arrival. He was getting a glimpse of how the servants took care of him, an in-depth view of how imperial households functioned that he never would have seen if he weren't hiding behind his alias of Sir Merrick.

He gave way where he could, paused to let servants pass, and waited patiently, knowing they were all stressed and anxious for the emperor's arrival. It also reinforced his decision not to tell them who he was—it would place undue stress on his people and he didn't want that. They were all doing their best and his early arrival would derail their efforts, and they did not deserve the upheaval.

Merrick finally reached the doors of the guest suite, Sitka nodding to him. "Still sleeping?" It had been a few hours since Merrick left Elia to sleep.

Sitka nodded. "Not even a snore, but I can sense he's just sleeping heavily. I asked for a bath to be run, and the midday

meal to be sent over. Servants should be here in a few minutes.”

“I’ll wake him so he’s not startled by the servants,” Merrick said and touched the door, removing the lock spell. No one had touched the door but Sitka while he was gone. Reassured Elia hadn’t been disturbed, he knocked quietly then entered the room, and Sitka closed the door behind him.

Elia had barely moved since Merrick left him that morning, and he wished he could let the young man sleep longer, but he needed food and would probably appreciate a bath. Unlike the bathing rooms in Vastok, baths here were in metal tubs, carted about and filled by servants. The plumbing here in the Holy City was antiquated and maintained by the city workers employed by the priests. Each official residence was maintained by the parent country, and while the Hellebore residence was kept in top condition, there were only so many improvements that could be made without tearing up the city streets and running modern plumbing lines. The residence had been expanded as much as possible in prior centuries, but there was limited space on the island and nowhere to go but up, but since this was a marshy island, none of the residences were multiple levels and only a few of the temples, due to weight concerns and worries about sinking.

The priests were reluctant to embrace change, especially in their city, and instead of multi-level buildings, terraces were built around the central spire of the tall peak that dominated the island.

Merrick sat on the edge of the bed beside Elia and gently reached out, pressing softly on Elia’s shoulder. The prince murmured in his sleep, curling up in a ball, refusing to wake. Merrick was charmed by the sleepy, stubborn prince. Elia was not a morning person at all.

“Elia,” Merrick murmured, gently rocking the young man by his shoulder.

“Sleepy,” Elia complained.

“I know, sweet prince,” Merrick replied, rubbing his hand up and down Elia’s shoulder and upper arm. “Food will be

here soon, and a bath.”

Bright blue eyes slowly opened, cranky and tired. Merrick couldn't help the grin at the adorable sight of Elia rumped from sleep and grumpy. “Magi Cora is coming after lunch.”

That reminder was enough to make more awareness creep into bright summer-sky eyes, and Elia slowly sat up, blankets falling from his shoulders. His thick black hair was a mess, but not too horrible, and there was a line on his cheek from the bedding.

“Ugh, what time is it?” Elia rubbed at his eyes.

“Midday. You got several hours of sleep after breakfast this morning.”

Elia slowly scooted over to the edge of the bed, slim bare feet carefully touching the stone floor. The temperature in the building was maintained by spells, and the floors were comfortable to bare skin.

Elia bit his lip and tried standing, and Merrick reached out without thinking and helped him upright, Elia leaning on him as he swayed a bit. He seemed not to notice he was leaning his whole weight on Merrick's chest, and it warmed his heart that Elia felt safe enough to do so with him. “The washroom is over there,” Merrick tilted his head to the closed door on the far wall. “There's a water closet in there and a small sink for washing up after. A bath will be here soon as well.”

Elia hummed softly. “Thank you,” he whispered, and Merrick only heard him due to their closeness. Elia moved away slowly, taking one hesitant step, and Merrick shadowed him until he was certain the younger man wouldn't fall or faint.

A knock came on the bedroom door just as Elia retreated into the washroom, and Sitka opened the door at his summons. Two servants entered carrying a huge copper tub and set it in front of the cold hearth. A servant wearing a uniform of the upper staff bowed as they entered and approached Merrick. “The housekeeper sent me to help our guest, Sir Merrick.”

Merrick realized that with the emergency over, staying in the room with Elia while he bathed was well beyond the bounds of propriety, and he nodded, trying not to show that he had expected to remain in the room while Elia bathed. He was acting like Elia was already his, and that wasn't fair to Elia at all.

“Thank you,” Merrick replied. “He’s in the washroom. Hellions will be in the hall and the garden for his protection. He’s still recovering from his injuries, so be mindful of his condition. Do not lock the doors.”

“Understood, Sir Merrick,” the valet bowed again, and went to oversee the servants filling the tub.

Merrick sent one more glance at the washroom door, then walked out of the bedroom, Sitka at his side.



Sir Merrick was absent when he left the washroom, and a pair of servants were filling a large tub, and another servant dressed differently than the ones filling the tub stood at attention, clearly waiting on him. Elia would have wept with relief at the ability to bathe if he weren't too tired for tears.

“Hello, sir. I’m Oric, a valet here in the imperial wing of the Hellebore consulate. I’ve been assigned to assist you,” the waiting servant bowed, a young man not that much older than Elia. He was tall and slim, dressed neatly in an elegant uniform of blues and greens trimmed in silver, with a tiny patch on his shoulder of a mountain with a waterfall.

“Hello, Oric, and thank you,” Elia managed, and he gingerly approached the tub. Despite getting more sleep, he was tired and a bit dazed, and he faltered. Oric was there immediately, hand under his elbow, keeping him steady as he went to the tub.

Elia was tired enough that he didn't shy away from the touch, and was pleased to discover that he felt nothing from Oric, even with the physical contact—that same wall he felt around the Hellions and Sir Merrick was around Oric, and Elia

rejoiced at the peace it afforded him, even in the presence of strangers.

Already full of water, Elia noticed the lack of steam over the tub and figured a cold bath was better than nothing, as clean was clean. Who was he to demand warm water for bathing? He then wondered if he were dreaming, asleep on his feet, when one of the servants held their hand out over the water, flat, and stared at the tub for a long moment. A shiver of energy raced over the water's surface and the water began to steam, and the servant withdrew their hand and gathered up the empty jugs.

A servant used magic to warm the water, and it was done casually and without fanfare, the other servants acting like it was a perfectly normal thing to do and see. He could feel the heat radiating out from the tub and the water. It was no dream, a servant just used magic as easily as breathing, and on so mundane a task as warming bath water.

Elia was flabbergasted, rendered speechless by the blatant use of magic, and he let Oric strip off his remaining underclothes and then help into the tub. The water was warm, but not too warm, perfect for tired muscles and clearing the stench of sweat from pain and a hard journey in the saddle.

Oric remained while Elia slowly washed himself, picking at the assorted bottle of soaps and bath salts until he found ones he liked. The valet laid out a variety of clothing, and Elia was delighted to see more jewel tones in the outfits on the bed.

He was so tired of wearing gold and white, or black and brown.

“Sir?”

Elia looked up from scrubbing his legs, the warm water coming to just under his chin, soothing his whole body.

“Would you like help washing your hair? I don't mind helping you,” Oric asked casually, without drawing attention to how Elia's hands shook as he ran the wash cloth over his skin.

“Yes, please,” Elia sighed. “I don’t mean to be a bother. Thank you.”

“Not a bother, sir,” Oric assured him. Oric paused, smoothing out a pair of silk trousers, then continued. “Is there a name I can use for you, sir? Sir Merrick has made a point of not telling us, and I assume that’s for privacy, but it feels rude not to use a name for you. No need to tell me your real name if you’d rather not; any name will do.”

Elis dropped the wash cloth and watched as it slowly sank in the water. He leaned back on the wall of the tub and thought about it.

“I am Elia.”

Oric turned enough to look at him with wide eyes, startled, but the valet said nothing about the name, and he recovered quickly. It was not a common name, but rather came from an old children’s story. He was given the name because Hadrix showed no interest and Wyle knew it was a name his mother contemplated for him before her death. Wyle had been there at his birth, the midwife ordered to leave once Elia was born and his mother’s body was wrapped in bloodied sheets. The old manservant was the only one left to name him before a wet-nurse was found.

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness.”

Elia blushed a bit, and nodded once, a shy dip of his chin. “Sir Merrick probably wants my name to be a secret.”

“I never gossip about my charges,” Oric stated firmly as he approached the tub, pushing his sleeves up past his elbows and reaching down for a small jug to the side of the tub. “I will not mention your name or station outside these walls. Shall we wash your hair?”

“Yes, please.” Elai paused for a second. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Your Highness.”

Oric filled the jug from the tub, and Elia scooted forward so he could crane his head back enough not to have water run in his eyes. Oric’s arm was close to his face, and he saw

strange white and pink markings around his wrists before he was forced to close his eyes as Oric wet his hair.

Fingers gentle and efficient, Oric thoroughly washed Elia's hair, rinsing it twice before letting Elia sit up, and then handed him a small hand towel to dry his face and eyes. Elia patted his face dry, eyes tracking Oric's arms, and saw both wrists bore the strange markings.

Oric caught him looking, and Elia quickly dropped his eyes. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare. That was rude of me, I apologize."

"I don't mind," Oric assured him. Elia glanced at his face, and saw nothing but patience and a slight smile. "I was once a slave, sold along the main branch of the Adracias River. The scars are from the shackles I wore."

"A slave?" Elia sat up straight, heart thumping in his chest, aghast and curious. He knew of the slave trade in Eistrea, but never saw slaves, not even in the palace. Most slaves, almost all of whom were magic-born, were sent out of the country, removed to lessen the potential uproar caused by their presence among the people, at least according to one of his father's many rants against the magic-born. Anyone deemed unsuitable to be one of the crown's mages was sent out of the country, or they disappeared. The mages were technically slaves, beholden to the crown, but as far as Elia knew they lived in the Mage College in their own rooms, with servants and every need attended to.

Seeing the deep scars on Oric's arms told Elia more than any words that there was a more injurious side to slavery than he ever thought about. He fiddled with the washcloth, finishing his bath, wondering if it was rude to ask questions. He decided to risk one, unable to keep it behind his teeth.

"You're not...not a slave now, are you?" Elia struggled to ask without sounding utterly ignorant, but he failed miserably and he knew it when Oric flashed him a look of surprise, brows raised.

"I am as free now as the day I was born," Oric said proudly. "After I was sold to the river slavers masquerading as

traders, I served in an Eistrean merchant's household for most of my imprisonment."

"How did you get here?" Elia asked, ignoring the cooling water in favor of asking more questions.

Oric gave him a pleased smile and grabbed a large towel, holding it out for Elia. He stood gingerly, and Oric wrapped him up in the towel, handing him a smaller one to dry himself.

"It was a stroke of luck that I was with my master on one of his river barges when he was delivering goods to a town not that far from here on the Hellebore side of the river. A troop of Hellebore soldiers were nearby and did a random search of the barge. They found me chained and gagged out of sight in the lower hold, and freed me that very moment."

"They did? What did your owner do?" Elia asked, enthralled. He felt like a child learning a scandalous story and he flushed when Oric chuckled at him. "I am so sorry, I am being dreadfully rude. I know slavery is not a child's tale. My interest is uncouth and callous. I've never been told anything about slavery and I've never met anyone who was a slave."

"I'm happy you're asking," Oric assured him, and Elia eyed him. He would have suspected that Oric was placating him if it weren't for the vague hints of sincerity he was finally picking up. It seemed that the longer he was exposed to someone, even those mysteriously shielded from him, the more he was able to acquire some sort of impression.

And what he did sense from those shielded from his gift was nothing in comparison to what he usually got from his fellow Eistreans—vague hints and faded impressions, like a slight breeze, as compared to a torrent of emotions in a sudden thunderstorm. It was refreshing, and Elia was burning with curiosity and a desire to figure out exactly what was causing the difference in experiences.

Gently shooing Elia to the side so he could pick up the wet towels around the tub and the small empty jugs, Oric continued his tale, putting everything in the tub itself, likely meaning to have it all removed all in one go. "My former owner had everything on the barge seized by the Hellebore

army, and he was arrested. I believe he's still in prison for owning a slave, and he will be for some time yet. In Hellebore, it's seen as a heinous crime, slavery. There is no leniency for it. All slaves are freed the moment they're found, and anyone participating in the slave trade is charged with crimes against humanity. Funds from the seizures of his goods went toward reparations for my suffering, and I got training and an education, and found work here in the Holy City."

"Why did he bring you to Hellebore then?" Elia asked, knowing he sounded utterly ignorant, and his brain had no notion of controlling his tongue, too tired to filter his questions. Oric must have noticed his state, as he grabbed a nearby chair set off to the side and brought it to Elia, helping him sit before he toppled over to the floor.

"Most of the time there isn't a lucky troop of soldiers nearby," Oric explained with a rueful half-shrug and a long exhale, stepping back once he was sure Elia wasn't going to fall out of the chair. "Traders and merchants with slaves take the risk when working on the river borders. Many merchants aren't willing to pay for people to work for them, so they use slaves, even at the risk of losing everything if caught by the Helleborian authorities. They're willing to risk everything to keep from paying a fair wage, and when they do get caught, the Helleborian authorities show them no mercy."

"And you came here once freed? Didn't you want to go home?" Elia asked, hesitant.

Oric shook his head, lips thin. "No. I was once Eistrean, you see." Elia stared at Oric in dismay, at a loss for words. Oric smiled grimly, but continued explaining with an ease that Elia admired. "I was sold by my own kin to the river slavers. There was no reason to return. I'd have been resold into slavery the moment someone recognized me."

"But why would your family do that to you?"

"There are usually three fates for the magic-born in Eistrea, Your Highness," Oric told him, and Elia's eyes went wide and his breath froze in his chest. "Death, slavery, or escape. Those with the more valuable talents are sold directly

to the Eistrean crown and imprisoned in the so-called Mage College in Meadowtown. I was more lucky than most that my master was reckless in his greed, and got me within reach of Hellebore. Others aren't so lucky."

"Slaves are sold to the Eistrean crown?" Elia whispered, horrified. He knew in a very shallow way that the mages were indebted to the royal family, but he was always under the impression that the mages were given everything they needed and lived in relative comfort, in return for using their magic at the high king's discretion, things like weather-working to fuel the agriculture that defined the kingdom.

Elia was sick to his stomach as the realization swept through him that he was a fool and horribly sheltered, even while suffering under his father's abuse.

"Your father is the largest slave owner in Eistrea," Oric informed him, calm and steady as his words cut at Elia's conscience. "He owns all the mages, their instructors, the servants at the Mage College, and the staff that help them. Even the enslaved mages who are stationed at farming towns across your country and tasked with maintaining Eistrea's favorable weather to grow the crops your kingdom is so famous for are your father's slaves."

"How do you know all this?" Elias whispered, not disbelieving, but horrified.

"I've learned much from working here, and talking to other imperial servants, who get the truth from the imperial ministers and the army commanders who run the squadrons tasked with combating the slave trade. Emperor Heremis made it his first act as sovereign, tackling the slave trade that poisons the border Hellebore shares with Eistrea." Oric paused with a quick grimace, and he forged ahead as if he were talking about his least favorite tea. "It's common knowledge in Hellebore, too, the hatred the High King holds for the magic-born. What slaves he cannot use for his own ends, he has killed or sold out of the country."

Elia believed him.

Hadrix was a horrible father, and nothing he knew about the man led him to believe that his father would be anything but a monster to his own people. Elia was horrified at his childish, ignorant dreams of escaping to the Mage College to learn how to use his powers and get away from his family. There was no escape there, not for anyone.

“Thank you for sharing your story with me,” Elia said softly, sickened by a growing guilt and heart-sore at Oric’s plight. “I am so very sorry that happened to you, and glad that you’re free now. I know my words mean little, but I am sincere. I hope your life now is full of joy and safety.”

“You aren’t to blame for your father’s evils,” Oric said with a pensive air. “And your discomfort tells me more about you than you think. Many a former slave would expect an Eistrean prince to see nothing wrong with his country’s oldest and most lucrative form of commerce.”

“I admit to ignorance, Oric,” Elia swallowed hard, throat clicking. His eyes fell to the scars on the servant’s wrists, telling a wordless tale of blood and terror. “Sheltered, terrible ignorance. I may not be a favored prince, but I am an Eistrean prince regardless. My privilege comes from a source of evil and pain.”

“I cannot help you manage your feelings about the awful truth of Eistrea or your family,” Oric replied. Elia nodded, agreeing. That was not for Oric to assist with, and it was Elia’s to deal with however he could.

Oric did give him a tiny smile, changing the subject. “I can help you dress more for your station. I am quite good at that,” Oric gestured for Elia to approach the bed and the clothing laid out for his perusal. “Let’s see what we can do for you.”

Chapter Fifteen

The bath did wonders. Elia was clean, refreshed, and dressed in borrowed clothing that hummed with subtle energy, as if they belonged to someone who wielded magic regularly. Elia wasn't sure whose clothes he was wearing, but they fit and were well made, and distinctly Helleborian in cut and colors.

Oric styled his hair for him after the bath. After their long conversation, Oric changed the subjects to far lighter topics. Being shown care by a skilled valet was a novel experience. Elia had tended to himself for so long that he couldn't recall the last time someone attended to him in such detail. As a child, he was watched over by nannies and governesses but they were usually cold, reserved, and did the bare minimum in making sure he was clean, healthy, and fed. Many times he likened his guardians to absent-minded caretakers of a barely tolerated pet.

"Thank you," Elia said before Oric departed after organizing servants to remove the tub and used towels. Another servant entered with a tray laden with food, setting it on a small table near the cold hearth where the tub had been previously. Food situated, the servants left, bowing to someone in the doorway that Elia couldn't make out due to the angles.

"You're most welcome, sir," Oric replied with a short bow. Oric was quick-witted, and Elia appreciated the other man not using his title in front of the other servants. "I'll be looking after you during your stay with us, if that suits you."

“Yes, please,” Elia said quickly, blushing a bit at his eagerness.

“Very well, I’ll see you this evening. Have a good day, sir,” Oric promised, bowing once more, and he left with the rest of the servants, pausing to bow to the person shadowed in the doorway before taking his leave.

Merrick stalled in the open doorway, hand raised as if he were about to knock on the doorframe.

“May I come in?” he asked, dropping his hand.

Elia fidgeted with the hem of his borrowed tunic and nodded hesitantly. Merrick entered the room, shutting the door behind him. Elia felt a weird jump of energy when Merrick touched the closed door with the flat of his hand for a brief moment.

“What did you just do?” Elia asked, unable to resist. Seeing people use magic without worry or censure was fascinating.

“A privacy spell on the doors and the room, to keep conversations from being overheard. It has many variations to fit the needs of the caster, and can even be used to seal doors and windows, only opening to those keyed into them. This one is just for privacy, preventing eavesdroppers.”

“I had no idea magic could do so much,” Elia said, a bit overwhelmed. “No one talks of magic in my homeland.”

“The prejudice in Eistrea against magic has many consequences,” Merrick replied, gaze as serious as his tone. “Something I hope to change one day.”

It was that statement that reminded Elia that Merrick was more than the guard he pretended to be. “Should I call you Your Grace? Since I know the truth now?”

A pained expression flashed across Merrick’s handsome visage, and he clenched his jaw. “I deserve that. And please don’t, not when we’re alone. I’ve gone by Merrick my whole life among family and close friends, and it would be an honor for you to use that name as well.”

Elia shook his head, not in refusal, but because he had no idea what to do. He laughed a bit hysterically, but reined his chaotic mind in as best he could before he said as much. “I don’t know how to act now, or what I should do.”

Merrick took a step farther into the room, though he came no closer to where Elia hovered by the bed. “I don’t know, either. Maybe I can answer any questions you might have? You can eat while I try to explain... well, everything.”

Elia eyed Merrick for a long moment, internally debating the wisdom of sharing a meal with the man who dared to give him hope of a better future, but the hunger waking in his belly and the patient understanding he saw in Merrick’s eyes swayed him to agree.

The wall was still there, around Merrick, some sort of emotional blockage that kept Elia from knowing every emotion that the older man was feeling, but it wasn’t as iron-clad as it had been the first time Elia experienced it. The longer he spent in Merrick’s company, the easier it became to get some idea of what and how Merrick was feeling.

Merrick went to the table and pulled out a chair, angling it, and waited. Elia knew if he refused, Merrick would take it well and go sit without a word, but he wanted the courtesy Merrick extended to him. He slowly walked over, watching Merrick, and turned to sit, the chair moving in under him. Merrick’s hands were close to his shoulders, and he fancied he could feel the man’s body heat, and then Merrick was moving away, sitting neatly across from him at the small table.

Elia snuck glances at Merrick in between investigating the varied dishes on the tray and scooping out portions of what looked good or intriguing. The dishes were vastly different from what he was used to in Eistrea, and the savory flavors lingered on the tongue. Before he knew it, he had eaten over half of what was on his plate, and he looked up at Merrick, blushing hot to see Merrick watching him avidly.

Merrick gave him a tiny half-smile. “I’m glad you’ve recovered your appetite. You’ll mend faster.”

Elia agreed with the sentiment. The food was helping, but he was still grateful to be seated. His legs weren't steady at all, and he was tired, but hunger won out. Elia drank some water from a glass that was far too chilled for the summer, condensation dripping down the metal and glass sides. Holding it in his hand, he felt a slight vibration when he focused. "Is everything full of magic in Hellebore?"

Merrick reached for a pear and pulled a small dagger from his belt, carving the fruit slowly while he contemplated his answer. "Magic use is an everyday blessing in Hellebore. Many of our people have some level of ability, and small spells like chilling water, warming baths, and mending clothing are commonplace amongst the people, at every strata of wealth, though household magics are more commonly used by those employed in larger households as servants and staff. Nobles and the wealthy have more niche or specialized interests or talents, if they're gifted at all. Our population is distributed fairly evenly between those without magic abilities, and those who show some quantifiable ability."

"That many people?" Elia asked, breathless with wonder.

In Hellebore, he would be able to blend in, be one of the crowd, and not sneered at for being tainted.

Merrick nodded, neatly eating a thin slice of pear, and chewing and swallowing before replying. "It's more common to have a little magic than a lot, and those who are blessed with the stronger talents tend to go on to become mages, attending one of the Mage Guild academies. We've a wide variety of gifts, and are lucky to have enough healers to justify a Healer's Collegium in Corinthia."

"Enough healers that they have their own school?" Elia said in disbelief. He looked down at his right hand, fully healed by the mysterious mage the day before. He flexed his hand and made a fist, battling anger and frustration, and tears pricked at the corner of his eyes. He blinked them back, refusing to cry.

Years of pain. Beatings, bruises, probably some breaks and sprains. He only saw a mage on the rare occasion a bone was

poking out of the skin or he was bleeding over the furniture in an inconvenient location where someone of higher rank might see him and spread rumors. Even then the healing was minimal and he would spend weeks recovering, hiding from his father and brothers until he was forced to be in their company again by circumstances outside his control. But then, he never had any control, not in all his days.

“Elia?” Merrick interrupted his chaotic thoughts, and Elia looked up and met his worried gaze head on.

“Everett kicked me once, I was eight or so,” Elia shared, memories filling his mind, the table fading away, voice monotone. “I accidentally stepped on the end of his cloak and made him trip. He turned around and kicked me so hard that when I hit the wall, I broke my wrist.”

Elia held up the wrist in question, remembering the way it sounded when the bones snapped, the jagged ends poking through muscles and skin.

Merrick’s jaw went tight and he swallowed hard, the hand holding the knife going white at the knuckles.

Elia felt something from Merrick then, but everything was too chaotic in his head and his heart for him to parse the difference between Merrick’s emotions and his own.

“Another time when I was little, I was introduced to a visiting noble who was distantly related to my late mother, and I giggled when my father spilled some wine and said a bad word. I was very little,” Elia paused, falling back in his chair, staring at the plate in front of him. “I was sent out of the room, and I woke up later that night to my father barging into the nursery. He dragged me out of bed and beat me badly enough I lost consciousness. My nanny found me the next morning, and called the guards, thinking an intruder had attempted to murder me. She raised a ruckus, unaware it was my father who hurt me. She was sent away before midday, and I had a new nanny the following week. I spent that week alone in the nursery, struggling to take care of myself. By the time the new nanny arrived, I was a mess. Wyle was my only help, but he

was reassigned not long after my mother's passing and he was rarely able to sneak away to tend to me.”

Merrick set aside the pear and the knife slowly, meticulously, as if afraid he might injure himself or someone else, and then leaned over the small table, hand held out, palm up. Elia was free to refuse the gesture, but he wanted to feel the support from Merrick.

Elia accepted the offer of comfort and leaned forward enough to slip his hand into Merrick's, their fingers curling to hold each other firmly.

Physical touch made the vague impressions from Merrick much stronger, though he couldn't sense anything concrete. There was still some separation, a thick cloud of fog making it hard for sharp details to emerge. And that was more than fine—Elia didn't need to know the minutiae of Merrick's emotional landscape. Merely having shadowy hints of what the older man was feeling was more than enough, reinforcing Elia's observations of body language and verbal cues.

“I am so, so sorry you went through that,” Merrick said softly.

Elia grimaced, shrugging one shoulder. It was weird to have someone *show* and *feel* sympathy for him, to express sorrow for his past. Alien in every way, but it felt nice, too.

He stared at their hands, Merrick's thumb sweeping over his knuckles, soothing him. “I am hated for irrational reasons that only matter in Eistrea, and the rest of the world sees me as...common.”

“You don't have to go back,” Merrick said, voice a low rumble. Hazel eyes full of sincerity, his touch just as honest. “I can get you away, keep you safe, regardless of whether or not you accept my hand in marriage. Prince Elia can disappear, never to be seen again, and you can live a life of your own choosing. You deserve safety and happiness, and control over your own life.”

“Does a royal ever get that? Control over their own life? What about duty?” Elia asked, heart in his throat. He couldn't

look away from Merrick. “And wouldn’t my disappearance cause trouble between our two countries?”

“Abandoning your duty for selfish reasons is different than walking away from a family legacy that has only caused you harm,” Merrick said firmly. “You’ve been excluded from the burdens and the benefits of the Eistrean high throne, and brutalized by the people who should have loved you and kept you safe. Staying for them, when they would never hesitate to toss you away if it benefited them in some way, is a poor way to live. They take everything, and you’re continually poorer for it, and they will carve out everything until there’s nothing left of you.”

Merrick took a deep breath, his grip on Elia’s hand firm and sure. “And if you choose to disappear, I can and will see you safe, even if it means marrying your sister, or hell, even your less odious brother, to keep war from erupting between our two nations. I doubt it would, but I can handle a spouse who wants nothing from me but power or access to limitless revelries. I have my heirs, and I will never drop my guard, especially with a scheming new spouse.”

“You’d marry Aria or Alden to keep from going to war if I disappear?” Elia asked in disbelief.

“I would,” Merrick said, and Elia didn’t doubt him a bit. “Even if you wanted to ask for asylum instead of disappearing outright, I’d protect you all the same. Hellebore offers asylum and refuge to Eistreans every day, and it’s more than tradition, it’s law. Duty and compassion would compel me to offer it to you, even if I didn’t want you for a spouse. Your rank and my duty are not impediments to your safety.”

A tear escaped, and he wiped it away with his free hand, not wanting to let go of Merrick. This kind man marrying Aria or Alden because Elia ran away from home wasn’t fair, to Merrick or his family. Aria wasn’t evil, but her ambition only served her needs and wants, regardless of who got in the way. It was safer for Merrick and his sons, and his country, if Aria could satisfy her ambitions by being a heartbeat from the high king’s throne instead of the emperor’s. And Alden would eventually die from a bad liver or a broken neck from too

many wine-soaked mishaps while disrupting Merrick's family and court.

"How do you know so much?" Elias asked.

Merrick shrugged that time. "I was raised by some kind, wise, and talented people who loved me. I know the weight of duty, and how love makes the burden lighter."

"Sounds wonderful," Elia whispered. He was jealous, but it was a tiny sting compared to all his previous hurts. "I wish I had that."

Merrick sucked in a deep breath, and then let it out slowly, as if girding himself. "I can share it with you, if you want. My family would welcome you with open arms and hearts."

"I don't know how to do anything," Elia warned, and he was warmed by the slightly exasperated expression on Merrick's face, and the hint of fondness he felt from the shared grip of their hands.

"You can learn," Merrick told him, not a trace of doubt in his expression or tone, sincerity and determination coming across through their touch. "Anything you want to learn, you can. I won't stand in your way. And I won't make you learn how to run a country unless you want to."

"If I want to spend my days hiding in the gardens talking to birds?"

Merrick raised a puzzled brow, but said nothing against his odd question. "I'd show you the imperial menagerie, and let you relax with the animals all day, every day."

Elia was briefly distracted by the exciting prospect of a menagerie, but his situation was too fraught to be distracted long. He needed answers.

"And if I got in the way, or bothered you, or needed something at an inconvenient time?"

Merrick shook his head once, long hair brushing his shoulders, and he tightened his grip on Elia's hand, not enough to hurt, but enough to ground Elia in the moment. "There's no

trap, sweet prince. I'd treat you with dignity and respect, and your needs would be my own."

"I'm scared." He hadn't meant to say that, but he was glad he did, relief racing behind the escaped words.

"No shame in being afraid," Merrick assured him. "Fear makes us look before we leap."

"Or holds us back," Elia breathed out, feeling something settle in his chest. He met Merrick's gaze and for the first time in what was probably his entire life, felt brave. "I accept."

Merrick's smile was slow and sweet, and he gently squeezed Elia's hand.



Elia gave him a tiny, shy smile, eyes full of nerves and uncertainty, but his grip didn't lessen.

Merrick stood, keeping Elia's hand in his, and gently encouraged Elia to stand as well, joining him. He lifted the hand he held to his mouth, kissing Elia's knuckles. Elia sucked in a swift breath, eyes wide, trembling like a leaf in the breeze along the river.

"I will treasure your trust, my sweet prince," Merrick swore. "You will be safe with me, and I'll do my best every day to make sure you're happy."

Elia remained silent, ducking his face, but not before Merrick saw the glistening eyes and tremulous smile on his soft pink lips. He took a small chance and tugged Elia to him, and was rewarded by Elia sliding into his arms like he was made to be held by Merrick and Merrick only, and Merrick hugged Elia to him, enjoying the way they fit together. Elia was much shorter than he was, and he was able to rest his face on soft black tresses, closing his eyes and enjoying the warmth of the man in his arms.

Gradually, Elia's trembling eased, and he melted into Merrick's arms even more, his slim, lean frame warm in his arms, his magic humming beneath his skin. There was magic

where they touched, a harmony of energy, and Merrick enjoyed the shy touch of Elia's personal energies as their magics brushed up against one another. An intimate experience, and Merrick was sure Elia wasn't all that aware of it happening, but Merrick didn't mind at all.



Nervous and yet delighted, Elia relished in the way Merrick held him like he was precious. It was as if he could see his future stretched out in front of him, the once dismal landscape no longer barren and dark, but full of warmth and joy. A dream still, but one less heavy with despair. Hope bloomed again, and it hurt—so unaccustomed to hope that feeling it was worse than never experiencing it.

Yet this time he grabbed the hope on offer and refused to let go, clinging as tightly to it as his hands did to Merrick's tunic.

A sharp knock at the door had Elia jumping in Merrick's arms, but Merrick held him close, safe in his embrace.

"Yes?" Merrick called.

"Sir Merrick, Magi Cora is here to see our friend," Sitka called through the door.

Elia looked up at Merrick, who lifted a hand and traced his fingertips along Elia's jaw in a brief caress. "Are you ready to see her?"

"Magi Cora is the one who healed me, right?" He stumbled a bit over the title, as it was new to him. Hesitation and nerves tried to sink their claws into him, but touching Merrick was a new form of strength and he was shamelessly taking advantage.

"She is indeed," Merrick replied. "She is quite formidable, though kind. You'll like her."

"I hope she likes me," Elia worried quietly.

“No worries,” Merrick said, chuckling. “She will adore you nearly as much as I do. We’re ready,” he called out, and that slight jump in the pressure in the room that was magic moving happened again. Each time he sensed it the magic startled him less and less.

The door opened and in swept a tall, imposing figure in dove-gray robes with shiny silver hair. Elia stared in amazement—she was so unlike anyone he had ever seen, and it was all due to the power swirling around her like a river of stars.

She came to a halt not far from where Merrick still held him in his arms, and Elia could do nothing but stare in wonder. Little stars swung idly in random patterns around her shoulders and head, flowing in a slow, almost lazy river of light and energy.

A dark brow arched and a smile lit her face as brightly as the stars around her. “Powerful indeed. Close the door, Hellion, before all our secrets spill out into the hall.”

Sitka entered the room and closed the door behind them. Neither Sitka nor Merrick were acting like they saw a goddess clothed in starlight every day; they seemed completely unbothered by the sight. She lifted a hand, and with a smooth push of power, the sight of the stars faded from his view, and eventually were gone entirely. If not for the way she was eyeing him like he was something unexpected and marvelous, he would have thought he’d hallucinated the entire thing.

He sensed nothing from her, except a hum of what must have been her power. No emotions. No images or stray thoughts, nothing invasive or smothering. His emotions were his own, but for the hints he got from Merrick. Another citizen of Hellebore who kept their emotions to themselves, sparing Elia the pain and wear on his mental shields and stamina.

“Prince Elia, a pleasure to meet you,” she said, bowing her head in a slight dip without taking her eyes off him. “You’ve a wealth of power of your own if you saw my magic like I believe you just did. What exactly did you see?”

“A river of stars,” Elia breathed out, blinking hard from staring so long. “Am I mad?”

“Not mad at all, and I think we’ll get along splendidly,” she said, a satisfied grin lighting up her face.

Magi Cora was a beautiful person, with strong features, hair tied up and away in long, thin braids that fell from the crown of her head, the strands bright as polished silver, making her skin appear all the darker and more stunning for the contrast. He had no idea of her age, her bearing one of calm surety and confidence suggesting both longer years and high rank. As tall as Merrick, she stood with a grace he was used to seeing in soldiers gifted in swordplay, and her robes were a rich gray that spoke of wealth and purpose, not ornate at all, but trimmed in silver thread around the hems and collar, the fall of the cloth draped in a majestic manner.

A palm-sized patch depicting the mountain and waterfall crest of Hellebore sat on her left shoulder, though this one was made from black, gray, and silver threads, and the mountain was braced by stars, quite different from the other patches Elia had seen so far on those in service to the imperial throne.

She saw his interest, and smiled at him. “This patch bears the symbol of the Mage Guild of Hellebore. A graduate mage from any of the Hellebore magic academies will bear one similar.”

Elia eased back from Merrick and bowed deeply, as deep as he would for any monarch.

He held his bow, and she chuckled. “Oh, you are a delight. Rise, Your Highness.” Elia straightened from his bow, and blushed at the indulgent look she gave him. “I am Magi Cora, Representative of the Mage Guild to the Imperial Court of Emperor Heremis,” she introduced herself, as if he had any doubts as to who she was. “I healed your injuries, and if you’re feeling brave, I’d like to teach you some magic as soon as possible.”

“Teach me? You? But...”

She lifted a hand and silenced his protestations. “You need to control your magic before circumstances force it to act to protect you, and people could die,” she stated matter of factly.

Elia froze in alarm. “But...I only talk to animals, and sometimes move things with my mind, and..... I’ve never done anything...like that.” He swallowed hard, worried. He was afraid to mention he sensed emotions. When his family figured out what he could do, they reacted with extreme anger and violence.

“You can do far more than you think. You have been using your magic for so long it’s unnoticeable, as natural to you as breathing. And that’s dangerous, for magic grows with the one who wields it,” Magi Cora informed him, expression serious. “What you could do as a frightened and injured child is nothing compared to what you can do as a grown man, cornered and desperate. Best to know how to control your magic now, before the worst comes to pass.”

“You know?” Elia asked, feeling vulnerable and exposed. He glanced at Merrick, dreading what he would see, but there was nothing but compassion.

She caught on quickly. “No one told me,” she explained. “I saw your past laid out clearly on your bones and body when I healed you.” She addressed Merrick next, arching that brow again, her gaze dangerous and yet patient. “I trust that situation will be resolved soon?”

Merrick dipped his chin in acknowledgement, smiling faintly. “Prince Elia has accepted my offer of marriage,” Merrick shared.

Magi Cora smiled widely, and Sitka was grinning from their post by the door.

“Lovely,” Magi Cora breathed out. “I won’t need to rush your early training, then. If you’re agreeable, Your Grace, I’d like to train your betrothed until such time as we return to Vastok and a more permanent instructor can be found for His Grace.”

“Grace?” Elia blurted out.

“You’ll be Imperial Consort Prince Elia of Hellebore soon enough, and we address our sovereigns by Your Grace. None of this majesty stuff,” Sitka proudly shared, a smug grin in place.

Elia, tongue-tied and overcome with a mixture of hope and nerves, took the hand Merrick offered him and held on for dear life.



Merrick stood off to the side of the garden and observed the rudimentary training session as Magi Cora gently ordered Elia about, the young prince hanging on her every word like a starving man and each instruction from her a tidbit of food.

The garden was small, shared amongst a few adjoining guest suites, and the other rooms were locked and spelled for privacy and access, helping to limit entry points. Merrick doubted anyone would attempt anything, as only the Eistrean guards out in the city, and Magi Cora, knew who Elia was and that he was here, but Merrick wasn’t taking any chances. Elia had come to mean everything to him in such a short time that he was struggling to adjust to the strong emotions ruling his heart and mind.

Usually it was Talen who ran security matters, Merrick only giving input if it impacted his schedule or his family directly, and Talen made most of the decisions. It was stressful trying to account for any potential dangers. Merrick was thankful for Cormand and Sitka, two veterans who’d been part of the Hellions since before Merrick ascended to the imperial throne.

Sitka stayed as Elia’s shadow, not part of the lessons but present, though they shared a few occasional bits of insight that helped Elia when he got hung up on an explanation of the basic mechanics of magic.

Cormand came to stand at his shoulder, and Merrick spared him a quick glance, reluctant to look away from Elia. “You’re worried about something.”

The Hellion guard nodded, though his expression was bland. “I hope Foryne and Captain Talen are doing all right. Kell’s a fine fighter, but just the two of them and the servants to look after Foryne has me worried.”

“The high king wants his daughter married off to the emperor,” Merrick replied, smiling as Elia grasped a concept quickly, exhilaration lighting up his expressive face. “Elia’s incident,” Merrick growled a bit at calling the abuse something so paltry, “may make things tense. We can send guards to join them on the last leg of the trip, but unless they’ve got augments for the mounts, they’d reach the convoy in time to turn around and be here the next day.”

“I checked on who was stationed here and magic-born, and while they’re decent soldiers, none have the specialized gifts for such a trek. I could do it, but I won’t leave Sitka alone to guard you both.” Cormand gave him a sharp glance before Merrick could even open his mouth to protest, and he chuckled quietly, letting it go. Cormand was right. For all that Merrick was pretending to be a Hellion, he was still the emperor, and an accident or unforeseen incident could endanger the peace between the two nations.

“We wait for the convoy to arrive,” Merrick said quietly, though he knew there was no one able to overhear their conversation who shouldn’t be privy to it. “I’m more concerned about my timing in retiring Sir Merrick and letting Heremis take over.”

“We’ll stick to the plan we had before Prince Elia joined us,” Cormand said. “The chaos of the Eistrean convoy reaching the city and Foryne’s arrival at the consulate will give you the cover you need to avoid scrutiny, and since neither the Hellebore convoy or those stationed here know who is escorting Emperor Heremis here or when, you can pop up how and when you please, with minimal questions. The Hellions escorting the Imperial convoy will pull away and arrive early, playing part of your escort and cover. They’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“Did you get a message?” Merrick asked in response to the slight changes in their previously laid plans.

Cormand nodded, and held out a tiny slip of paper. Merrick took it and unfolded the slim message, noting the Hellion stamp the size of his pinky nail on the back. It was from Sergeant Ulric, Talen's second-in-command and the Hellion leading the emperor's honor guard. As far as those in the Hellebore convoy knew, Emperor Heremis was in an undisclosed location not far from the Holy City while on his hermitage, and the Hellions were going to peel away from the convoy and escort the emperor to the city just prior to the festival beginning. All was going according to plan, and so far his cover had yet to be questioned by any interested parties.

"Good," Merrick handed back the note to Cormand, who tucked it away in a pouch on his belt. "Since the Sergeant and his Hellions are coming in discreetly, I won't need to make a spectacle of my arrival. I should be able to drop the guise of Sir Merrick once Sergeant Ulric and his team get here. Enough of my wardrobe is here already that I can retire Sir Merrick without issue."

"You won't wait for Foryne?"

"I thought about it, but I want to be here in a position of strength if the High King arrives in a dangerous mood. I'll arrive as the emperor tomorrow morning, and the Eistreans should be here the morning after. Elia being here unprotected, in the company of foreign guards, might be too vulnerable of a position, and I don't want Elia exposed to his family like that. My early arrival means I will have spent public time with Elia one on one, and will give credence to formally asking for Elia's hand. I should have some time with Elia as Heremis before the Eistreans arrive."

Cormand grimaced slightly, but nodded. "Tight timing but we'll make it work. I'll send a messenger with a sealed note to the captain and the ambassador so they know what to expect." Cormand observed Elia for a second. "The prince is a quick learner."

Elia was summoning fire in his palm under the watchful eyes of Magi Cora, and Merrick was impressed. Fire was the first element summoned in basic training, and he'd managed it in under an hour.

“He is, isn’t he?” Merrick said, pleased.

Chapter Sixteen

Elia was sweaty and exhausted, but he was happy with his progress, even if it was minimal. Magi Cora got him to the point where he could actively feel his magic, even when not trying to use it, and it was illuminating to see how much he had been using it on an instinctive level for so long. His perception of danger was augmented by magic, letting him know, even if he couldn't act on it, when he was in physical danger, and his magic helped heal him after injuries.

The subconscious self-healing explained how he'd made it to adulthood without suffering from permanent physical ailments after years of abuse. Mentally he knew he was scarred, but there were few scars on his body. He wasn't a healer, a person born with the innate talent to repair bodily damage on another living being, but he'd been using his magic, albeit ineffectively, in a very rudimentary, instinctive spellwork to heal himself of injuries that should have left bigger, more enduring impacts on his body.

Done through sheer will and desperation, his self-healing was something Magi Cora said was commonly seen in people who suffered much like he had as a child. That small tidbit of knowledge both hurt him deeply and eased some of his stress, an odd experience that left him a bit adrift.

And while his self-healing protected him, his empathic ability left him vulnerable to the emotions of others, as it was unwittingly left active as an instinctive, advance warning of danger. At this point, it was the greater risk to leave untrained.

Magi Cora addressed his empathy with a carefree acceptance that left him stunned. All she said was that his shielding would improve as his awareness of his magic grew, and that he was lucky the Hellions who saved him were magic-born and trained in keeping their own emotions and thoughts to themselves behind their own shields. And then the lesson began in earnest, propelling Elia past fear and nerves and into determination.

A quick glance toward the Hellions keeping him company in the garden showed the same lack of concern at the mention of his empathy, and their lack of negative reactions to that revelation told him even more about the nature of magic and its acceptance in Hellebore. What was seen as an abomination in Eistrea, a violation of the natural world, was normal and of no major consequence here, aside from the expectation that individual privacy was to be respected.

He'd been doing magic so long that he wasn't aware of it on a conscious level. When Magi Cora helped him visualize his own magic, he found himself fumbling with trying to replicate consciously what he'd been doing subconsciously for over a decade. He failed, but even the failure helped him gain a greater understanding of the boundaries and depths of his magic.

The mental wall he had been using to keep out the emotions of others was something he could feel the edges of, especially the thin spots, the weaknesses that collapsed under pressure from crowds of people or the overwrought emotions of an individual.

"Enough for today," Magi Cora stated, appearing quite pleased. "You've done well, Your Grace, and I see you making great strides with your magical education. Even with what little we've done today, you should have a better sense of your magic, and be more aware of when it's working, and you'll gain more control." She gave him a nod of approval. "Focus on closing yourself off with the techniques I gave you, and hopefully in our next lesson we'll be able to gain more control over your empathy. You deserve some peace and quiet."

Elia bowed to Magi Cora, trying to convey how much he appreciated her help. “Thank you, Magi Cora. I cannot express how grateful I am for your time and attention.”

“You’re most welcome,” she nodded graciously. “I have a feeling tomorrow will be quite busy, but I will be here for dinner and I’ll check on you afterwards. Training can resume in earnest once the festival is over and we’re on the road to Vastok.”

“Tomorrow?” Elia asked, and Merrick came to his side, gently grasping Elia’s hand and holding it firmly.

“Emperor Heremis is arriving in the morning,” Merrick said with a half shrug and a rueful expression. “Things will be a bit hectic once that happens, but I would be very happy if you would remain here until your family arrives.”

Somehow hearing that made everything feel very real, sudden, and nerve-wracking. He swallowed hard, trying not to panic.

“When is the convoy arriving? The high king, I mean,” Elia tried not to sound as nervous as he felt.

“They should be here in the next three days, likely the morning of the fourth day, if they have not changed their pace since we left them behind,” Merrick answered. “I’ve sent messengers to meet up with Foryne so he has some warning that I’ll be here, and not as Sir Merrick.”

Elia frowned at Merrick, thinking. “The staff who brought the first shipment of your belongings here know your face, right? They know you, the emperor? Aren’t they gonna be able to tell you’ve been here the whole time as a Hellion?”

Merrick froze for a second then Elia noticed with some surprise that a blush reddened his sharp cheeks. Magi Cora snorted out a hearty laugh, shaking her head at the chagrined expression on Merrick’s red face.

“What?”

Merrick rubbed his free hand over his face, smoothing down his short beard before smiling ruefully. “I’ve actually been glamourous the whole time, since I left Vastok. I’ve kept it

in place whenever there was anyone around who didn't know about the hidden identity plan.”

“Even now?” Elia asked in disbelief. “Wait, does that mean I don't know what you look like?”

Merrick shook his head. “No, you're the only person who's seen my real face this whole time. I'm wearing the glamour right now, but you've never seen the face I wear as Sir Merrick, only my face underneath.”

“I don't understand,” Elia said, frowning hard and trying not to let his confusion turn to hurt.

Merrick made an odd gesture in front of his face with his free hand, and there was the slightest bump in the energy fields around them, so slight Elia wouldn't have known it was magic and not a breeze if not for his lesson with Magi Cora.

Merrick dropped his hand away and looked at Elia expectantly. Elia's frown deepened. “I don't see anything. You look the same.”

“True Sight for certain,” Merrick said, smiling. “Magi Cora told me when she healed you that you had it, but that's confirmation enough for anyone. I just took my glamour off, but there was no change for you?”

Elia nodded once, suspicious. “No change.”

“Means you've always seen my real face, and never saw the glamour, your True Sight has seen past it from the start. True Sight is a gift that lets the bearer see past illusions without needing to cast a spell. Different strengths of the gift exist, and it can be used to read auras and comprehend beyond the surface level of people and situations. Lower level illusions are something you see through instantly. Your mind dismissed the glamour since it wasn't working on you, and so you've never seen the false face I've worn as Sir Merrick.”

“I saw the weird glimmer thing you and Sitka did when you came to my tent when I was hurt,” Elia argued. “One second the tent was empty, the next you were there. I didn't see through that one.”

“That glamour was a far more powerful illusion, meant to hide His Grace and Sitka from sound and sight, and with training your True Sight you’ll probably be able to see past the more complicated and stronger glammers. The one he wears as Sir Merrick only alters his features enough to give credence to the persona.” Magi Cora explained. “He has a beard in both guises, and the hair is the same. Men from Vastok are commonly seen wearing their hair long if they aren’t in a trade where it can get caught in moving parts. The eyes are similar. Brown as Sir Merrick, and hazel as His Grace.”

Elia took in Merrick’s features. His eyes were a bright hazel, beard trimmed short and neat, and Elia wanted to kiss that handsome face again, feel the soft prickles of the neatly trimmed beard on his face. He looked away quickly, hoping that thought wasn’t easy to discern in his expression. “I’ve always seen your real face, then?”

Merrick lifted the hand he held and pressed a soft kiss to Elia’s knuckles. “Yes. Only my real face. And only you.”

Elia’s fingers tightened on Merrick’s. He liked that. A lot.

Magi Cora made a strangled noise halfway between a sigh and a groan. “Sweet enough to drop a gryphon into a sugar coma,” she complained, though she was smiling. “And I saw through your disguise quite easily, Your Grace.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised. You’re amazing,” Elia stated without a smidge of sarcasm.

“You are a delightful young man, Your Grace,” she told him, patting his shoulder in approval. “I look forward to hearing more about how amazing I am during our lessons. For now though, I think some rest is in order. Drink some water, eat something, and rest. Tomorrow will come soon enough.”

With that, she swept out of the garden, Elia sketching a quick bow as she did, and then she was gone. It felt like a storm had passed through and the air pressure was fluctuating. “She’s really powerful,” Elia exhaled in amazement. “I’ve never sensed anyone like her before.”

“She’s the guild representative for many reasons, but her prowess is indeed one of them. I think she’s the most powerful mage I’ve ever met, and I have met many.”

Elia never doubted that for a second. Merrick—Emperor Heremis—probably knew a lot of powerful, important people, and Elia, despite his rank and status, knew little of the wider world and the people in it, and he came with nothing but his bloodline.

“Are you sure?” Elia spoke before his better judgment told him to be quiet. He fidgeted a bit, shyly glancing at Merrick before pretending the ground held interesting secrets he was dying to know.

“About what? Marrying you?” Merrick’s words were gentle and also upfront, a strange mix of kind and blunt that Elia found reassuring instead of intimidating. He looked up from the ground, peeking through his hair.

“Yes,” Elia breathed out. “I’m not sure what you’re getting from marrying me? I get to escape and learn magic and be safe, and you... What if my father can’t see reason? If he refuses? He could do so much damage to the treaty and your people, to you...”

Merrick stepped forward enough that Elia had to tip his head back to look Merrick in the eyes. A big hand swept aside the hair hanging in his eyes, and Merrick cupped the side of his face, holding him.

“Kind, sweet, caring, and the least selfish person I have ever met in my life,” Merrick stated plainly. “Anyone else would have jumped at the chance to marry me, and you’ve asked questions instead of screaming yes. You worry about what’s going to happen to me, and that warms my heart. I’m not losing a thing by marrying you, and if there is trouble, from any quarter, I can and will handle it, and you’ll never suffer for it. Ever.”

They were standing so close that Elia felt the heat from Merrick’s body, and he swayed a bit, wanting to lean on the taller man. The way Merrick held his face, thumb sweeping along his jaw, made his body hum in new, strange ways, and

he felt hot all over. That big thumb came to rest at the corner of his mouth, and Elia's lips parted, and he gasped. His face went red hot in a fierce blush, and he trembled head to toe.

He wanted Merrick to kiss him.

"Come, let's find something to eat," Merrick broke the tension between them with regret, if the clear reluctance to remove his hands from Elia meant anything. Merrick made that sharp gesture again in front of his face, and Elia felt a little jump in energy, but it was slight enough to be a breeze. He squinted at Merrick, trying to see the glamour, but there was nothing different about the man's handsome face.

Merrick chuckled. "Given more training you'll be able to rein in your True Sight and see glammers if you so wish. As it is, I think you're constantly using it, a type of hyper-awareness to protect yourself, along with your empathy. That must be exhausting."

"It is," Elia sighed. "I wish I had more control."

"You've had one lesson," Merrick reminded him gently. "Control will come. Be kind to yourself. And we shall all keep our own shields up, to spare your senses. We want you to have the peace that you sorely deserve, Elia."

Elia blushed at Merrick's words, but he nodded in agreement, though he had trouble seeing a future where he wasn't bombarded by foreign emotions. Being able to see through simple glammers was a nice ability, though he would like to *see* what he wasn't seeing...

Merrick held out his arm and Elia blushed even as he slid his hand into the crook of his elbow, following Merrick into the guest suite. Sitka beat them inside, and they were setting up an array of plates and bowls full of food.

Elia sat and ate, the others speaking quietly amongst themselves, likely noticing Elia's exhaustion. He drooped in his chair, and set aside his half-eaten lunch, too tired to keep chewing, even if the food was delicious. He much preferred the savory flavors and unique spices to be found in the

Hellebore dishes to the relatively unseasoned, heavy, and overly sweetened dishes of Eistrea.

He would miss the bountiful fruit yielded by the orchards around the palace in Meadowtown, though.

“Elia?” Merrick was kneeling beside the chair, and Elia blinked in confusion, wondering when Merrick moved.

“Was I asleep?” Elias asked groggily.

“Only for a moment,” Merrick assured him. “Come, lie down and rest for a while.”

Merrick guided him to the bed, tugging off his boots before he even finished getting comfortable. Merrick covered him in a thin blanket, and Elia snuggled down into the pillows. The last thing he saw before sleep claimed him was Merrick sitting in the armchair by the bed, watching over him.



Sunset was a different experience in the Holy City. The very top of the temple on the peak of the island’s hill was illuminated as if on fire as it caught the last rays of the setting sun. Down among the many terraces and the walled residences, the shadows were deep and cool despite the shining glory high above providing an odd sort of twilight.

“Despite how crowded and loud this place gets, it’s quite beautiful,” Sitka observed, staring up at the light show several hundred feet above them. Windows and stained glass were catching the light and shooting intense rays across the ground, temporarily blinding those who were unaware that they should be minding their eyes at this time of the evening.

Merrick looked away when it became too bright to watch without incurring floating sunspots in his vision, Sitka doing the same.

An indignant *mreow* caught his attention, and Merrick returned to petting the demanding orange cat that haunted the front garden of the residence. Sitting on the low wall, the fluffy orange cat with the creamy chest and white mustache

that looked like a perpetual frown looked positively regal, the perfect cat for an imperial residence. He even had matching white legs that looked like fluffy little boots. Merrick checked the collar, though there was nothing signifying an owner aside from a small silver coin hanging from a ring in the leather, emblazoned with the Hellebore crest, and the little golden bell. The cat was well-loved and groomed, no mats to be seen. The residence walls were high and the gate bars narrow enough that such a big cat probably couldn't push through them into the busy street out front.

“Friendliest cat I've ever met,” Sitka said, kneeling to pet the cat who was purring up a storm, delighted to have two people in doting attendance. “Hello, lad. A tom, too, from the looks of it.” Sitka held a hand over the cat, smiling. “Bespelled not to breed or spray. Smart. I wonder who worked that fiddly bit of magic. I've not seen such an efficient spell on a cat before. Usually it's reserved for horses and large hunting dogs.”

“Oh, that fiend for pettin' belongs to Housekeeper Renly.” The guard from earlier spoke up from the gatehouse, poking her head out the window enough for them to see her. Sergeant Rena grinned. “My brother's cat.”

“Ahh, that explains much,” Merrick grinned in return. “Friendly fellow.”

“His name is Lucius. Spoiled rotten and doted upon daily,” she agreed. “Renly hired one of the priests to work their magic on the cat, so he could be in the house without destroying it. Worked, too. Behaves better than some guests we've had.”

Merrick burst out laughing, cackling at the scandalized expression on Sitka's face, the guard joining in.

Many of the priests were magic-born and came from Hellebore, where they grew up seeing magic in common use, and the priesthood welcomed those with magic. It was one of the few outlets open to Eistreans with magic of their own, the priesthood—those who took the robes of the priests of Adracias were protected from both enslavement and from Eistrean prejudice, in part because the priesthood was shared

between the countries. Though it was next to impossible for them to minister to their fellow Eistreans due to the ingrained bigotry. Those magic-born priests from Eistrea tended to settle down in the Holy City or Hellebore.

Upper-level priests from the Holy City and Hellebore who went to Eistrea were more insulated from the hatred, but the neophytes and acolytes at the bottom experienced the worst of it, and were trained in the Holy City or Hellebore as a result, many choosing not to return to their homeland.

Eistrea was beautiful, and the people largely kind and decent, but the depths of depravity hidden beneath the golden fields of wheat and the idyllic river towns told a different tale. Neighbors and families turning on each other, selling their loved ones into slavery, or even killing them outright in the farthest reaches of the country—that was the truth of Eistrea, and one Merrick was determined to confront.



Elia grumbled when someone called his name, rolling away from the person trying to wake him. “Sleepy.”

“You truly hate mornings, don’t you, my prince,” Merrick teased him, and Elia rubbed his eyes hard as he sat up, glaring at the handsome man standing next to him.

There was a folded blanket over the back of the armchair by the bed, and Elia scowled at it. “Where did you sleep?”

Merrick gestured to the chair. “Cormand and I took turns watching over you in the night, while the other slept down the hall. Sitka slept in the garden outside your room.”

“In the garden? Outside?” Elia asked, aghast. “That’s not fair at all.”

“I was quite comfortable, Your Grace,” Sitka informed him as they laid out some clothes for Elia on the end of the bed. Cormand was absent, probably sleeping still like Elia wanted to be. Sitka brushed at the front of their uniform, orange and white hairs covering them from neck to waist. “I need to

change. That fluff ball used me as a pillow last night and left his fur all over me.” Sitka waved as they headed for the door of the room. “I’ll wake Cormand and then check on the status of the incoming Hellions.”

Sitka left, the privacy spell going back up. Elia was too tired to decipher what Sitka was talking about, nor did he care that his hair was a mess from slumber and that he was in his small-clothes. “The Hellions?”

“Sergeant Ulric, Captain Talen’s second-in-command, is arriving with the rest of the Hellions at any moment. They’re going to be coming in discreetly, only announcing their presence outside the gates of the residence. I’ll be joining them in the courtyard once they’ve arrived. There’s about a dozen of them, plus an additional mount tacked in my riding gear. I’ll be hiding myself behind a glamour until I can mix in among them and then I’ll reveal myself. It’s time for Sir Merrick to be relieved of duty.”

Elia woke up fast, staring at Merrick. He wasn’t dressed in his Hellion uniform—Elia finally saw that Merrick wore a dark blue and green robe that fell nearly to the floor, open in the front, a dark blue silk shirt over black leather trousers, and knee-high black riding boots. His hair was braided back, but more ornately, the braid beginning by his temples and then hugging the curve of his head into a thick tail that hung straight down his back. His beard was trimmed even shorter than before, not a hair out of place, and there was a glimmer of green and blue shadow over his eyes. An ornate necklace hung to the center of his chest from a thick silver chain, a rich green stone carved into the Hellebore crest, with a brilliant sapphire twinkling from the center where the waterfall pooled beneath the mountain.

Gone was the humble soldier—and in his place was an elegant, dignified emperor, who wore his authority with ease and without pretension.

“Your Grace,” Elia breathed out, bowing as best he could while tangled in blankets.

“Oh Elia, my sweet prince,” Merrick sighed. He reached down and took Elia’s hands in his, lifting him up from his awkward bow. “In private, just the two of us, please never think I need or want such etiquette from you. In public, the bare minimum, please. I offer everyone close to me the same courtesy, so you’ll not stand out once the news of our betrothal spreads.”

Elia nodded, blushing, finding it difficult to look away from the sight of Merrick in his finery. “You’re beautiful,” Elia breathed out, face burning, but he kept eye contact as long as he could. Merrick smiled, delighted.

“Thank you, Elia,” Merrick helped him out of bed, and Elia was thrilled at the kiss Merrick pressed to his cheek. It was chaste and swift, but he felt it like a brand on his skin, deeply aware that Merrick was incredibly handsome and strong and so close to him...Merrick raised back up, a wry smile on his lips, heat in his eyes, and Elia decided he was perfectly capable of making a move on his own if his betrothed was going to stay the perfect gentleman.

Elia took his chance and went up on his toes, pressing his lips to Merrick’s in a kiss that was both ardent and awkward. A chuckle broke free where their lips tangled and Elia’s cheeks burned, but then Merrick took over the kiss, a firm arm swooping around Elia’s back and lifting him off his feet. The kiss deepened, and Elia sighed happily as he let Merrick into his mouth, the easy confidence in the way Merrick did everything present in the way he kissed.

Heat and longing exploded between them, and Elia was unable to discern who felt what, the kiss the most intimate experience of his life, and it made him feel *alive* in a way he never had before.

A chime rang out in the depths of the house and Elia broke the kiss, lips wet, panting heavily, heart racing.

“Is that them?” Elis asked, face flushed and hair somehow even more of a mess. He wanted nothing more than to stay in Merrick’s arms but the world wasn’t stopping for them and things were moving along too quickly. Merrick set him down

gently, and Elia fussed with Merrick's robes, smoothing away the faint wrinkles caused by their embrace. Merrick caught him by the shoulders and ceased his fussing, smiling kindly at him.

"Easy, sweet prince," Merrick smiled warmly. "I need to leave, but you've got plenty of time to relax and enjoy your morning. Sitka will come for you before midday and escort you to my quarters for an official introduction, alright? Take a deep breath."

Elia did as directed and sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I'll see you soon?"

Merrick nodded. He drew Elia in for a hug, and Elia went gladly, clinging to Merrick's firm chest. He smelled wonderful, like cedar and wet stone after a rainstorm in autumn.

He had a moment to enjoy the hug before Merrick slowly disengaged and backed away with a small smile and a hand cupping Elia's cheek, a brief caress, and then he was gone, striding from Elia's room in a swirl of elegant robes, the door shutting behind him as if he were never there.

He felt like he'd just said goodbye to an old friend, someone he'd never see again. Sir Merrick the Hellion might not have been the real man he'd come to know the last several days, and he wasn't dead or gone forever—Merrick was still there, just with more layers to him than Elia first expected. It still stung, though, and he wondered if the same qualities that drew him to Sir Merrick would be there in Emperor Heremis.

Elia told himself to stop expecting the worst and grabbed the clothes Sitka had laid out for him, hurrying to the washroom to get ready to meet the most powerful man on the entire continent.

And if he spent most of that time thinking about that kiss, no one needed to know.



Cormand eyed him from head to toe, and nodded once in satisfaction, though a hint of amusement was present in the quirk of his mouth. Merrick had left Elia's rooms to find Cormand waiting for him, and he knew that the Hellion figured out what he and Elia were up to by the smirk his friend wore. Merrick said nothing, not wanting to kiss and tell, and Cormand chuckled quietly as he set the spell to disguise Merrick and followed him to the courtyard. "No one will see you. I'll drop it the second you signal."

The glamour Cormand cast was simple, one meant to make eyes look away, to distract and confuse. The mounts and their riders in the courtyard were just arriving, the gates opened enough to allow the Hellions to enter the Hellebore residence. The household servants were waiting until the horses were secured by stablehands before greeting the guests, since the Hellion mounts were warhorses and huge, and no one wanted any biting or stray kicks due to inexperience.

Merrick spied Sergeant Ulric in the middle, guiding a mount, one of Merrick's stallions from Vastok. He recognized Starya, the buckskin stallion with a black mane and tail, saddled and snorting impatiently. A glamour obscured Starya, one similar to the spell currently on Merrick, and the magic-born Hellion maintaining it would drop it as soon as Merrick appeared. The Hellions were expecting him and were prepared for his sudden appearance in their midst.

Merrick eased into the chaos, minding his feet, and drew a thick traveling cloak up over his head, cowl obscuring his features.

He reached Starya, gently tugging on the reins, his mount sniffing him, able to see past the glamour without issue. Some animals weren't fooled by glamours, depending on the species and their exposure, and most horses used as mounts by the imperial family saw through glamours, as they were desensitized to magic in their training.

"Hello, fine fellow," Merrick murmured to his horse, happy to see him. Glaciere was enjoying her rest after the adventures in Eistrea, and would be thrilled to see a herdmate in the stables. Sergeant Ulric must have felt the tugging, as the

reins dropped casually from his hand and the Hellion began calling out orders to the stablehands.

Merrick took a breath and said goodbye to the obscurity he'd enjoyed the last several weeks as Sir Merrick, and sent a tiny surge of energy along the glamour Cormand was maintaining. Cormand felt it and the glamour hiding Merrick fell away, as did the one obscuring Starya, the timing nearly perfect.

Merrick stood at the stirrup beside Starya as if he'd just dismounted, and he pushed back the hood of the traveling cloak, letting his true face show in public for the first time in over a month.

A nearby stablehand who was taking saddlebags from a Hellion squawked in alarm, jaw dropping. "Your Grace!"

The courtyard went quiet, except for the snorting and stamping of horses impatient to reach their stalls and any promised treats.

"Good morning," Merrick greeted the stable hand. "Could you send for Housekeeper Renly, please?"

"Of course!"

The poor stablehand scurried off toward the house, and Merrick regretted the sudden chaos his presence would throw the household into, but his early arrival was unavoidable if he wanted to protect Elia. Thankfully he wasn't abominably early, only a few days, and from what he'd seen since their arrival from Eistrea, the Hellebore residence was well-prepared.

Sergeant Ulric dismounted and handed off the reins of his mount to a gawking stablehand, who thankfully went about their duties with alacrity despite the emperor standing in their midst.

"Your Grace," Sergeant Ulric nodded respectfully, not bowing outright despite the urge he saw in the man's tense shoulders. "You look hale and hearty after our journey."

"I've enjoyed myself immensely, Sergeant," Merrick replied, acknowledging the Hellion with his own slight nod. No proper greetings, since they were supposed to have been

traveling together for days already and past such things. “Thank you for everything.”

“My honor, Your Grace,” Ulric replied, and this time he worked in a full bow, Merrick’s lips twitching in amusement at the relief he sensed in the Hellion at finally being able to greet him as habit and training demanded. It took a while for Sitka and Cormand to drop the bowing, and they had weeks more practice than Ulric.

A stablehand, the senior-most one based on the neat shirt, hastily brushed hair, clean hands, and the gray at her temples, finally worked up the courage to approach Merrick, bowing. Merrick passed her the reins with a quiet thanks and stroked Starya’s neck in parting before stepping away and heading for the residence. Sergeant Ulric followed a step behind and to his right, sword-hand free to draw if needed, a familiar motion that helped settle Merrick back into the frame of mind he needed to resume his place and purpose.

Housekeeper Renly appeared the second he entered the foyer of the residence, Merrick looking about as if he hadn’t just been there a few minutes before.

“Your Grace,” Renly swept an elegant bow, as courtly as any noble in Vastok, rising after the exact proper amount of time and smiling widely. “Welcome to the Holy City. We are delighted to see you after so long, Your Grace. I hope your hermitage and the journey here were pleasant?”

“Delightful and uneventful,” Merrick replied. “Thank you, Renly.”

Renly flushed at the use of his name, and assisted Merrick in removing his traveling cloak, passing it to another servant hovering just a few feet away. “Your rooms are ready, Your Grace, and a good portion of your belongings are here already, though most remain with the imperial convoy from Vastok, I’m afraid.”

“That’s alright. I’ll make do with what’s here,” Merrick assured the housekeeper. “This is Sergeant Ulric, second-in-command of the Hellions, and he’s in charge until Captain

Talen arrives from Eistrea.” Renly greeted the sergeant with a quick bow and a smile. “I heard we’ve a guest in residence?”

“Oh yes, Your Grace, a delightful young noble from Eistrea who was injured on the road. A few of the Hellions assigned to Ambassador Foryne rode ahead with the young man and got him some help. Magi Cora is here for the festivities and saw to the young man herself, and he’ll make a full recovery. He’s likely still abed at this hour, shall I rouse him for you?”

“Let the lad sleep,” Merrick said, and Renly smiled, nodding in agreement. “I’d like to settle in first; I can meet the young man for the midday meal if he’s amenable.”

“I’ll see to it, Your Grace,” Renly gestured down the larger hall that branched off the foyer.

Merrick followed the housekeeper toward the emperor’s quarters, resisting the urge to turn the opposite direction and return to Elia, ruse be damned.

Chapter Seventeen

Sitka came for Elia after Oric helped wrangle him into a proper ensemble fit to greet the Emperor of Hellebore. He tugged on the hem of the tunic, reminding himself that he already knew Merrick and that this was mere formality to add cover to their ruse.

“The emperor is a kind man,” Oric assured him before he left Elia’s room. “Be yourself, and he’ll like you just fine.”

Elia blushed and nodded, biting his lip, while Sitka hid a grin behind their hand.

Sitka led him to the opposite side of the residence from his suite, and the furniture and the style grew more luxurious, though it remained simple and elegant. Nothing ostentatious and garish, not like the private wing of the royal palace in Meadowtown. High King Hadrix enjoyed coating everything in gold leaf and plating, whether it should be or shouldn’t. It made Elia’s eyes hurt some days, all that glare from the gold, and he was thankful the rare metal was never wasted on his rooms.

Here it was all stones in a variety of colors and types: solid granites and dark marble, sandstone and limestone. Dark woods polished to mirror finishes, more varieties of hardwoods that were beyond Elia’s ability to name. Velvet and satin, silk in blues, greens, purples and darker shades of jewel tones covered chairs and window treatments, and thick rugs stretched in wide swaths across the stone flooring. Paintings of mountains, tiny hamlets nestled in narrow valleys, and thick forests along whitewater riverways dotted the walls. But Elia

was entranced by a huge painting that took up an entire wall of a sitting room.

The painting was taller than he was and easily twice as long as he was tall. It depicted what must be Vastok, a towering city perched above a huge waterfall, dwarfed by the cloudy and hidden peaks of mountains in the background. He could almost feel the rumble of the waterfalls beneath his feet, smell the scent of wet stone, and sense the heat of the sun's rays reflecting off the high walls, the call of birds of prey flying overhead. Or maybe they were gryphons. Elia wandered closer, craning his neck back, trying to take in as much of the huge painting as he could. It was impossible, and he backed up a few steps, struck by the grandeur and majesty of the city perched high above a waterfall nearly the entire width of the painting's vista.

"Is that Vastok?" Elia asked, hushed, struck by the talent and skill, the impressive detail of the city glowing in the mountains like a diamond in a waterfall.

"Yes," Sitka replied, coming back to stand by his side, admiring the painting as well. "Well, as Vastok was, once upon a time. It's a few hundred years old, the painting, but the city remains largely the same as it's shown here. A bit bigger, a few more neighborhoods added, and terraces widened. The essence of Vastok is much the same."

"It's beautiful," Elia breathed out, eyes dry from staring in awe. He blinked up some tears and discreetly wiped them away. "I'd love to see the city myself some day."

Sitka eyed him strangely, one brow arched up, and they shrugged. "Have you forgotten you said yes?"

Elai blinked at them in confusion, then his face went red as he recalled that he'd accepted Merrick's proposal. "Oh."

Sitka snorted in amusement and gently knocked his arm with their elbow, jerking their head toward the direction they were originally leading Elia. "C'mon, almost there."

Hellions, new faces he'd yet to meet but in the same uniform Sitka wore, lined the wide hall leading up to a pair of

curved doors bracketed by stone pillars with glass and iron lanterns. They were lit, but not with flame—tiny balls of light spun within the glass and metal frame, clearing away shadows but without a trace of heat or smoke, and Elia stared at them in amazement when they reached the doors.

A cough reminded him where he was and that he was about to see Merrick—no, Emperor Heremis—and he could ask Magi Cora about the magical lamps later. Sitka met his nervous gaze and Elia calmed, remembering that this was all for show, and that nothing was really changing.

Sitka reached for the doors and opened them both, stepping inside and then to the left so Elia could see into the room.

“Your Grace, your guest is here,” Sitka stated quietly but loud enough that Elia heard them without strain. Sitka gestured to him and Elia stepped across the threshold into the room.

Housekeeper Renly was directing a few servants who were setting up a table and a wide assortment of food, and the smells made his stomach growl, reminding him that he’d been up at dawn and that breakfast was a while ago. The table along the far side of the room, a room which was easily three times the size of Elia’s guest room, was set underneath wide, tall windows overlooking the city terrace below and the high walls of the Holy City. The view was unobstructed and clear enough that he could see past the river’s edge. From the slant of the sun, he was looking west.

Into Hellebore.

Awestruck, Elia walked over to the windows, so absorbed in the view that he forgot where he was until he stood under a bright ray of sunlight that warmed his skin. Elia spun around, blushing, hands clenched into fists.

Hazel eyes alight with amusement met his, and Elia felt both calmer and more excited, glad to see Merrick again but profoundly confused on how to act around him now that he was no longer the Hellion he’d first met.

“Emperor Heremis, apologies,” Elia rushed to say as he bowed deeply at the waist in the Eistrean style, not sure of whether it was appropriate but figuring it couldn’t hurt. There were still a few people in the room, servants setting up lunch and idly watching Elia embarrass himself. “I was so struck by the view I forgot myself. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Elia rose from his bow and his gaze landed on the necklace Merrick bore, likely a royal sigil, an official emblem of his station and authority, much like High King Hadrix wore the gold and diamond crest of the Eistrean house. He paused, swallowing, then dove headfirst into playing his part. “I am Prince Elia, fourth child of High King Hadrix of Eistrea, and I thank you for the heroic actions of your Hellions in saving my life and bringing me here to receive care. Your people have been kind and welcoming, and I must thank especially Hellions Sitka, Cormand, and Merrick for everything they did for me. They saved my life.”

“Welcome, Prince Elia,” Merrick replied, and he broke from his regal bearing and held out a hand to Elia, palm up, and Elia blushed even more when he took the step forward to meet it, slipping his right hand into Merrick’s, letting the dazzling emperor bring him closer than propriety likely allowed, but Elia relaxed even more, feeling safer close to Merrick, hand in hand. “My Hellions are all exemplary soldiers, and I’m proud to hear they acted with all the honor and compassion I ask from them every day of their lives in my service. You are welcome here in the Hellebore residence for as long as you need to recover from your accident.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Elia murmured, thrilled at the firm grip on his hand and the focus Merrick had on him, as if he were the most important person he’d ever met.

Merrick was wearing the same clothing from that morning, though the cloak was missing and he appeared more relaxed, naturally in charge and the center of gravity, despite them both standing on the far side of the room from everyone else.

Merrick gave him a swift wink and addressed Sitka, without turning from Elia. “Sitka, thank you for your dedication to duty and your service. Please pass along my

thanks to Sir Cormand and Sir Merrick as well, and the three of you are off duty until Captain Talen can arrange something further when he arrives.”

“It was an honor, Your Grace, Prince Elia,” Sitka replied with a deep bow. They rose with a swift grin for Elia before addressing Merrick. “I believe Sir Merrick wishes to visit a few relatives here in the city, if that’s alright.”

“More than alright,” Merrick said magnanimously with a small wave of his free hand, grin mischievous, and Elia bit back a surprised giggle. “Please pass along my words, and if Sergeant Ulric is out there, have him come in on your way out. Thank you again for your assistance.”

Sitka nodded sharply before taking another deep bow, and then backed out of the room as a new Hellion entered.

Tall, muscular, and broad-shouldered like most of the Hellions Elia had seen so far, he guessed this must be Sergeant Ulric, and his guess was confirmed by Merrick’s next words. “Sergeant Ulric, may I present His Highness, Prince Elia of Eistrea, youngest child of High King Hadrix. He was injured on the road to the Holy City and was rushed ahead of the convoy to receive healing. He’s an honored guest here at the residence until he’s ready to rejoin his family after they arrive in the City. If you could arrange a guard detail for him while he’s our guest, I would appreciate that immensely.”

Sergeant Ulric bowed at the waist to Elia, who managed to nod in response, a bit nervous. He trusted Merrick’s people not to hurt him, but his old caution around his father’s soldiers and Everett’s cronies made its appearance in a cold shiver and a wary feeling in his bones. In an effort to make a good first impression, and not insult the Hellion, he tried to keep his sudden caution off his face.

“Certainly, Your Grace, Your Highness.” Sergeant Ulric stood at attention, hands clasped behind his back, sharp eyes watching Elia for a long moment before drifting off to check the windows and the servants before returning to rest on the emperor. Continually on guard, even in the presumed safety of the residence. “I’ll arrange it immediately. I’ve also sent scouts

from the guardsmen to check on the Eistrean and Helleborian convoys. You'll be provided a definite time frame for their arrival by supper."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Merrick said, and the sergeant bowed once again to Merrick, and then Elia, though not as low as he had for the emperor, but that was more than acceptable. Elia was a mere prince, and Merrick was the emperor of a country that took up over half the Velantan continent. The sergeant left, and the servants setting up lunch left as well, Housekeeper Renly the last to leave with a bow, closing the doors behind him with a soft click.

He was pulled into a hug, Merrick chuckling into his hair, and Elia wrapped his arms around Merrick's lean waist and pressed his face to the firm chest hidden under smooth, cool silk and satin. Cedar and rain-dampened stone filled his senses, and he loved it, imagining a sleepy vista of a mountain in autumn rains and the warmth of a fire, wrapped in this man's arms.

"You did very well," Merrick spoke low enough that no one outside should hear them. "It felt a bit silly, didn't it?"

Elia snorted inelegantly, then gave in to the giggles fighting to escape. "Very silly."

Merrick squeezed him gently, then led him over to the table. It was covered in several raised silver platters holding fruits and desserts and large, covered dishes carved from stone and a dark metal he couldn't name but that felt like seasoned iron. The dishes hummed, and Elia reached out, curious, touching the lip of the nearest dish. It vibrated under his touch, and felt far warmer than it should, even fresh from the kitchens.

"Is it magic?" Elia asked, curious, grabbing the handle on top of the cover and lifting the lid to spy a thick stew of meats and tubers of various types.

"Household magics, a useful range of spells to have amongst staff, nobles, farmers, and homesteaders alike. I believe reheating a cold cup of tea is one of the first spells taught in many homes, along with lighting a candle. Magic

makes fire dangerously accessible to children of young ages, so taking away the mystery and making it something common and mundane ensures a safer home, regardless of rank and privilege.”

“That’s sound reasoning,” Elia said, setting aside the lid on a trolley seemingly there for that purpose, and took the smaller bowl that Merrick held out to him, ladling up a hearty portion of the thick, dark stew. “I wish my people were taught such things instead of it being hidden away as evil, or something only for priests.”

His life would have been easier as a child, for certain—though a part of him was convinced that his father would have found any reason to treat him so vilely even if the magic hadn’t been a problem.

“Perhaps, with time and our marriage, attitudes can be changed in Eistrea. Enough magic-born Eistreans escape across the river to Hellebore that they must know a safe welcome and new life awaits them in Hellebore, that the rest of the world doesn’t hold the same rigid beliefs as their homeland.”

Elia looked up at Merrick as he passed him the full bowl, taking another empty one in exchange and serving up a hearty portion of stew for Merrick. He gave Merrick twice what he served himself, since Merrick was easily twice his weight in muscle and bone. He replaced the cover and took back his bowl, wondering where to sit.

There were two chairs, but they were on the opposite end of the table from each other, and he didn’t feel like shouting the length of the table to talk to Merrick.

Merrick must have been thinking the same because he pushed back his long, fancy sleeves and grabbed the chair that must have been meant for a guest as it was far less fancy than the one facing the door, and carried it down the length of the table, setting it down with a solid thunk beside his chair. His forearms bulged a bit as he did, and Elia flushed, trying not to stare at Merrick with such blatant appreciation.

“Come, sit beside me,” Merrick invited, holding the chair for Elia. He smiled and took the offered seat, shivering a bit as Merrick pushed it in underneath him. He really enjoyed it when Merrick did that for him.

Merrick fetched his own bowl and then sat, arranging the long fall of his over-tunic behind him with a practiced, absent-minded motion of his arm, telling Elia he wore such long garments often, when he wasn’t pretending to be a Hellion.

“You gave your former guise a reason to be gone,” Elia said after swallowing his first bite of delicious, hearty stew. Typically he would object to such warm, heavy food in the summer, but the Hellebore residence was anything but stifling and overly hot. It was cool, the air surprisingly dry for summer on the river, and he hadn’t once been overheated during his stay. Another subtle use of magic, and it left Elia feeling slightly bereft, his childhood spent sweltering in the royal palace, even in the white and yellow stone halls that kept the worst of the summer heat at bay. If Elia had been too hot in the palace, what about the people in the fields tilling the wealth of Eistrea, or the traders and craftsmen? The people toiling in the late evening hours after the sun was long set, as the midday hours were too hot to ply one’s trade in the depths of summer?

“It was the most boring and reasonable excuse for Sir Merrick to be absent so everyone can eventually forget about him while the focus is on the emperor and his guest.”

Elia nodded, thinking that was wise, and a long moment was spent in contemplative quiet.

Merrick paused and tilted his head, eyeing Elia in concern. “You’ve gone quiet. Is something wrong?”

“I was just thinking about all the things denied to Eistreans due to bigotry and fear,” he waved his spoon about, pointing to the dishes and then the ceiling above them. “Food kept warm for eating, and rooms kept cool even in summer, in a city made of stone. Magic in garments to make them fit a stranger, and lanterns lit by flameless stars of light.”

Merrick reached out and gently laid his hand on Elia’s wrist. “I promise, we will do all we can to help your people,

especially those who are shackled for the simple crime of existing. It's a goal I've been working toward for many years, and I refuse to see it fail."

Elai set his spoon down, throat tight. "I didn't even think about those sold into slavery. What does that say about me?"

Merrick frowned and gripped his hand firmly. "It says you've led a sheltered life, even while being treated abominably by your family. And even I was shocked to learn of the depths of depravity magic-born were subjected to in Eistrea and along our shared river borders after I ascended the imperial throne. I'm an emperor, and I still struggle to accept my role in allowing it to continue because I cannot stop it on my own."

"You are Emperor of Hellebore, not Eistrea," Elia said softly. "Even the great Sir Merrick cannot be all places at once."

"Adracias knows I've tried a time or two," Merrick said with a small, wry smile. "As I mentioned before, if I cannot get your father to bend, I've plans in place with Corainia and Pyrderi to stop the enslavement of magic-born and vulnerable Eistreans."

"What kind of plans?" Elia asked, a bit dubious. His father had never bent to another's will in Elia's living memory. Not even when it might have been for the best. High King Hadrix did not know the meaning of compromise.

Merrick set aside his spoon and bowl, though he kept hold of Elia's hand. Not surprising that a man comfortable enough to pretend to be a sword-wielding Hellion for weeks on end was ambidextrous enough to eat with either hand. That odd thought helped him relax a bit, and he waited patiently for Merrick's reply.

Merrick's gaze was steadfast, the hazel bright in the slanted sunlight coming in through the windows overlooking the far shoreline where he could just make out Hellebore. When he spoke, it was with measured tones and a confidence and certainty that Elia recognized as regal and unassailable.

“If Eistrea cannot be brought to reason through bonds of family and marriage, then the three kingdoms of Corainia, Pyrderi, and the Hellebore Empire will blockade all seafaring trade made by Eistrea. All ships at sea on open waters will be boarded, searched, all slaves freed and given asylum in whichever of the three allied kingdoms they choose. Any ship bearing slaves will be stripped of its contents, the crew arrested for crimes against humanity, and the ships scuttled where they were captured. All proceeds from sales of seized goods will be split between reparations towards those enslaved, and funds to continue efforts to stop the slave trade. This will continue until Eistrea capitulates and stops the slave trade.”

“That will mean war,” Elia breathed out in alarm, heart thudding in his chest. “Eistrea has no naval fleet built for war, only trade.”

Eistrea had benefited from the close proximity of two nations equipped with powerful standing armies and large naval fleets of their own, and Pyrderi and Hellebore made treaties and alliances with Eistrea to provide a buffer between any aggressors on the sea to the south and the Strait of Dylan to the far east between Eistrea and Pyrderi. In return, those countries received primary trade access to the agricultural wealth of Eistrea.

Eistrea had an army, but it wasn't mobile, not like other nations. It was mostly stationary, infantry assigned to permanent forts and ports along key points of the river network used for shipping and the ports along the saltwater borders of the country.

“If this happens, won't Hellebore and Pyrderi suffer when my father refuses to trade with them for food? Wheat is the top export, and Hellebore and Pyrderi benefit from its abundance.”

Merrick's smile was grim. “This is where Corainia comes in. They may be far smaller than Hellebore, but their lands are almost as fertile as Eistrea. We've tentative treaties in place to send our own trade exports to Corainia and Pyrderi, in return for Pyrderi's participation in the blockade and produce from Corainia. Pyrderi has lessened its dependence on Eistrean farm

goods in the last few years, investing in their own farmlands in the south of their kingdom. Belts will be tightened, but the good will far outweigh the bad if our plan comes to fruition and Eistrea yields before too much damage is done.”

“How long have you been planning this?” Elias asked, searching Merrick’s bright eyes.

“We had a summit last autumn, between Eistrea, Hellebore, Corainia and Pyrderi, before the Sea of Iscandis grew too perilous to sail. Your father’s envoy left after refusing to countenance any discussion on the matter of the slave trade, despite it being the reason for the summit in Corinthia. Once that happened, I, Corainia’s Prince General, and Crown Prince Janis of Pyrderi came up with this plan. Whether it is set in motion or not depends on your father, and how he handles my decision to wed you instead of Aria.”

“He’s going to be furious, and it’s going to mean war!” Elia shouted, covering his mouth at his outburst, shocked at himself.

Merrick sighed, nodding, sympathy etched on his handsome features. “My sweet prince, your father is wealthy due to the bounty of Eistrea, both in what the earth provides, and from the people he condemns to slavery. It was always going to mean war.”

Chapter Eighteen

Elia slept restlessly that night, mind a confused jumble of worry and nerves. The Eistreans were due in the morning, and no word had yet made it back that Elia knew of from the messengers sent to Ambassador Foryne. Either that was good news because they were close enough that any messengers sent back would barely beat the convoy, or they were prevented from returning with updates.

Either option left Elia worried about what morning would bring, and even though he was tired from training with Magi Cora and still recovering from the healing he received, he found himself tossing and turning all night long.

Merrick was himself again, who he really was, and as such he was asleep in the emperor's private rooms, and not sleeping beside Elia, either chastely stretched out on the bed or protectively watching over him from the chair. A Hellion he met the evening before was stationed outside his room, and while he was grateful for the protection provided, an armed stranger outside his door occupied his thoughts too much for him to settle. He had trouble recalling the Hellion's name, and that tiny prick of guilt ate at him too.

Exhausted, he fell asleep sometime before dawn, and woke to a firm series of knocks on his door. The sunlight was bright, intense, and reached nearly across his room, telling him it was late morning. He sat up, rubbing at his face and more than half asleep.

“Yes?”

“Your Highness, breakfast is ready, and we’re to prepare your bath,” Oric called through the door.

“Come in,” Elia replied, throwing back the blankets. He felt utterly wretched but would make do somehow. Oric waking him now probably meant the convoy’s arrival was imminent and he was nearly out of time to get ready.

The Hellion outside opened the door and servants bustled in, carrying a large tub and arranging the furniture to make room. Oric carried in a tray for his breakfast and brought it to the bed instead of the table. “Here, Your Highness, eat in bed until your bath is ready,” Oric said, and Elia sat back against the pillows and headboard, taking the tray and balancing it on his legs.

“Thank you,” Elia reached for some fruit, nibbling, trying to eat so he would wake up. “Is the convoy near?”

He looked up at Oric through his messy hair. Oric appeared to have spent a great deal of time on his appearance, his clothing pressed and neat, hair perfect, and he even smelled nice. Oric nodded, expression unreadable as only a servant’s could be but Elia sensed some tension. “The Eistrean convoy entered the city a few minutes ago, and is making its way to the Eistrean residence. Ambassador Foryne is on his way here. His Grace bid me wake you so you could be ready to greet our visitors.”

“Thank you,” Elia drank some warm honey tea and tried to wake up more. “I apologize for the late hour, I didn’t sleep well.”

“Not a problem at all, Your Highness. Hopefully tonight you’ll sleep easier.”

With Oric’s help he managed to get a bath, and was dressed in some more Helleborian clothing, though this time the fabrics were even more luxurious, including a deep purple tunic laced with black trim and embroidery that looked like small mountains and pine trees along the sleeves and the bottom hem. A thin pair of silk trousers, dyed a dark gray, along with a new pair of thin, black leather boots completed the ensemble, and he felt the hum of magic in every stitch.

“What does this magic do?” Elia asked Oric as the valet tugged the tunic into place and made sure it fell correctly.

“Keeps you cool, so you can wear these fabrics without overheating. It won’t work if you’re standing in the midsummer sun and doing intense labor for hours, but it will keep you from sweating through your finer clothes if you spend time in the gardens or the walled yards.”

“Ingenious,” Elia breathed out, marveling at the spells. He had no idea how any of them functioned, but he could sense them hovering at the edge of his awareness, and with training he might be able to see them and replicate how they worked in the future. “Whose clothes am I wearing? I should thank them for the garments.”

Oric moved around in front of him and gave him a swift wink. “We’re about the same size, and these are what I wear when I’m not on duty.”

“These are your clothes?” Elia asked, touched and grateful. “Thank you, Oric. I’ll return them once my own clothing reaches me.”

Oric smiled and shook his head. “They’re yours, Your Highness. His Grace has paid me well for them, and seeing them on you makes me quite happy. I made them myself, you see, and having a prince wear them is an honor I never expected to experience.”

“Thank you, Oric,” Elia said quietly, hoping Oric could see his sincerity. Oric grinned, eyes bright, clearly happy. “Did you do the magic as well?”

“I did!” Oric exclaimed, stepping back and critically examining Elia from head to toe. “I enjoy using magic in my work. You are perfection. You’ll no doubt adore the Helleborian clothing in Vastok at the Imperial Court. Jewel tones are ravishing with your coloring.”

“You think so?” Elia twirled a bit, liking how the longer hem of the tunic floated out around him before settling lightly around mid-thigh. He paused, startled, belatedly realizing what Oric said. “You know?”

Oric shrugged one shoulder. “I paid attention. And I haven’t seen Sir Merrick since His Grace arrived, and that’s most unlike your stalwart champion. Took me a moment, but I recognized the magic Sir Merrick used on the doors to your room has the same magical signature His Grace has used since he arrived.”

Elia wrung his hands together for a moment but forced himself to stop, relaxing. Oric kept the secret about who he was, so he would trust Oric not to mention anything about Merrick’s adventures as a Hellion in Eistrea.

Oric must have seen his worry despite his efforts to hide it. He met Elia’s gaze, steady and unblinking. “I know the value of discretion, Your Highness. You need never worry about what I might know and who I might tell. Unless a secret I learn means someone innocent is about to be harmed, you need never worry about me telling another soul.”

“Thank you.” He tried to think of something else to say to convey his gratitude, but he couldn’t manage it.

A chime echoed out in the hallway, and Oric gestured to him before the sound faded. “They’re here. I’ll escort you to the formal receiving room.”

“Lead on, please,” Elia said, following Oric out into the hall. His Hellion guard paced them a few steps back, maintaining a professional distance, expression blank, eyes watchful.

The walk to the formal receiving room was relatively quick, as it was near the guest quarters. Oric led him to one of the doors of the room, which was set up like a miniature throne room, though everything was elegantly muted, not at all overdone. Oric left with a murmured good luck and then Elia was on his own but for the silent Hellion who remained at the door.

A large chair of wood and stone was centered near the top of the room farthest from the main doors, surrounded in a half circle by smaller, though no less luxurious, chairs, and several small tables for drinks and light meals during talks.

Two more Hellions were in the room already, one stationed at each door, and the door on the opposite side of the one Elia entered opened just as he came to a stop in the center of the room, wondering if he were in the right place. Merrick swept in, wearing a dark green and blue tunic, the imperial sigil glittering on his chest from the long chain, topped by a long cloak in a rich sea-foam green held to his shoulders by richly decorated silver clasps. Merrick favored long tunics, or perhaps it was a Hellebore fashion. Elia supposed a country comprised mostly of mountain ranges would develop clothing that protected more of the body from strong winds and icy weather.

Merrick smiled, a welcoming sight that thrilled Elia and summoned a blush immediately, his cheeks heating. He bowed as deeply as he could manage before Merrick reached him.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Elia greeted. “I hope you had a good night’s rest.”

“A bit lonely, but I managed.” Merrick eyed him in concern. “Once Foryne is settled, please feel free to rest afterwards.”

“I must look as tired as I feel,” Elia sighed. Merrick gave him the tiniest of shrugs and a commiserating glance.

“Lovely as ever, but I understand the comfort to be found in the residence beds. Very welcoming.”

Elia eyed Merrick, wondering if he could call the man’s subtle flirting out without revealing Merrick’s previous disguise. He decided not to risk it. “The ambassador is on his way?”

Merrick nodded, eyes crinkled in good humor. “He should be here any moment. I heard he brought someone with him, too.”

Elia went still, instinct freezing him in place. “Who?”

“I’m not sure, but Foryne’s message didn’t contain any codes for a problem. I got the impression it’s meant to be a surprise?”

Elia opened his mouth to ask another question when he heard a familiar voice out in the hallway, from the door he had come through minutes earlier. Cantankerous and sharp, though not at all mean, the voice was as familiar to him as his own, and Elia spun with a gasp.

“Wyle?” Elia darted for the doorway, and skidded to a halt so he didn’t run over his old friend. “Wyle!”

He gathered the old man to his chest in a gentle but firm hug, never so happy to see someone. Tears gathered at the corner of his eyes and he sniffled, relishing the chance to hold the one person in all the world he considered truly family. Thin, slight hands gently patted him on his shoulders, and Elia indulged in the hug another moment before pulling back enough to examine Wyle from head to toe.

Aside from his wispy white hair being a bit ruffled from the wind and a slight tan over the bridge of his nose, Wyle appeared bright-eyed and energetic. He was dressed in clean clothing, and appeared uninjured and no worse for wear for having endured a week-long journey in summer heat at his advanced age.

“Wyle, how are you here?” Elai asked, moving so he could slip one of his arms under Wyle’s, assisting him into the room and straight to the nearest chair. He was aware of people watching him, but he couldn’t care less—Wyle was his main concern. “How was the journey? You look alright, but I couldn’t check on you and then I got hurt and brought ahead. Are you well? Do you need anything?”

Wyle sat in the chair, patting Elia’s hands as he fussed. “My dear prince, I am more than fine. Once news of your departure swept through the camp, I went looking for answers. I asked the first Hellion I saw, who turned out to be Captain Talen. He told me what happened and helped me get here once the convoy reached the city. No one raised a hand to stop them, and I did not mind as I needed to check on you myself. You look well. Are you recovered?”

Wyle’s worry was apparent, and Elia’s heart squeezed at the naked concern. “I was hurt, but I received healing the

moment I arrived. I'm nearly well now, just easily tired for another day or so."

"I'm here now, so you'll be better soon. I'll make sure of it." Wyle declared this with a narrow-eyed, suspicious glare around the room, squinting at Merrick, though he gave no sign that he recognized who Merrick was or that he was last disguised as a Hellion. Before Wyle could speak, Elia introduced him.

"Your Grace, this is Wyle, who has served three generations of my maternal line, and is my personal valet." They'd already met, of course, but Wyle didn't know that Sir Merrick and Emperor Heremis were one and the same. "Wyle, this is His Grace, Emperor Heremis of Hellebore, who has graciously allowed me to recover here in the Hellebore residence while we've been awaiting my family's arrival."

The look of suspicion didn't abate all that much, though Wyle did make as if he were going to stand to bow properly. Merrick lifted a hand and politely stopped him, and Wyle relaxed. "Greetings, Wyle, please stay seated. A devoted companion of such exalted years need not stand on ceremony with me. You are most welcome here."

"Thank you, Your Grace." Wyle still bowed at the waist, and then straightened slowly with Elia's help.

Movement from the corner of his eyes brought Elia back to the wider world, and he realized he had been ignoring several other people in the room.

He recognized the ambassador, who went to Merrick and made his bows, greeting him first before offering a lesser equivalent to Elia, and he was startled and pleased to be acknowledged. Being greeted as a royal by a stranger of rank was new to him—he wasn't accustomed to such respect, and it had been given without prompting.

He nodded graciously in return, and watched with arrested attention as several other people paid their respects to Merrick, uniforms and clothing signaling their stations as diplomats and Hellions. Elia recognized one of the Hellions from the group

that came with Foryne to Meadowtown, who was most likely the oft-mentioned Captain Talen.

The lower-ranked officials left after a few murmured words with Merrick, and Elia caught the swift glance Merrick sent him. He turned to Wyle. "I need to speak to His Grace, but I'll come see you soon."

"I shall see to your rooms now that I'm here," Wyle declared, carefully standing.

A Hellion came over and immediately offered their arm with a smile. "Sir, I can show you to His Highness's rooms. May I assist you?"

"Thank you, youngin'," Wyle replied with a shaky smile and a couple pats on the Hellion's arm. "Your Highness, it is so good to be at your side once more."

"I've missed you too, Wyle," Elia said softly, watching as the Hellion carefully guided Wyle from the chair and toward the door that led to the guest quarters.

When Wyle was out of sight and the door shut, Elia turned to see that only Merrick, the ambassador, and the Hellion captain remained. He nodded to Foryne, and then Captain Talen. "Thank you, good sirs, for bringing Wyle. I appreciate the effort you took on my behalf. He is family to me, and I worry for him in his late years."

Foryne graciously nodded. "You're welcome, Your Highness. He's quite a charming old fellow, and stubborn, too."

Elia bit his lip and then took a breath, the questions burning on his tongue. "And how are the relations between our people after my unfortunate accident and subsequent removal here to the Holy City?"

"Delightfully put, Your Highness. You've a gift for diplomacy," Foryne commented, one brow arched. "I'll gladly include you in my report, if His Grace allows."

"Of course I'll allow it," Merrick gestured for them to all sit. "Please, we can discuss matters while seated. This will likely take a while."

Elia bid himself be patient and he waited until the others sat, Merrick in the throne-like chair, the ambassador and captain arranging themselves to his left, and then Merrick held a hand out, inviting Elia to sit directly to his right. Elia blushed, meeting Merrick's intense gaze, and sat in the indicated chair, trying not to fidget under the curious gazes of the men directly across from him.

Foryne wasted no time once they were all seated. He spoke mostly to Merrick, but made an effort to include Elia in his delivery. "Once morning came, I went immediately to the High King's tent and asked for an audience. Despite the early hour and his penchant for rising late, I did manage to get a few moments with High King Hadrix. I explained that Prince Elia was kicked by one of our warhorses and that he needed immediate help from a healer. I explained our agreed upon version of events, and aside from confusing the High King, I believe due to the early hour and not being quite awake, he made no complaints about your absence or the fabrication we spun. Our meeting was brief, and I left shortly after, and I believe he went right back to sleep after I informed him of the incident."

"He probably did," Elia said as Foryne paused. "My father detests rising early. And since it was about me, he wouldn't have hesitated to go back to bed."

Foryne grimaced, and Captain Talen's jaw went tight, displeased. Foryne exchanged a pained glance with Merrick before he continued. "The remaining time on the road passed without incident. The High King made no inquiries as to how you might be faring, Your Highness, nor did he ask for specifics of what happened. I don't know if that is due to him not being aware of how badly you were hurt, or if it didn't matter to him."

Elia was embarrassed at the blatant disregard from his parent, but decided his pride hardly mattered since these men knew enough already.

"Father never cares if Everett hurts me, he only reins my brother in if he gets bored or if Everett might go too far." Elia shrugged, not really sure how to explain that his father got

bored of him quickly, and the casual abuse he got from Everett was preferable to when Hadrix took an interest in punishing him. “And I never really understood where that line was. He usually stops Everett if they are going to be late for something or they are expecting important company. I don’t even think my Father noticed that Everett hurt me that night in the tent. He was drinking his favorite wine and telling Alden the same dismal tales of his own wild youth that he always brags about when drinking.”

The room was quiet, and Elia noticed that all three men were staring at him, varying degrees of shock, dismay, and anger on their faces. Merrick reached out and took Elia’s closest hand in his own, squeezing firmly and holding tight.

“I apologize,” Elia said with a small, tight smile, squeezing back. He looked to the ambassador. “I overshared. Please continue, sir.”

Foryne opened his mouth, likely to say something about what Elia just shared but thankfully Merrick shook his head and Foryne changed his mind. He waved at Captain Talen to take up the remainder of their report.

“Kell and I saw no inclinations from the Eistrean guards or army to ascertain where Prince Elia was or investigate what happened, nor did the other royals seem concerned. We weren’t approached by anyone with authority or who was close to the royal family. The tale of the prince being kicked by a horse was uncontested, and his expedited journey to the city was taken at face value, as far as we could tell. Only the Eistrean horsemaster inquired, and he was more concerned that it wasn’t one of his horses that did the kicking. He did ask after you, though, Your Highness, and passed along well-wishes for a speedy recovery.”

Captain Talen spoke to him directly at that last bit, and Elia nodded as graciously as he could in acknowledgement. Lord Calla was a good man, and it made him feel a little bit less invisible knowing the horsemaster cared enough to inquire. “Thank you, Captain.”

“The ruse stands, then?” Merrick asked, and both men nodded. “Good. I can’t promise that this complicated charade will end well, considering our goals, but any revelations of our previous actions will cause additional strife.” Merrick paused, expression set, eyes flinty. “Though, I will take up cause against Prince Everett; his actions cannot go unchallenged.”

“Please don’t, not for me,” Elia pleaded, turning in his seat and putting his free hand over Merrick’s. “I don’t want any more strife than there needs to be. Everett has a horrible temper and might do something stupid, violent—probably both.”

Merrick was angry, but he controlled it with ease. It was there in his eyes, and in the firm grip on Elia’s hand. Usually when Elia was with an angry man, he got hurt, and he would be anxious to leave, and hyper-wary. And yet there was no doubt in his mind that Merrick would never hurt him. His body was still tense, though, anticipating something, anything, and Merrick seemed to see it in his eyes or hear it in the quaver in his voice, as the anger gradually eased from his handsome features and calm returned to his intense hazel eyes.

“For now, I will do nothing,” Merrick conceded, but with a fervor that lent credence to his words. “But the second you are secure in my arms and untouchable, I will call your brother to account for his actions.”

“He likes fighting too much not to try and hurt you. Please don’t put yourself in danger, not for me.”

That statement earned a tiny twitch of Merrick’s mouth, and his eyes were full of sympathy and an odd mixture of resignation and something Elia thought might be affection, but he was not used enough to seeing it to be sure.

“But if he ever attempts to harm you again, I will stop him,” Merrick swore, gaze so intense Elia struggled to meet it. “You are important to me, and deserving of protection. Let me champion you, Elia, please. In this matter, and all things.”

Elia blushed, eyes wide, torn between hysterical laughter at the utterly alien experience of having someone declare, in

front of others, how he felt and how he regarded Elia—he also wanted to cry, touched and pleased and happy, a confused jumble of emotions that overwhelmed him.

Elia nodded, the only response he could give when confronted by such a declaration and all it ignited in him, a lightning strike in the starved lands of his heart and soul. He was struck silent by the emotional storm brewing inside. He ducked his face away, hair falling over his eyes. He had no idea how to avoid appearing love-struck and overcome by Merrick's words, and so said nothing.

Inside, though, he also worried. Everett might not be a swordmaster, but he was still accomplished enough to be lethal, and he won duels with steady regularity. Everett was quick to violence, and challenged nobles at court with alarming frequency, only avoiding those who held influence with their father.

Everett would do something incredibly stupid if driven to anger. Having an emperor confront him for abusing the little brother he saw as worthless might spur Everett into sulking in hiding with some wine and a willing bedmate, or his brother could explode in anger and hit someone, or even more frightening, draw a weapon.

Merrick gently squeezed his hand, drawing his attention. Elia snuck him a glance through his hair, and Merrick rewarded his bravery with a sweet, warm smile that fired the blush in Elia's cheeks.



Merrick warily observed Elia, but his sweet prince stayed silent, though he wasn't hiding as overtly as he had just been, his shoulders relaxing a bit. The blush that covered his face was adorable and alluring, and Merrick wanted to explore just how far down it went down his slim neck. He forcefully reminded himself that he was not alone with Elia and returned to the topic at hand.

“Will the High King demand his son be returned, do you think?” Merrick asked Foryne and Talen. “His indifference to Elia’s situation on the road makes me wonder.”

Talen frowned, obviously concerned with the logistics of keeping Elia safe if he went back to his family, as was Merrick, and Foryne was grim, even as he shook his head.

“I doubt he’ll make an issue of it at this stage,” Foryne offered. “They may spend the day getting settled in at the Eistrean residence, especially since there’s so many of them in the convoy. Finding a place for all the courtiers the high king dragged along will take time. High King Hadrix practically emptied the entire court when we departed Meadowtown.”

Merrick agreed with the statement, thinking about his options. Elia watched him through thick locks of silky blue-black hair, summer-sky eyes bright with worry and curiosity.

“I’ll send a note, welcoming him to the city and extending my greetings.” Merrick thought about how to keep Elia under his roof and away from his family. “Any complaints if I imply that you’re still in need of recovery? It might buy you another day or so before the official festivities begin.”

A tiny furrow appeared between gracefully arched black eyebrows, Elia biting his lower lip as he thought. “When does the festival start? I’ve lost track of the days since we left Meadowtown. If I stay here, will I be missed if I’m expected to participate in a function or event? I don’t know much about what is meant to happen, for the summer solstice celebration or the treaty festival. Am I meant to be present for something official, or for ceremonies? I was never included in any planning for it, and I wasn’t born until after the last treaty year festival.”

“The summer solstice is in four days,” Merrick answered. “That morning is the Ceremony of Adracias, in the temple at the top of the hill.” Merrick paused, trying to remember his own attendance at the last summer solstice that fell on a treaty year. He’d been young, and not an active participant due to his age. “In treaty years there is a recommitment ceremony, where we sign an ornamental version of the first peace treaty

between our peoples, and that's usually when a negotiation for marriage between our countries would be discussed if all the parameters can be met. This year all parameters for a treaty marriage can be met, so those who are eligible are required by treaty law to attend the ceremonial signing."

A chime rang through the residence, and the four of them paused, listening. "I'm not expecting anyone else," Merrick said quietly, already certain it was someone coming to fetch Elia. None of his people out in the city would ring the bells if they were already accounted for upon initial arrival.

From the terrified grip on his hand and the fear in those wide summer-sky eyes, Elia's fear was palpable.

Chapter Nineteen

Elia wanted to run. Someone from his family had come for him, he was certain of it, and he wanted nothing more than to run and hide. A childish urge, but a familiar instinct, and the last few days of peace, comfort, and safety revealed the cracks in his heart and mind at the imminent threat of seeing his family again.

There was a knock on the door, and Captain Talen stood and went to the doors, opening one a few inches and speaking to whoever knocked. A note was passed through, and Captain Talen closed the door and then brought the note to Merrick.

Merrick had to let Elia's hand go to crack the wax seal on the note. The golden wax and the white thread that bound the parchment, along with the seal stamped into the wax, told him it came from his father's hands.

Elia was out of his chair without thought and all but running for the door he initially entered the receiving room through, breath ragged in his chest. He reached for the door handle, desperate to escape, fear overriding his rational thoughts, but a big hand attached to an armored arm landed on the door from over his shoulder, holding it shut.

"Captain, stand down," Merrick barked out, the command in his raised voice unmistakable, and it was enough to jolt Elia from his mindless terror. Elia spun, Captain Talen holding up his hands and stepping back from Elia, watching him warily, as if Elia were a wild thing liable to lash out.

Merrick came for him and Elia raced to reach him, flinging himself on Merrick's chest, clinging to the fine robes and shivering uncontrollably. Strong arms swept him up in a fierce hug, and Merrick held him tightly, almost too tightly, squeezing him until Elia was forced to slow his breathing.

He was panicking, and teetering on the edge of some unfathomable abyss. How weak was he that the merest thought of returning to his father's control left him a ragged, tear-streaked mess? The thoughts were unkind, he knew it, but stopping them was impossible sometimes, and he was too overcome with terror to make an attempt.

"You are safe, my sweet prince, I swear it," Merrick whispered in his ear, warm breath caressing his skin, interrupting his mental castigation. Elia shivered again, and wrapped his arms around Merrick's neck, hanging there in his arms, uncaring of their audience. "No one will ever hurt you again."

He lost track of time, Merrick holding him as if he weighed nothing, whispering promises of care and protection in his ear, pressing kisses to his hair, and eventually Elia calmed enough to lift his head, and squirm in embarrassment. Merrick carefully set him on his feet, and Elia risked a glance, peering out through his hair.

Captain Talen glanced at him, though Elia saw none of the judgment he was expecting from the Hellion captain. And Foryne was reading the note, muttering to himself.

"Are you well, my sweet prince?" Merrick whispered, and his hands came up, smoothing back Elia's hair to reveal his face, thumbs brushing away tears. He shivered at the intimate touches, eyes wide, and he swayed into Merrick, helpless to stop his full-body reaction to the man touching him with such care and devotion.

Merrick chuckled, cupping his jaw, and Merrick leaned down enough to press a firm, yet chaste kiss to his forehead. Elia made a tiny noise he would deny was a squeak until his dying day, hands reaching up to catch Merrick's wrists—not to push him away, but to hold him in place, to pull him closer.

Merrick's lips were soft and yet firm, and his skin tingled where they touched.

He never wanted Merrick to stop touching him.

Merrick pulled him back into his embrace, holding him firmly to his chest, and Elia burrowed into his robes, breathing in the cedar and stone scent that would always remind him of Merrick. He slid his arms around a trim waist, holding on tightly. He turned his head just enough to peek out and see the other two men.

He blushed when he saw both the ambassador and the captain watching them with broad smiles and chuckles. The Hellion captain even dared to wink at Elia, and he hid his face again, flustered.

"Foryne, what's the message say?" Merrick asked the ambassador, who looked down at the unfolded letter with a grimace.

"Flowery, heavy-handed greetings, and a 'thank you for tending to his most treasured youngest child'," the scathing disbelief in Foryne's tone made Elia snort in amusement despite the urgency of the situation. His father was overplaying his hand, but subtlety wasn't the high king's best talent. Foryne scanned the letter, unrolling the thick parchment as he went. "The High King is sending his daughter, Princess Aria, to check on his son, and conveniently enough, at the usual dinner hour this evening. I believe they're using Elia's presence here as a way to get Aria in front of the emperor."

Elia agreed, and he should have seen that coming. No wonder his father made no public complaints about Elia being whisked away by the Hellions. Aria would play the part of a compassionate, caring older sister to her injured little brother, and do her best to make an impression on Emperor Heremis while faking her sisterly concern.

"She's trying to get you to notice her, using me as an excuse," Elia murmured, knowing it was obvious but he refused to remain silent about it. If his sister was coming, then their father was all but shoving her out the door and across the city to charm her way into the emperor's good graces,

regardless of how she might be feeling after a week of traveling in the summer heat. Exposing Merrick to the machinations of his family made Elia sick to his stomach. “I should go back so they can’t use me to get her in front of you.”

“I can ignore the calculated flirtations of a princess, especially if it means you get to stay here without any arguments from your father,” Merrick scoffed. “Let her ply her wiles while I seduce the Eistrean royal I really want. You’re staying here where you’re safe.”

Elia giggled at Merrick’s declaration, the sick feeling in his gut abating at the absurdity of Merrick thinking he needed to work to seduce him. “You have no need to seduce me, Your Grace.” He lifted his head enough to meet Merrick’s laughing gaze. “I’m already yours.”

Heat joined the laughter in those bright hazel eyes, and Merrick held Elia a bit tighter. Elia’s cheeks heated at the promise he saw in Merrick’s eyes.

“Your Grace, perhaps we should cut to the heart of the matter and have you declare for Prince Elia immediately,” Foryne said, folding the letter neatly and tapping it in the palm of one hand as he thought. “It’ll bypass any drama of the princess attempting to enchant you and your subsequent rebuttal.”

“Don’t we need to wait until the treaty signing?” Elia asked, not wanting to endanger peace between their two countries.

Merrick shrugged one shoulder. “As both families usually don’t meet all eligible participants until the treaty signing ceremony, betrothals usually happen at the end of the event, or soon after, quickly followed by the wedding. According to the treaty marriage terms, there’s less negotiations than there typically would be between our royal houses, as the marriage is merely a cementing of the bonds between the two kingdoms, and the wedding takes place before the end of the solstice festival. We’d be jumping ahead by a few days, but it wouldn’t derail anything, I don’t think. The priests would probably

appreciate the efficiency of having a betrothal in place first, since they do most of the wrangling of the reluctant parties.”

Merrick brushed a hand along Elia’s jaw. “I’d very much like to declare for you, my sweet prince. May I break tradition and inform your father of my desire to marry you?”

The reality of the situation hit Elia then, heart thumping hard in his chest. He struggled to form a coherent reply, but all he could do was take a deep breath, and nod once while holding Merrick’s intense gaze.

Merrick grinned and tugged him back into a fierce hug. “I promise you’ll not regret it, my love.”



Merrick signed the letter with a flourish of an enchanted pen, the ink a shimmery black with a rainbow film like oil on water, and then pressed the face of the imperial sigil pendant into the dark-green wax at the bottom of the letter. His imperial name always took him aback, not quite used to signing Heremis instead of Merrick, even after nearly a decade of using it on countless official papers.

Replacing the sigil around his neck, Merrick sat back as Foryne leaned in from where he stood beside his desk at his side and sprinkled white sand over his signature, drying it quickly. The ambassador tapped the excess sand into the tiny bowl beside the pen and ink, and examined the letter with a critical eye before nodding, satisfied.

“Excellent,” Foryne said, rolling the parchment and then securing a warmed imperial wax seal to the roll, the wax cooling rapidly once in contact with the parchment. “I will deliver this at once, Your Grace. And I will await a reply. I’m not sure of my reception, but I can’t see the high king denying you your choice after all is said and done.”

“Thank you, Foryne,” Merrick told his ambassador, glad the man was willing to do the difficult job ahead of him. Foryne had a spine of steel. He doubted Hadrix would take Merrick’s choice well, so he was sending Hellions with Foryne

to guarantee his safety. Hadrix saw no value in Elia, and from his own impressions of the princess from his time in Meadowtown, Aria was neck deep in her father's machinations, and Merrick offering for the wrong royal would derail their plans.

Hadrix had a temper. As did his oldest son.

"Of course, Your Grace," Foryne bowed. "I shall collect my escort and leave at once. The congestion in the city means it'll be a few hours at least before you can expect a response. Perhaps His Highness would appreciate something to take his mind off of everything."

"Good idea, thank you Foryne. Stay safe and good luck."

Foryne left the room with determination in his step.

Elia sat curled up in a large chair beside the fireplace in Merrick's study, and Lucius the fluffy orange cat, had joined the young prince for a nap, delighting Elia and taking his mind off the incoming dramatics from the Eistreans. He hugged the giant cat to his chest, the loud rumbles from the tomcat filling the study. The cat eyed Merrick suspiciously, as if concerned Merrick would steal his prime spot.

Elia gazed listlessly into the cold hearth, petting the cat in slow, mindless strokes, the cat's tail flicking slowly in contentment. Elia was worn out from the fright he'd experienced earlier, and the stress of worrying about his father's reaction to Merrick's proposal.

They had some time before they expected a response. And Elia needed a distraction, something to pull him from his brooding.

Merrick stood and went to the door of his study. A smile and a chuckle escaped when he spied Sitka and Talen wrapped up in each other's arms, kissing like they'd spent weeks apart instead of days.

"Ahem," he coughed into his hand. Sitka jumped and spun away from Talen, eyes wide, lips red and wet from the captain's kisses. They smoothed down their rumpled uniform while Talen glared at Merrick, a bit irritated at the interruption.

The arches in the hallway were recessed enough around the study door that the two Hellions had been out of sight from anyone passing by, and anyone in the study wouldn't see them unless they were in the doorway like Merrick was. It probably wasn't the first time that the lovers had snuck a kiss or two. They weren't the type to slack off while on duty—and Merrick confirmed this by stepping out into the hall far enough to see a regular complement of guards at either end of the hall, preventing anyone from approaching the imperial study.

“Aren't you still off duty?” Merrick teased Sitka.

“Um, yes?” Sitka replied, eyes darting between Talen and Merrick, a blush on their cheeks. “Apologies for the indiscretion, Your Grace.”

“You missed each other and neither of you are on duty,” Merrick replied, waving away the apology. They were a good fit for each other and he had no issue with them in a relationship. “I am a bit worried that you chose to get amorous in the hallway outside my study, though. Odd place for a lovers' tryst.”

Talen snorted out a laugh, wiping at his mouth, a wry grin breaking free. “Ambassador Foryne caught me as he was leaving, told me to help you distract the young prince. Sounded like a good idea. I'm too wound up to sleep, and Sitka wasn't around when I was looking for a distraction.”

Sitka rolled their eyes at the captain. “I was looking for you! You weren't in your rooms. But we're here now, and Prince Elia looks like he's in mourning.” Sitka leaned a bit to see around Merrick's shoulder, frowning when they saw Elia in the chair by the fireplace. “Poor lad. Whole building is abuzz with rumors that our dear emperor is refusing to let the Eistrean prince return to the bosom of his family for some mysterious reason. About half the rumors called you besotted already, and that's close enough to the truth. I'm impressed with the rumor mill here, it's remarkably accurate.”

“Excellent,” Merrick said, pleased. “That'll spread through the city posthaste and it'll make my proposal even harder to resist once the priests catch wind of it. There hasn't been a

love-match in a few hundred years at a solstice festival; that should inspire plenty of excitement.”

“Always plotting,” Talen sighed, holding back an eye-roll with effort. “Enough already. How about we tend to the princeling brooding away? Any idea what to do for him as a distraction? Sitka’s caught me up on what I’ve missed. Magi Cora is occupied, so that’s not an option.”

At the mention of Magi Cora, Merrick got an idea. One of her duties while in the Holy City was to check on the spells in the imperial residence, and that included some heavily guarded secrets. He turned to look at Elia, who was murmuring to the fluffy tomcat in his arms. The cat was loving the attention, staring up into Elia’s face with what Merrick fancied was adoration, his purring loud enough to be heard from where Merrick stood.

“He has a way with animals,” Merrick said. “Too bad we aren’t in Vastok, he would adore the menagerie.”

Talen moved enough so he could see Elia through the open doors, humming a bit as he thought. “There’s always the river. Plenty of animals down there.”

Merrick nodded in agreement, thinking the same thing as the Hellion captain. “Clear the way to the tunnel. I’ll get our forlorn prince.”

“Will do,” Talen nodded and gave him a jaunty salute, catching Sitka by their arm and hurrying off with his lover in tow.



Elia followed on Merrick’s heels down the long, sloped tunnel; the Hellion captain led the way with Sitka bringing up the rear of their little party. Small torches set in intervals in the tunnel glowed with tiny stars of light, flameless suns of silver and white that were painful to look at directly for too long.

When Merrick told him he had a surprise to share with him, Elia was not expecting an ancient, secret tunnel beneath

the city, the entrance hidden in a private courtyard off the imperial quarters, steps from Merrick's bed. He'd been distracted by passing through the emperor's bedroom, Merrick leading him by the hand past the huge expanse of the massive mattress in the four-post frame, into the courtyard, followed by Captain Talen and Sitka, both Hellions grinning at him in excitement.

The tunnel was old, very old, and the walls were smooth gray stone, with a gradual downward incline, the floor scuffed enough to prevent slipping. Moisture dripped along the walls, the scent of water and damp stone heavy in the air. There appeared to be no erosion, no cracks, and the moisture in the air seemed to be growing heavier the farther down they went. Elia thought he heard the lapping of water, and when they suddenly exited the tunnel onto a wide platform hidden beneath a rocky overhang, he was right—the River Adracias raced past, a subtle roar echoing in the air.

“Where are we?” Elia asked, curious and awed.

“Escape tunnel and a well-hidden dock, built when the city was made into a place of peace between Hellebore and Eistrea. The years after the signing of the very first peace treaty were fraught and imperfect, and tensions were high enough that the new imperial family wanted a way to escape the city that wasn't through the heart of the island.” Merrick's voice echoed in the stone chamber, the water lapping along the stone offering a chaotic counterpoint.

“It's that old?” Elia whispered, shocked. It looked very old, but to be a thousand years old? That was a number he struggled to comprehend.

“Give or take a few years, but around there, yes,” Merrick confirmed.

The wide platform at the exit was carved from stone just like the tunnel itself, a smooth expanse that held no seam or crack, and there were stone posts at intervals with iron rings for ships to tie off. Along either side of the cove, near the portion where the overhang stopped, there were stone pillars carved from rocks that jutted up from the water, holding the

ceiling up. The place where the cove met the river was narrow, and artfully hidden, a switch back among the pillars with enough space for a small vessel to be rowed through the passage. Off to the left was a smaller platform, and what appeared to be a shelf carved into the walls. Elia stared at it in confusion until he recognized the shape of a long, low rowboat under what must have been a heavily-waxed tarp protecting it from the elements. Even in times of peace, the imperial family had a way to escape if it grew dangerous in the Holy City.

He hoped that there would never be a reason to need the tunnel.

Along the right side of the hidden cove was a narrow path carved into a stone ledge, with a door made of weathered wood that looked to be as ancient as the city.

“Where does that go?” Elia asked, pointing.

Merrick looked where Elia pointed, a smile lighting up his handsome face. “That’s a door hidden in the base of the city wall, in case a larger vessel was needed to evacuate the imperial family. The cove is only large enough for a six-person boat, including oarsmen, and my ancestors were worried about larger generations in the future needing a way out for everyone. The door leads to rocks cleverly altered to allow a river barge or masted ship to dock along the base of the wall instead of entering the cove.” Merrick took his hand and gently led him toward the door. “It has a fantastic vantage point to look out over the river. The river is low enough right now that all the rocks should be above the water line.”

Captain Talen led the way, making Merrick grumble good-naturedly about overprotective guards, and Elia chuckled, amused by the teasing between the two men. They were obviously old friends, not just guard and emperor.

The captain opened the door, the hinges squealing with rust, and Elia winced at the sound, though he was able to forget the discomfort quickly when he saw the view past the ancient portal.

The river glittered in the summer sun, reflecting gold like a mirror, the ripples over the surface throwing light across the

stone, making Elia shield his eyes as they adjusted to the brightness.

Merrick stepped through the door, which was at a point where the depth of the wall had been purposefully thinned out, but even with the alterations, the wall foundations were impressive. Elia followed, stepping out onto a wide, flat boulder that was right outside the threshold, and he turned around and craned his head back, back, back, astounded by the sheer height of the wall that reached toward the fluffy white clouds in the bright blue sky.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Elia breathed out in amazement. He felt like he might fall, grateful for Merrick’s firm grip on his hand. “How did anyone build something so tall?”

“Magic,” Merrick answered him, looking up as well, shielding his eyes from the sun with his free hand. “Old magic, the kind humans haven’t used in a very long time. Mages of old had more power, or maybe just less caution. They did things back then that mages would be wary of trying today.”

Sitka stepped out through the ancient door with a bounce, excited, and Elia smiled at the infectious enthusiasm radiating from the Hellion. They were looking around like a kid at a festival, eyes lit up and a wide smile on their face.

The surface of the river was a few feet below the door, and examining the immediate area, Elia saw the many different water lines showing old flood levels up the side of the wall. One alarming flood line was at least twenty feet above the top of the door, and Elia was glad it looked incredibly old, faded by time and the sun, and there were no other flood lines marking the wall even close to it. Not a common occurrence then, which helped calm the niggling fear at the sight.

The water lapped at the boulder upon which they stood, the curve of the city wall letting the waters calm as the river eddied around the many protrusions that rose around the foundation of the city. Elia guessed they were on the north end of the island, and to the far right he caught hints of trees and a

relatively flat, craggy outcrop that jutted out into the river away from the wall.

“Will people see us?” Elia worried. The river was wide here, the current fast, but slower near the wall and the multitude of rocks that rose from the water around the island. He couldn’t see the river bottom, and he wondered just how deep the water was at the base of the wall. For a masted ship to come alongside the wall without scraping the river bottom, it had to be far deeper than it looked.

Merrick gestured farther out. “There’s a chance they could if a barge or ship comes by, but this side of the island has a faster current and the rocks along the western shore of the island are difficult to navigate unless a mage is on board and able to work with the right spells to find them. Any ships that come on this side will hug the Hellebore shoreline, and approach the island either farther upriver or come around the backside from the south. No one is coming up close to this side of the island unless they know exactly where the slip is hidden in the rocks.”

“I see why your ancestors chose this spot for their escape route,” Elia said, eyeing the plethora of boulders that rose from the water like a rock garden, and the cleverly hidden boulders that were aligned perfectly with those towering above them, obscuring the stepstone path that would take escapees out to any awaiting vessels. It would be useless as an escape route in flood season, but most of the year the water levels of the Adracias were well below the tops of the slip and the dock within the cove.

Merrick hopped onto the next massive stone, a stride away and just as flat as the one outside the ancient door, and held his hand back for Elia. He leaned out enough to grab Merrick’s hand and then jumped, easily landing beside Merrick.

He grinned up at Merrick, enjoying himself. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

Merrick leaned down to speak in his ear. “You’re most welcome, sweet prince.”

“Please don’t fall in the river,” Talen called out, loud enough to be heard over the river, the sounds of the water echoing off the wall. “I detest swimming in the water here.”

“What’s wrong with the water?” Elia asked, looking down and trying to see what the problem might be. “Are the fish big here? Water snakes?”

“Human waste from the sewers, I’m afraid.” Sitka answered with a grimace. “It’s not that bad here, most of the refuse drains out from the south side of the island and flows downriver.”

“Ew,” Elia sniffed, eyeing the water with suspicion. It looked clean and free from refuse, and there was no smell, so Sitka’s assessment was probably correct. “Do the priests not use magic to clean the waste from the sewers like you said Vastok does?”

Merrick grinned, seeming pleased, and Elia blushed a bit under the sun. It was warm, but the river supplied a cool, steady breeze and it was more than tolerable on the water.

“For all that the priests of Adracias embrace magic, they are slow to adapt to changes, preferring tradition over progress,” Merrick explained, tugging Elia under his arm. “They tend to be a few decades behind in how to use magic for the betterment of everyone. The public sewers have had few improvements, and the wealthier priests and those few merchants who live here year round with the means to afford the spells have them, but mostly to control the plumbing within their own homes and those don’t extend out into the city. The Hellebore residence has the spells in place, cleaning all waste waters before they leave the property. The same cannot be said for the rest of the city, I’m afraid.”

“But why not?” Elia asked, confused.

“For all that the priests claim to serve the people, they are still human themselves, and can be just as greedy or apathetic as anyone else. And those that have internalized prejudices against magic are reluctant to incorporate it into their daily lives. There are a few of them like that in the priesthood, and they tend to remain in Eistrea or on the southern edge of the

city. And some older generations of priests don't see the value in wasting magic on the poor, or those who can't afford the costs themselves."

"How disappointing," Elia murmured. "I'd hoped that the priests of Adracias were better than that. I never had much to do with them in Meadowtown. I was largely ignored by the priests, except on holy days when I would be trotted out from the nursery and made to be seen, then shuffled back out of sight after it was over."

Merrick hugged him. "Some priests are good people, some are horrible, and most are in the middle, like every other person in this world."

Elia hummed in agreement, savoring the way Merrick held him, looking out over the water and the distant shore of Hellebore.



The afternoon spent in the hidden cove with Merrick and the Hellions was pleasurable and exactly what Elia needed. When the glare of the sun off the river surface grew too strong they retreated into the cove, and sat on the edge of the stone dock, looking out over the water. Sitka left for a short while, to check in that they weren't needed above in the residence, and they returned with a pair of wicker baskets brimming with food and drinks, some thick blankets thrown over their shoulders for them to sit on.

Elia enjoyed an impromptu picnic with Merrick, content to nibble on delicious foods as Talen and Merrick shared tales of childhood adventures, Sitka teasing their captain, and Elia quickly grew fascinated by the relationship between the captain and the mysterious Hellion who helped save Elia's life. Sitka was charming and funny, open with friends, and quiet in a watchful manner when on duty.

Sitka was an intriguing mix of masculine and feminine traits and behaviors. The way they talked, moved, laughed and teased, was uninhibited and sincere, and uniquely them. Sitka

caught him staring once in a while, and Elia would flush and look away, but Sitka never grew angry at Elia's obvious fascination.

He found Sitka attractive, but that wasn't the cause of his wonder. Sitka was dressed in their Hellion uniform, their hair styled to keep strands from their eyes, but long enough that when not tied back, it would fall to their jaw. A few brightly colored threads were woven into braids at each temple, holding the strands back from their face. The longer hair might be cultural, as Merrick had very long hair compared to men in Eistrea, and his was braided at the temples much like Sitka's hair was, sans the colored threads. Sitka drew the eye and held it, graceful and lean and much like a bird of prey, sharp eyes and sleek feathers, quick and witty, beautiful and deadly.

Elia drank some chilled wine, and realized as he sipped that he felt a measure of envy. Sitka expressed themselves as they saw fit, feeling no need to conform to expectations, aside from the uniform they wore while on duty.

Elia turned his contemplation to his betrothed. Merrick's hair was long and trailed well down his back even when braided, and there were silver and jeweled clasps tying off the ends of the braids. No rings on his fingers, but the imperial sigil hung around his neck, hidden in the rich fabrics of his elegant clothing. The colors he wore were beautiful and something Elia usually saw only on women of the court back in Meadowtown. A hint of eye shadow accentuated Merrick's eyes and dark brows, and there was a bit of black liner that made his hazel eyes appear even more intense. No one mentioned it—in fact, no one reacted to seeing their emperor wearing cosmetics or beautiful clothing, it was utterly normal to them. No lingering glances that weren't appreciation, and no disgust or derision, sneering scorn like Elia would see on the faces of his family or courtiers if he were to wear something similar back home.

Captain Talen was the next to journey back up the tunnel to check in with the residence, and the alacrity with which he returned made Elia get to his feet, fidgeting nervously.

Merrick set aside his wine glass and stood as well, hand reaching for Elia before he even finished standing. Elia took it and Merrick stood at his shoulder, giving him strength.

“News, I take it?” Merrick asked. Captain Talen nodded, a tight frown thinning his lips out, brows low.

“Foryne is back, and some of the Eistrean royals are here,” Captain Talen said, glancing at Elia for a split second. “Cormand is back from his day off, and he said he doesn’t know which royals arrived, but he did say it’s not the high king based on how few guards came with them. Cormand is waiting at the tunnel entrance in the garden for us.”

“How long have they been here?” Merrick asked. Elia was listening, but he was struggling to pay attention, forcing himself to breathe slowly and not give in to panic.

“Not long from what Cormand said, and he got it from Renly. You’ve got a few minutes before our guests might get restless.”

Merrick nodded, and slid an arm around Elia’s shoulders, pulling him close. “Trust me to keep you safe. No one will harm you.”

Elia gave a jerky nod and clung to Merrick’s side all the way back up the tunnel, blinking at the bright afternoon sun in the courtyard when they exited the cool darkness. Cormand was there waiting for them, hand on the pommel of his sword, tense and watchful, and he took in Elia’s fraught state with a frown and a quick head to toe glance. He said nothing, but he arranged himself next to Sitka behind Elia as Merrick led him inside.

Sweat beaded on his brow and trickled down his back, nerves overwhelming the spells in the clothing meant to combat the summer heat. Skin cold yet flushed with sweat, fingers tingling, and breath rattling in his chest, Elia struggled to find his mental balance as Merrick guided him into the imperial quarters. Elia sat where Merrick guided him, in the same chair in the study they’d been in earlier, and Merrick knelt on the floor in front of him, hands chafing Elia’s hands, trying to warm them.

“You’re safe here,” Merrick promised him again. “I’m going to greet our guests, and depending on who it is and what they want, I’ll come back in here and leave it up to you whether or not you want to see them. I can send them away, too, if that’ll be easier.”

“I’ll...I’ll wait here, please,” Elia stammered. He was panicking again, tears stinging his eyes. “Please don’t let him take me back.”

Instinct was screaming at him that it was Everett who waited somewhere in the Hellebore residence, wanting to reclaim Elia and drag him back to their father.

Merrick’s eyes narrowed at his choice of words, and Elia would have been frightened of the anger he saw stirring in Merrick’s intense hazel eyes if he weren’t so preoccupied with trying to breathe.

Sitka and Cormand came to stand on either side of Elia’s chair, and Merrick nodded to them in thanks as he rose to his feet. “I’ll be in the sitting room, through those doors. I’ll greet our guests there. No one will come in here except for me or Talen, and they won’t know you’re in here. Sitka and Cormand will keep you safe.”

Elia made a jerky nod, hands twisting in his lap, and he focused on breathing, struggling to rein in his fears that wanted to override his rational mind. A soft *mwerp* heralded the arrival of Lucius, the fluffy tomcat jumping up beside Elia on the arm of the chair, purring loudly, rubbing his head on Elia’s shoulder. Elia managed to take a deep breath, then another, and Merrick gave him one last look before he left with reluctance, stepping through the doors into the other room where Elia first met him as Emperor Heremis.

Sitka stayed at his side, and Cormand went to the doors, and Elia saw he left one open the barest amount, the Hellion leaning on the shut panel, unabashedly eavesdropping through the narrow gap. He gave Elia a swift wink and a smile, and Elia breathed out slower, knowing that Cormand would be able to recognize who it was from his family and would be able to tell Elia without him getting close to the doors himself.

Cormand rested his hand on the pommel of his sword and leaned hard on the closed door, listening, and Elia was able to breathe easier knowing the Hellion was between him and whoever was out there, and Sitka was there at his side as well in case Cormand wasn't enough.

He worried for Merrick, but Captain Talen was with him, along with the other Hellions stationed in the residence. Merrick was even safer than Elia, but his hands still shook and his mouth was dry, and even though his panic was easing, he was still afraid.

Lucius crawled into his lap, settling down for a nap, purring loudly. Elia tried to focus on petting the fluffball to distract himself, and it worked for a short while.

A few minutes passed in silence, and then there was a rumble of voices and the faint sounds of doors opening and shutting. It made Elia jump, startling Lucius from his lap. Elia listened as hard as he could, trying to parse out a familiar voice.

When he heard the voice he was dreading, Elia held his hands over his mouth and shivered. He thought he heard Aria, and then his heart leapt into his throat.

Everett had come for him.

Chapter Twenty

“Your Grace, thank you for granting us an audience on such short notice,” Prince Everett swept a bow in the Eistrean style, and the man managed to make it mocking instead of sincere, a feat Merrick would have been impressed by if he hadn’t wanted to rip that smug expression off the prince’s face.

Everett rose, nearly striking a pose, hip cocked and his cloak thrown back in a dashing manner over one shoulder, revealing a muscled form clad in white and gold. It appeared to be real gold thread, too, a fairly over-the-top display of wealth that had no place in an informal audience, even one between royals of allied countries.

A smirk twisted Prince Everett’s wide mouth; he seemed to be relying on his rough charm to appeal to the emperor in much the same manner it must have with his lackeys back in Meadowtown. Merrick was already enamored with an Eistrean prince and it wasn’t the oaf standing in front of him.

Princess Aria moved forward next, sweeping her skirts out in a Helleborian curtsy that was identical to any he received in Vastok, showcasing her impeccable training, moving in such a way that an observer’s eyes would follow the graceful lines of her sun-kissed form and the golden wreath of tiny wheat stalks holding back a thick mane of golden hair. She rose with a slow, demure motion that was meant to draw the eye and showcase her elegance and attire, and if Merrick weren’t so damn angry that he had two uninvited Eistrean royals invading his sitting room, he might have applauded her

efforts. He was unmoved by them, but she made an impressive showing.

Merrick remained seated, relaxed in his throne-like armchair, the royal siblings standing alone in the center of the sitting room. Merrick sat bracketed by Captain Talen on his left and the massive windows showing the far distant shore of Hellebore to his right.

Everett was taking the same opportunity as Merrick to take Merrick's measure, a faint furrow creased his swarthy brow when he noticed the cosmetics Merrick wore and the way he styled his hair, the long braid decorated with precious metals and gems, and the elegance of his clothing. Merrick saw the disdain and confusion in the younger man's eyes, and how he struggled to keep the scorn off his face.

Meeting a man wearing what to an Eistrean would be feminine tools like cosmetics and hair adornments—he was clearly not what Everett had been expecting. Perhaps he thought Emperor Heremis would be more like Hadrix, so overtly and aggressively masculine as the Eistreans thought men out to be and not so vastly different.

Nothing showed on Princess Aria's face but a sweetly passive and pleasant expression, and she stood primly and patiently, hands clasped in front of her and her eyes lowered slightly, as if shy in his presence. It was all fakery, but she had a talent for acting that wouldn't go amiss on the stage. If he hadn't seen her behaving as her true self when he was pretending to be a Hellion guard, he might have been inclined to believe this shy, proper princess was the real Aria.

The siblings were alike enough in coloring that their relationship was undeniable, and Merrick marveled at the huge disparity in the siblings when compared to Elia. If not for the certainty of the high king that Elia was his and that he was the striking image of his late mother, Merrick would have believed it more likely the youngest prince was a Helleborian foundling who got lost in the Eistrean palace nursery by pure chance.

Foryne appeared pained, though he stood calmly enough to the side of the room within a few steps of Captain Talen,

clearly aligning himself with his emperor and out of arm's reach of the visitors. His face was impassive with nothing showing of his opinion of the eldest Eistrean royal children, which told Merrick quite a lot.

“Welcome to the Holy City, Princess Aria, Prince Everett,” Merrick said, cool and reserved, only giving the Eistreans a slight dip of his chin in acknowledgment.

No arrogant bully with a penchant for abuse would get anything but the barest of respect for his rank from Merrick, and if he weren't certain war would erupt in the Holy City immediately, he would've confronted Everett with a sword to his throat for his treatment of Elia. And he would not offer more respect to Aria, lest he give her the wrong idea about his intentions. She was here uninvited days before their families usually met at the solstice celebration, a bucking of tradition that was less about building friendships and more about setting her hooks into the imperial throne.

“I sent a letter in greeting, welcoming your family to the city with Foryne. I trust your royal parent received it? I was not expecting him to send his eldest children with his reply.”

Foryne was back at an hour that made Merrick suspect that he'd had enough time to hand over the letter to Hadrix and then get shuffled out the door again immediately after. That did not bode well for the letter's reception, nor Merrick's request for Elia's hand in marriage.

“My father sends his many thanks for your hospitality for his youngest son, and sent me to escort him home to the adoring bosom of his family,” Everett stated like he was rehearsing for a play, and he plodded through his lines, disinterested in how they landed. Impatient to get it over with, his eyes darting about as he took in the furnishings and subtle wealth that comprised the imperial quarters. Everett continued in a distracted manner, absorbed with the view out the huge windows. “I'm to take Elia home, Your Grace. Our father misses his youngest son and wishes to make sure he's doing well after his accident.”

Not even a twitch as he spoke, nothing to show that Everett knew how badly he'd injured his little brother, that he almost killed him. That what he did was wrong. Nothing. As if he truly thought a horse kicked Elia, and that was what sent them racing through the night and day to save his life.

Rage pooled in Merrick's belly, and the only show of it he made was the tightening of his fingers on the arms of his chair. Princess Aria was more astute than her brother—she must have sensed Merrick's ire in some fashion, as she dropped the demure act and took a tiny step forward, breaking Merrick's stare away from the imbecile examining the room like he was thinking about pocketing some Helleborian treasures on his way out.

“My father sends his regrets that he wasn't able to come himself,” Princess Aria said, her words full of calculated regret delivered in a placating tone he was sure worked well on her father, matched with an entreating, shy smile on her fair face. “He's assisting the settling in of the royal court after such a long journey. My father hopes that I can help rekindle the bonds of friendship between our two nations, and help catch up on how both our royal families have been since the last treaty festival. I'd be delighted to stay and learn more about Hellebore and your family over dinner, while Everett takes Elia home to our darling father. He'll surely recover quickly once reunited with his family.”

High King Hadrix expected Emperor Heremis to entertain his only daughter, alone, while Everett dragged Elia across the city and away from the Hellebore residence, after a recent injury severe enough it threatened his life. Hadrix sent two of his children to meet with a sovereign of a foreign kingdom while he plotted to wed his daughter off as fast as possible to said sovereign. A marriage between their two families was expected of them, but all this pretending and plying of wiles was too much, and unnecessary. The fact that they thought all the playacting necessary in order to align their families for a marriage merely showed Merrick the inadvisability of going through with it in the pairing Hadrix desired.

From the way they were acting, neither young royal expected him to argue with them about any of it, though Aria was far more observant than her oblivious brother, and every flutter of eyelashes and graceful dip of her chin was as precisely planned as a swordmaster in a duel.

Merrick said nothing. When he failed to react to her farce, she stilled, a living statue born of white marble and gold leaf.

“Ambassador Foryne, was there a response from the High King to my letter?” Merrick asked abruptly, not responding in any way to Aria or Everett. The princess jolted a hairsbreadth, and Everett frowned, glowering at the snub.

“I handed it to High King Hadrix myself, Your Grace,” Foryne replied promptly, bowing a bit at the shoulders as he spoke in apology. “I was given no reply, as there was no time for one—Princess Aria and Prince Everett were leaving anon and requested,” more like *demande*d, from the tone Foryne was using, “an escort to the imperial residence. The High King had not opened it before he asked me to escort his daughter and son here.”

A calculated move on Hadrix’s part, so that he could say with honesty that he had no notion of any plans Emperor Heremis might have had and he could foist Aria on the emperor at the first chance presented.

“Your Grace, I’m so sorry we rushed the good ambassador back before my father could send his formal reply,” Princess Aria said with a tiny dip of her chin. “I was so anxious to see Elia, and to meet you of course, Your Grace. Is my brother still abed? Perhaps seeing his family will help cheer him. May I see him, please?”

Elia was mere feet away on the other side of the double doors in Merrick’s study, and Merrick made no move to look in that direction, despite the urge to make sure Elia was safe, the desire to have Elia in his arms. The doors to the study remained closed, and Merrick took that to mean Elia had no desire to see either sibling.

Merrick remained cold and impassive, nothing showing on his face. Neither Aria nor Everett seemed to suspect how Elia

featured in Emperor Heremis's affections, and he decided to end the farce at once. Hadrix had likely read the letter by now and was fuming, regretting shoving his children out the door without forearming them with knowledge of the contents.

His silence made Everett rein in his wandering attention, and he finally took a good look at the emperor. Princess Aria was several steps ahead of her brother, the quality of her gaze slowly morphing from innocent ingénue to political animal, even while maintaining her pleasant mask.

Everett opened his mouth, no doubt to say something rude and infuriating, and Merrick lifted but a single finger, silencing the prince instantly.

“While I appreciate the desire to sit down to dinner and get to know each other, I must decline, as I’ve already chosen my dining companion for tonight, and every night for the immediate future,” Merrick declared, observing the way Aria’s eyes went sharp and calculating, and how Everett stood, clearly confused, behind his sister. “Prince Elia has been tended by Magi Cora, Mage Guild representative to my Court, and his injuries are well on the road to recovery. He is resting still, mage’s orders, for another day or so until she deems it safe for him to move about.” Merrick paused a heartbeat, battling back his rage. “His injury was life-threatening, you see.”

Merrick added that last bit quietly, making sure the weight of his gaze settled on Everett with unmistakable meaning, and the silence in the room was enough that his words could be heard by all present.

In the periphery of his vision he saw Aria tense, her chin jerking as she restrained herself from glaring at Everett. For the prince, the tense atmosphere following Merrick’s words finally broke through his obliviousness. Merrick was petty enough to enjoy the man’s mental acrobatics as he realized that the emperor knew that the youngest prince was deliberately hurt by his brother and not kicked by a horse on the road.

“Prince Elia nearly died, and by the grace of Adracias, he was brought here, and received prompt, proper care to address his injuries. Imagine my dismay when the most esteemed magi in my empire told me that Prince Elia was plagued by years of injuries, most healed through untrained magic, the grace of Adracias, and the resilience of youth, and not the tending of a healer,” Merrick paused, enjoying the splotchy red flush on Everett’s face, the sweat beading on his temples. Princess Aria was deathly pale beneath her summer glow, hands gripping each other so tightly that the blood fled from her fingers, leaving them as white as her silk dress.

“Your brother is a kind, sweet young man,” Merrick said, and let his words hang for a moment, knowing exactly when they landed as he intended, when Aria’s eyes went dark in frustration from foiled plans and her jaw tightened. He let the first smile since the audience began come alive on his face, and Everett tensed, right boot sliding back a half-step, changing his balance in a soldier’s instinctive reaction to the dangerous malice Merrick let slip into his demeanor.

“Impeccable manners, a kind heart, and a humility that is refreshing to see in a royal of any kingdom,” Merrick stood at last, a smooth, efficient motion that stirred Everett into taking a full step back, white and gold cloak swirling around his boots, hand falling without thought to the empty belt at his side where his sword no doubt usually hung.

All guests were disarmed before appearing in his presence.

Aria froze, a deer sighting a gryphon, hoping the predator would attack the ignorant herdmate foolish enough to draw the eye of the hunter.

“Prince Elia is everything I would have wished to find in a spouse, and I am humbled to share with his loving siblings that he has accepted my marriage proposal.”

Aria’s gasp was unintentional, her eyes wide. Everett appeared even more confused, glaring around the room like he expected Elia to hop out of the shadows at any moment. Mouth agape, Aria looked between Everett, Merrick, and Foryne in disbelief, as if they were playing some sort of prank

on her and she was waiting for them to all laugh and admit it was a joke.

“I informed your father of such in my letter that Foryne delivered to him—a pity he did not take the time to share its contents with you before you made the trek across the city. It’s so congested, with everyone arriving for the summer solstice, and it takes far too long to travel between our residences. As Elia is still recuperating, I’ve offered him respite here in the imperial residence, to spare him the arduous trip, and he’s graciously accepted. Please inform your father he is more than welcome to visit his son, and any questions he may have concerning marriage terms should be sent to the high priest, as I’ve also informed them that I intend to fulfill the treaty marriage requirements by wedding your brother.”

“Elia is a boy.” Everett sputtered, “He’s —” Merrick cut him short with a sharp glance.

“Yes? He presents as a man, and has not requested I address him otherwise?” Merrick said, framing it as a genuine question, and Everett was left floundering again, confused. The openness with which he and his fellow Helleborians accepted those who existed outside the antiquated gender roles of ancient Velanta had yet to permeate Eistrea, and Merrick was certain it would be a long time coming, from the complete lack of comprehension from both Everett and Aria following his response.

“Your Grace, I’m sorry, but surely you must wed for heirs? Your sons are quite young, and a dynasty always requires more heirs for the sake of security and stability,” Aria hesitated, summoning courage as if afraid to speak an unfortunate truth to a higher power, yet he was forewarned of her true motivations and her sincerity fell flat. “Elia is a wonderful companion, I’m certain, but he cannot further your family line? Surely affection cannot outweigh duty.” Aria stopped, calculating her next steps, her mask of sincerity slipping the slightest amount. She was angry, deprived of a prize she expected to snare with ease.

How horrible for her.

Merrick did not care. Let her scheme to ascend her father's throne and leave Hellebore out of it entirely.

"My sons are precocious learners, intelligent, and exceptionally healthy," Merrick shared with a fierce smile, and her expression crumbled a bit around the edges; she knew she overplayed her hand. Any further mention of his children would not go well for her. "And if a tragedy were to take them from me, my sister and her children are more than willing and able to further our family line. I'm quite lucky that I am free to marry for love, as my first marriage satisfied my duty to provide heirs to the imperial throne."

Everett finally had enough, exploding in a flurry of words.

"Love? Elia? He's charmed you with those god-forsaken powers of his, hasn't he?" Everett spit each word with ire, hands clenched into fists, nearly shouting. "Whored himself out the first chance he got and stole his sister's prize, that ungrateful brat. He's useless in the marriage bed, nothing but a barren field to waste your seed. You could have an Eistrean princess with impeccable breeding for an empress and you'd settle for a scrawny runt to warm your cock? I should have broken his neck before we left the capital."

Gasps came from both Foryne and Aria, and Talen moved for his sword, Everett's words spreading his vitriol in the room with harsh strokes that left no one unaffected.

Merrick acted before Talen could pull his sword. He wore no dagger or sword, and his weapons were invisible until drawn.

Aria screamed when the air in the room moved with no source to be seen, a fierce wind that ruffled her skirts and hair, and she dashed to the side. Everett stood unmoving, shocked and confused, the perfect target. A single swift cut of Merrick's hand through the air in front of him, and power rose and snapped in the room, echoing like the crack of stone heralding a rock slide.

Merrick struck Everett across the face with his magic, the blow throwing the prince's head to the side, making him stagger back several feet. A shaky hand pressed to his cheek

came away with blood, and Everett's snarl of outrage died quickly when he saw Merrick's eyes.

He let the glow shine unimpeded, declaring to all present that he was magic-born, and that he held more power than just the imperial throne and the Hellions behind him. Aria scurried toward the door, but drew up short when several Hellions barged inside, hands on their weapons, ready to defend their emperor. Those who were magic-born would have felt him use his powers, and they came without being called. They blocked her way, and she stumbled back a few steps, uncertain.

Talen came to his side, hand on his sword, an inch of steel pulled from the scabbard, the threat clear. The doorway to his study burst open and Elia stood between Cormand and Sitka, and Merrick held them back with a single motion of his hand, bidding them wait. Elia was terrified, and Sitka held him back, his desire to run to Merrick heartwarming and dangerous with Everett close enough to grab him if he entered the room.

Everett saw Elia in the doorway, and his face contorted in rage as he headed toward his brother. It took Talen pulling free another inch of steel with a hiss of deadly metal on leather to halt the Eistrean prince where he stood, eyeing the Hellion captain warily. Everett was unarmed and outnumbered, and that alone seemed to stall his actions even through his rage.

"Prince Elia's magic is as welcome in Hellebore as he is in my arms," Merrick declared loudly. "I've promised him training to realize the full potential of his gifts. Princess Aria," Merrick called, and she spun around, flustered, eyes wide. "Please inform your father of what has transpired here. I will see him across the high temple on the solstice." The princess barely had time to gasp out an agreement before Merrick turned back to Everett, the older prince holding his bleeding cheek, fury and tears in his eyes. "And I will see Prince Everett across the sparring circle that night, to address his numerous dishonorable actions against my betrothed. Your actions and your words will not go unanswered. You will pay for them. Every. One. Of. Them."

"You'll pay for this instead," Everett gritted out, dropping his bloody hand away from his face and pointing at Merrick

before glaring at Elia, who stared back at his brother without a word, face pale and eyes haunted.

A neat slash, like that left by a whip, cut across Everett's left cheek, blood dripping to mar the front of his once pristine white and gold tunic. "I accept your challenge, you peacocking abomination. Your magic can't save you from my sword, and after I've struck you down, I'll wring the runt's fucking neck for daring to interfere."

"Another word against my betrothed, and I will end this now," Merrick said softly, fingers moving just the tiniest bit, wind rising in the room to flutter strands of hair, the ends of cloaks, chilling sweat-dampened skin. Aria searched frantically for the origin of the wind before she arrowed in on Merrick's hand.

"Brother, we should leave, now," Aria rushed to her brother's side and took his arm in both her hands, yanking on him, hissing out her words between clenched teeth. "Emperor Heremis can have us killed here and now, Everett! Leave it be. Let Father handle this!"

Everett shook her off, and she eyed him in shock, clearly not used to him ignoring her orders. Everett wiped blood from his cheek and flicked it across the floor between him and Merrick, uncaring of where the crimson droplets landed. Merrick let his magic shine again from his eyes, and Everett took an awkward step back, stumbling into his sister before regaining his composure.

"Captain, please escort our guests out and send them back to their father," Merrick ordered, dismissing the elder Eistrean royals immediately, eyes on Elia.

"Gladly, Your Grace," Talen growled, and with a sharp gesture, the Hellions surrounded Princess Aria and the glowering Prince Everett, herding them from the room.

Everett's shouted threats and vitriol could be heard for a few tense moments before they faded out completely, and Sitka released Elia, who darted forward and straight into Merrick's arms.

Elia shook in his arms, and he leaned down, pressing his face to Elia's soft hair, holding him tightly.



Elia struggled to contain his terror, hands shaking, fingers barely able to clutch at the silk of Merrick's tunic. It was as if he were going to shatter into a million pieces. Merrick held him, as steady as a mountain, and the only thing holding him together after the confrontation with his siblings.

"He wants to kill you now," Elia whispered, tears soaking Merrick's tunic. "He won't fight fair."

"I'll be ready for him," Merrick replied, a soft rumble in Elia's ear.

"Why?" Elia asked, almost crying the word.

"You are worth everything, Elia," Merrick said softly into his hair, his warm breath caressing the nape of Elia's neck. "Worth risking my life. Worth even the peace between our two countries."

"I don't know what my father will do," Elia said, pulling back enough to look up into Merrick's handsome face. "He's got a temper, too."

"War has been a possibility for a long time now. And Eistrea's odds of defeating our coalition remain negligible. If we cannot keep the peace after I've dealt with Everett, then we'll simply step into the next stage of our plans."

"People are going to die."

Merrick tucked a strand of hair behind Elia's ear, then ran his fingers along Elia's jaw until he could cup the back of his neck in a gentle grip. "People are already dying. Slavery always ends in death, unless we're lucky enough to reach them first. Ending the abomination of slavery is the end goal."

"What if dueling Everett and marrying me is too much and my father refuses? What if he agrees to end slavery if you marry Aria instead? What if—"

Merrick kissed his forehead and Elia stopped. Merrick wasn't smiling, but his eyes were patient and fond. "He won't end slavery. He makes too much gold off of it, and it fits his ideologies. His prejudices, his pride, and his temper make it unlikely. If I were to wed Aria after dueling Everett, they'd probably have me assassinated the first chance they got and try to merge the thrones."

"Then what are we going to do?" Elia asked, at a loss. "What if they try to kill you after we get married?"

"I don't see you trying to poison me the first opportune moment you get."

Elia shook his head, frowning. "I'd never do that."

"Ah, but your sister might, or one of her servants. It's easier to kill a spouse than an in-law. And I don't think Wyle is an assassin in disguise. Your sister would bring her entire household if I were to wed her, and that's easily a dozen potential killers."

Elia sat with that epiphany for a moment. "She would, if she wanted you dead badly enough. She wants the throne, and if she can't have the high king's throne, she'd take an emperor's without blinking." It took him a moment, then one thing Merrick had said clicked. "You'd let me bring Wyle to Vastok?"

"Let you? I would not dare try to stop Wyle from coming. He'd probably sneak into your luggage. Besides, he's your family. Let him retire, see you happy and safe. He'll have to put up with a rambunctious set of twins and their feral cousins, but he's scrappy."

"Thank you," Elia sighed, a worry he'd been carrying for days easing. Wyle would get his retirement in a place of security and care, and Elia wouldn't lose him in the process.

Now all he had to do was survive the solstice, and make sure the man he loved did as well.

Chapter Twenty-One

A dark brown and furry face looking back at him from just above the river's surface made Elia freeze in wonder and pleased surprise.

The river otter looked its fill at him, eyes a dark brown, nearly black in the evening light, whiskers twitching as it sniffed, catching his scent. Ripples in the otherwise smooth stretch of water told him the single otter he could see had company. Most otter families ran toward six to nine members, and this romp looked to be about that number.

The otter chattered at him, an inquisitive sound, and Elia laughed in response, delighted. The otter swam closer, only a few feet away from where he sat on a wide, flat boulder. He'd gone back down the tunnel to the secret dock and then the ancient door, and had been there for hours now.

He'd slipped away earlier, needing some peace and quiet, though the watchful eyes of the Hellions serving as his shadows kept him company from the tunnel entrance.

This otter was big, a fully adult male from the way it squared off with him, unafraid and boldly curious. About five feet long, it could do him serious injury if it didn't want him in its territory. He made no moves at all, remaining nonaggressive in his posture. The river otter was a highly intelligent and social animal, and typically chose avoidance over aggression unless pups were in danger.

Its eyes were dark and glassy, the otter's face almost humanoid, expressing curiosity. There was no malice in the

beautiful animal, and it seemed to sense Elia's appreciation. Elia felt its presence with his gift, the animal's mind open to him in a way that humans' were not—where he got only emotions from humans and sometimes images if the emotions were powerful, with animals, he caught their mental workings as well as their emotions.

This otter was curious about him, and saw him not as a threat, but as a novelty, and Elia was charmed by the bold creature.

“Aren't you a handsome fellow,” Elia murmured, and the otter rolled in the water, coming a little bit closer. The evening air was warm and still, the lapping of the water on the boulder upon which he sat loud in the quiet. The otter's front paws came in contact with his boulder, and it chattered again, its mouth opening to show rows of wickedly sharp teeth. Elia remained still, patient, and the otter inched closer, whiskers and nose twitching as it sniffed at his toes.

Elia smiled when the otter wrinkled its nose at him and slid back in the water, rolling and cavorting. It seemed to be a signal, as the river on either side of the big male came alive with more otters. Small younglings and what must be offspring or younger siblings chirped and splashed, making Elia laugh at their antics. One brave pup even hopped up on the boulder next to Elia, before diving back into the water, dunking its siblings.

Water went everywhere, soaking the boulders and his clothing. He didn't mind at all. The summer air was warm, even as the sun set. He focused his will on the worst of the splashes when his skin protested the cold, and his clothing dried swiftly. His lesson with Magi Cora came in handy, and he was still amazed by how easily control of his magic came to him in so short a time.

The otters sensed his magic, chattering in curiosity before continuing to play. They took care not to get too close, showing they knew he was there, even while they played on as if he were just another piece of the scenery. They were wild, but held no fear of him, and he was grateful again for the gift

that allowed him to communicate with animals. He doubted he could get this close without it.

Elia sat on the boulder for a long time, until the night air grew too chilled for comfort. Darkness came to the river and the thick woods across the water, and the sounds of the holy city at his back grew louder as the evening entertainment began. Light from the braziers atop the city wall high above his head glimmered over the river's surface, and Elia was able to see the shadows of the otters as they gradually left. One shadow stayed the longest, bigger than the others, and Elia gave a small wave to the friendly male before it too swam off into the darkness.

Elia stood, stretching out sore and stiff muscles before reaching for his boots. Thankfully they were dry, and he tugged them on quickly.

“Are you alright?”

Elia straightened, squinting into the shadows, the darkness within the door near absolute, until a light bloomed around a hand, flames of silver-white light.

“That doesn't hurt?” Elia asked, curious, since Sitka obviously wasn't in pain as petals of flame unfurled in a slow undulation around their free hand, the other braced on the stone doorway. He ignored the question about how he was doing—he wasn't sure, and had no answer.

“Not a bit,” Sitka assured him. “It's merely light. A bit of warmth, maybe, but nothing harmful.” Sitka seemed willing to let their previous question go, and Elia jumped from his boulder to the one below the door, Sitka stepping back to let him through.

The hinges groaned as Sitka forced the ancient door closed, and they stood in absolute darkness but for the light around Sitka's hand. Elia squinted at it, the way it moved, and he thought he could see that it emanated from Sitka's skin, the magic flowing outward.

He lifted his right hand, rubbing his fingers together, and tried to picture his own magic, just under his skin, waiting to

be directed into shape and purpose. His fingers tingled, as if he'd slept on them wrong, blood rushing to his fingertips, and a spark of something leapt from his pointer finger to his thumb, making him grin. He focused, willing the magic to take shape, and he held his breath as a dim glow grew around his fingertips, a soft blue like the gleam of moonlight over the river.

No match for the starry fire that cavorted in Sitka's palm, but a decent showing, a hint of blue flame that licked at the air, heatless but for a mere suggestion of warmth, a flicker of possibilities. He relaxed, and let it go, darkness creeping back in around them except for the blue glow from Sitka's magic.

"You're a quick study," Sitka said with a grin. "Takes most new students weeks to do even that much. You did it just by looking at my hand."

Elia flushed at the praise, unaccustomed to it, glad the shadows hid his blushing. "Thank you."

Sitka said nothing further, sparing him more embarrassment, gesturing with their head back toward the tunnel where Cormand waited, visible in the subtle glow from the torches within the tunnel. "Dinner is ready, if you're hungry. The stones get damp at night, so it's not safe to be down here too late."

Elia could swim but not well enough to save himself if he fell into the river here, and he didn't want to endanger anyone else if they jumped in to save him from drowning. "Of course. Let's go eat. Thank you for fetching me."

They joined Cormand, who eyed Elia with vague concern but kindly said nothing about Elia's retreat back into the tunnel after the confrontation with his siblings earlier that day. Both Sitka and Cormand had followed him, but at a distance, thankfully leaving him be as he dealt with the events of the day.

The walk up the tunnel was blessedly quiet, Sitka shaking their hand free of the light as if it truly were flame and not magic, much to Elia's enjoyment, and a sharp wink from Sitka cheered him further. The tunnel was wide enough that Elia

could walk side by side with Sitka, Cormand leading the way. Elia admired the Hellions and their uniforms in the crisp light shed by the starfire torches lining the smooth stone walls.

“Formal uniforms?” he asked, noticing an improved cut and quality in the clothing they wore, and they wore more metal armor on their shoulders and arms—Cormand wore gauntlets, not as heavy as many mounted cavalry wore, but more than adequate for a royal guard expecting to be at formal functions.

Sitka nodded, and Cormand answered over his shoulder. “In case we get any more visitors today,” he said, a trifle exasperated, and Elia felt the same. He was tired, in more ways than one, of the upheaval and stresses that had plagued him since before he met the Hellions.

The exit to the courtyard of the imperial quarters was full of light and a welcoming smile from the emperor himself, and Sitka and Cormand both peeled away from Elia in time for him to run the few steps between him and Merrick. He was engulfed in a tight embrace, held firmly, strong arms tight around his torso, and Elia buried his face in the firm chest covered in soft silk and cotton, that cedar and stone scent so very soothing to his fraught nerves.

A kiss landed in his hair, and Elia slipped his arms around Merrick’s lean waist, squeezing as tight as he could manage in response. A soft grunt and a chuckle from Merrick made Elia smile, feeling better already, tension falling from him the longer they embraced.

“I missed you,” Merrick said into his hair, not at all chiding, but Elia pulled back enough to see Merrick’s face, wanting to make sure.

“I’m sorry, I needed...” A soft peck of a kiss stopped his worried explanation, and he flushed, ducking his face a bit to look up through his lashes, suddenly shy.

The courtyard was quiet, and from the lack of emotional noise that usually brushed against his shields, they were alone. Or as alone as an emperor could be surrounded by loyal guards.

No one to see the way Elia bit his lip, the way hazel eyes latched onto the motion, or the heat that bloomed slowly between them, inevitable and languid. Elia lifted his chin, summoning courage, and rose on his toes, Merrick's arms lifting him too, as if reading his mind.

Elia pressed his lips to Merrick's and reveled in the gentle prickle of his beard, and in the soft lips that molded to his own. A hint of wine and fruit, and underneath the sweet flavors was the taste of Merrick himself. Elia sighed into the kiss, Merrick taking over, much to Elia's eager delight, and the emperor wasted no time in picking Elia up off his feet until they were of equal height, the kiss deepening.

They broke apart to breathe, and Elia panted for air, flushed from desire. Merrick appeared to be much the same, and a soft kiss landed on Elia's jaw, and he tipped his head back, opening his neck and jawline to more kisses and soft nibbles.

"What do you need, my prince?" Merrick asked between kisses, still holding Elia aloft with impressive ease. "Tell me."

Elia squirmed, hands clutching at broad shoulders, wrinkling silk in his desperation. "I was hoping..." Elia gasped as Merrick sucked gently at the side of his neck.

Merrick stilled for a long second, then pulled back, one brow arched high and a wicked smile on his full mouth. "What is it you have in mind, sweet prince?"

Elia sucked in a deep breath and took control of his fears, finally reaching for something he wanted, for him alone, and no one to punish him for choosing it.

"I want you. Please."

Merrick surprised him and made him feel like he was capable, an adult, when he merely nodded and gently set Elia on his feet, holding out his hand. Elia took it, the clasp firm and solid, and he walked with Merrick into the bedroom.



Merrick caught the sound of doors shutting discreetly as the Hellions left them alone, and he was never more thankful for their attentiveness than at that moment. He shut the doors that led out to the courtyard, finally alone with Elia.

He raised the slim hand he held to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to Elia's knuckles, enjoying the rosy hue on pale cheeks and the heat in those summer-sky eyes. That hand trembled, a fine shiver that told Merrick more than words—nerves, for certain, but he recognized determination in those eyes as well.

“I'm at your mercy, my love,” Merrick said softly, and the heat in Elia's eyes grew brighter, that flush spreading. “Do with me what you will.”

“Truly?” Elia asked, slightly suspicious, and Merrick grinned, stepping back and reaching up for the clasp around his throat that held the front panels of his tunic closed. He slipped it free, and Elia's eyes went right to the open expanse, leaving Merrick weak-kneed as he loosened the ties along the sides.

“Truly.” Merrick repeated, and then tugged the loosened tunic up and over his head, tossing it away, heedless of where it landed. His cotton undershirt was thin and airy, and he untied the collar as Elia watched, utterly fascinated. “Shall I keep going, my sweet prince?”

Elia nodded, eyes wide, his focused gaze following Merrick's fingers as he tugged the shift free and then tossed it aside too, the metal of the imperial sigil necklace cold as it landed on the bare skin of his chest.

Merrick sat on the edge of his bed, the wide expanse at his back, and grinned wide at the expression on Elia's face.

Eyes wide, lips parted, hands pressed to his stomach, Elia covetously eyed every single bit of Merrick's bare chest, as if the sight of skin and muscle was his only source of sustenance and he was starving. Elia was hungry, that was for certain.

Merrick bent down, intending to unlace his boots, but then Elia was there, freed from his frozen fascination at last, and he

knelt at Merrick's feet. Gazing up through thick lashes, Elia shyly met his gaze. "May I?"

"You don't have to," Merrick managed to get out through the arousal that wanted to choke his voice and his good sense. He sternly reminded himself that Elia was a novice and Merrick needed to be patient.

"I want to," Elia said softly, clever hands already working at unlacing his boots. He had one off quickly and then the next before Merrick could voice instructions on how to take them off, and he realized in a tiny corner of his mind that Elia had experience with undressing more formal attire; if he'd lacked caring servants growing up, he'd likely had to tend to himself.

Elia carefully set the boots aside, and Merrick found himself scooting back on the silken sheets as Elia hovered at the edge of the bed, one hand hesitating before coming to rest on the jewel-toned bedding by Merrick's knee. He waited, leaning back on his elbows, wondering what Elia would do next.

Fingers lightly danced over the silk before stopping just shy of his knee, and Merrick waited, hoping, and that hope was rewarded when Elia finally touched him.

The touch was as gentle as the man, and Merrick shivered when fingertips traced over his kneecap. Elia snorted, a short giggle of surprise. "Are you...are you ticklish?"

"I will deny it until the day I die, but...sometimes!" He tried to keep from laughing, but those clever fingers slipped quickly over the inside of his knee and breathless chuckles escaped.

Elia was smiling, freer than Merrick had ever seen, full of joy and silliness, and he would suffer through a lifetime of tickling to see that expression on Elia's face every day.

"Mercy! Mercy, my prince!" Merrick begged breathlessly, rolling on his side to escape those evil fingers, and Elia thankfully stopped, clutching at his belly and laughing, a delightful sound that rang through the room, a sound Merrick would never tire of hearing.

He lay limp on the bed, and when Elia straightened, wiping tears from his face, he held out a hand to Elia, who took it without hesitation. Any tension that had been there before their mutual laughing fit was gone, dissolved, and Elia climbed up onto the bed next to him, pausing only long enough to toe off his own boots.

Merrick opened his arms, and Elia curled into him, fitting perfectly. He nuzzled Elia's soft black hair, shiny as a raven's wing, pressing kisses to the crown of Elia's head, and found he loved the way it felt on his face.

"Your beard tickles, too," Elia murmured, though he sought to get closer, not shying away from the affection Merrick showed him.

"Does it bother you?" Merrick asked, and he sucked in a sharp breath when inquisitive hands touched his sides, dancing over his ribs. He wasn't as ticklish there, and Elia caught on quickly, pressing with more force so the ticklish sensation morphed into a more delicious feeling, a rumble of pleasure escaping Merrick's chest.

Elia tipped his head back even as his hands continued to wander, lifting to glide over Merrick's pecs and then around his neck. Elia nosed along Merrick's jaw, a wide smile on his pretty mouth as he encountered the whiskers of Merrick's beard. He kept it short, mostly for his own comfort, and Elia seemed to enjoy the sensations of the bristles on his fair skin.

"I like it," Elia murmured, eyes drifting shut, content as a cat to rub his face along Merrick's jaw, arms tightening around his neck.

Merrick eased onto his back, pulling Elia half over him, and Elia took the initiative to straddle his hips, gingerly sitting on Merrick's lap, knees on either side of his hips.

Summer-sky eyes flew open as Elia rested his weight on Merrick, lips parted a hair's-breadth, arousal stirring storms in the depths. They were intimately touching despite the clothing they both still wore—Merrick was delighted that Elia was enjoying their explorations, the young man as hard and straining as Merrick, heat rising between them.

“Oh,” Elia gasped, hands lifting from Merrick’s neck to his shoulders, Elia’s back arching as he thrust his hips down, more firmly pressing their cocks together through their trousers, Merrick groaning in delight at the bravery unfurling in Elia. He gently laid his own hands on Elia’s hips, firmly wrapping fingers around the trim form, though careful not to make it seem like he was trapping Elia—he wanted Elia to feel in control, to be in control, for him to feel safe and treasured.

Elia lifted himself enough to put a delicious amount of pressure on Merrick’s cock, hips gyrating the slightest amount in a wicked tease, making Merrick groan again, restraint ready to snap.

“I can feel you,” Elia breathed out, eyes wide in wonder and lust.

“I can feel you, too,” Merrick replied, gritting his jaw, thrusting up an inch or so as Elia continued to roll his hips downward.

“No.” Elia said and Merrick froze, worried he did something wrong. Elia clarified. “I mean, I can feel you. In my head.”

His empathy. Merrick paused, forcing himself to think clearly without lust clouding his thoughts. “Do you want to stop until you can keep me out? Is it too much?”

Elia blinked at him, startled, tilting his head curiously. “I... you’d stop, and not be mad?”

Merrick lifted a hand and ran it through Elia’s hair, enjoying the warmth of the silky strands, then cupping the back of his head and pulling Elia down for a soft, sweet kiss. “I’d never get mad at you for stopping during sex, my love. Never. We can do anything else, and I’ll be fine, I’m simply happy to be with you. I swear.”

Elia stared at him, and Merrick wondered what he was thinking. He tried his best to send Elia a clear and concise emotional message—he meant every word. He wanted Elia, but he wanted Elia to be happy above all things, and if Elia

wanted to wait on sex until he had better mental shields, then Merrick would abide by his wishes, and with enthusiasm.

Elia deserved to have someone care about his needs and wants.

Elia must have sensed something of what Merrick was trying to communicate, as he leaned down and pressed a firm kiss to Merrick's lips, making him chuckle. "I don't want to stop. I like feeling you. Is that...do you mind?"

"Not at all." Merrick said softly, bracing Elia's sweet face between his hands, meeting his gaze head-on. "I want you to know, without a doubt, how I feel about you. Never any doubts. I do love you, my sweet prince."

Elia closed his eyes tightly and threw himself down on Merrick's chest, burrowing his face in his neck and clinging with his arms and legs. Merrick wrapped his arms tightly around Elia's back, hugging him firmly. He rubbed along Elia's slim back, saying nothing when he felt the slightest hint of tears on his skin, Elia sniffing quietly.

He projected affection and love, closing his eyes and thinking about how he wanted to keep Elia safe and happy, regardless of what the world demanded of them. He willed every bit of confidence and support and care he could manage to transmit to the man in his arms, wishing he shared Elia's gift of empathy so he could tell if his efforts were working.

A soft kiss landed amidst the tears, and Merrick relaxed a bit, hopeful, still rubbing soothing circles on Elia's trim back. Another kiss along the side of his neck, and Merrick tilted his head back to allow more access to the inquisitive lips sending shivers down his spine.

Another kiss, right below his ear, and he rested his hands back on Elia's hips, delighting in the curious kisses and the flutter of soft lashes on his skin, Elia's warmth breath and tiny gasps of desire enhancing the experience.

He caught a glimpse of blue eyes through a wing of black hair, lashes wet from tears, and Elia leaned in to whisper shyly in his ear. "I love you, too."



Telling Merrick he loved him was terrifying and liberating, and he worried what the future might hold for them, but the answering joy and deep well of emotion he felt from Merrick was more than enough for him to set aside his fears and enjoy the moment.

Merrick slowly slid to the side and rolled Elia gently to his back, laying him spread out on the bed, hair falling away from his eyes. It was hard for him to meet the intense gaze of the man he loved, but he tried. Merrick kissed him gently, beard prickling a bit, but Elia liked how it felt, and lifted his head into the kiss.

A big hand caressed his chest, and Elia smiled into the kiss. He used one hand to help Merrick undo the laces of his tunic while he wrapped the other hand up and around Merrick's shoulder and neck, holding him closer.

It took a bit of laughter and some yanking, but the tunic was peeled off before he lost his patience or his courage, and then Elia fell back into kissing Merrick, feeling the shape of his smile against his lips.

A firm hand slid over his chest and Elia gasped, squirming in surprised delight when fingers plucked at a nipple, pebbling the delicate nub. Merrick pulled back from their kiss with a wicked smile and slid down enough to suck the other nipple into his mouth, making Elia gasp for air, both hands grabbing Merrick's long hair.

"Oh!" Elia squirmed, overwhelmed and enjoying it, too delighted to worry about whether or not he should be shocked at the brazen touches from his lover.

A gentle nibble to the sensitive nub made Elia arch into Merrick's mouth, gasping, and he tugged on the long hair that fell around Merrick's head, the ends trailing over the bedding creating a dark curtain over Merrick's face, his hazel eyes bright even in shadow.

A hot mouth and agile tongue took him apart, and Elia struggled for air in between gasps of pleasure. He tugged on the hair clutched in his hands, making Merrick look at him. “I want to touch you, too.”

Grinning widely, Merrick crawled back up the bed, one arm holding himself up over Elia, the other tracing soft circles along Elia’s belly and the waist of his trousers.

“Touch as you please, my love. Where do you want me to touch you?” He spoke in a low, raspy rumble, thick with desire, and Elia shivered in response, feeling echoes of Merrick’s arousal and lust every time they touched. The hand on his stomach was arousing both from the contact and the fleeting insight into Merrick’s own feelings, and it amplified Elia’s own arousal. That single touch was leaving behind it a swath of molten desire, stroking fires in his belly.

That fire gave him courage. “Lower?” Elia thrust his hips up a bit, feet digging into the thick blankets.

“Like this?” Merrick shifted his hand to the ties of Elia’s waistband, swiftly undoing the laces and loosening the fabric. Elia moved his free hand down to help, impatiently pushing down his trousers, lifting his rear off the bed, and Merrick chuckled, grin never leaving his face.

Together they got Elia’s remaining clothing off, undergarments as well, and Elia lost most of his shyness when Merrick rolled briefly away to do the same.

Gloriously naked, Merrick was long and lean, not overly muscled but with sleek definition. Not like Everett and his cronies, who were burdened by an overabundance of muscle—Merrick was catlike, masculine, yet beautiful.

“You’re so beautiful,” Elia said in a whisper, awed, needing to tell Merrick how he felt.

“As are you,” Merrick replied readily, making Elia somehow blush even more.

Finally allowed an unimpeded view of Merrick’s body, Elia looked his fill, delighted and thrilled.

Merrick was hard, cock full, thick, and lying along his hip, the head flushed dark, peeking past the hood with a shiny drop of fluid at the tip. Elia stared, eyes wide, breathing fast, utterly focused. Merrick lay back, arms over his head, his whole body on display. Elia had a hand out and sliding along a sharp hipbone before he even formed a thought, focused on the smooth, hot skin beneath his fingertips.

That thick cock jumped as Elia's fingers got closer, and grew even harder, lifting off Merrick's hip, balls tightening beneath. A fine dusting of neatly trimmed dark hair traveled from navel to groin, a trail Elia's eyes followed in fascination, and he leaned over Merrick.

"Go ahead," Merrick whispered huskily. Elia could feel Merrick's enjoyment, and that spurred him on along with his own growing need to touch and explore.

His hand wrapped around the hot length and he loved the way it grew even harder in his grasp, muscles flexing along Merrick's groin and abdomen in response. He stroked, up to the head and back down, the skin moving in a silken glide beneath his fingers, and he slid closer to Merrick, drawing courage to add his other hand, both now stroking in tandem over the thick cock, squeezing and relaxing, learning what made Merrick groan.

Elia was just as hard, but he was enjoying touching Merrick too much to give a thought to his own pleasure until Merrick reached down, resting his hand on Elia's thigh, waiting for permission even as Elia continued to stroke Merrick. He nodded quickly, biting his lower lip, and then Merrick had him in hand, Elia shuddering at the unexpected and long-awaited touch. Merrick's hand was large enough that it neatly engulfed Elia's cock, and he whimpered, stilling as Merrick made his first confident, experienced stroke from root to tip, swamping Elia's entire body in pleasure.

"That's...oh!" Elia gasped, hips jolting on the next stroke.
"I..."

Face red, panting, mouth parted, his back arched as he nearly came, ready to snap too quickly, too fast, he wanted it

to last....

He bit his lower lip, wincing at the pain, not wanting to come too soon, and he gazed helplessly at Merrick, unable to keep up his own ministrations, too overcome.

Merrick's expression was fierce, wicked, and Elia launched himself at Merrick, and was caught fast in his arms, that wonderful hand snaking down between them again.

Elia rutted against Merrick, desperate, and he cried out when that big hand wrapped around both their cocks, sweat and warm pre-cum easing the strokes. A big thumb swiped over the head of Elia's cock, and he clawed at Merrick's shoulders, hips moving, chasing the sensation.

Merrick curled his hand into Elia's hair at the back of his head, kissing him open-mouthed, and Elia moaned as he let that wet tongue inside, both men sharing air in desperate breaths.

"Come, sweet prince," Merrick ordered him in a harsh whisper, jaw tight, words brushing over wet lips parted from frantic, panted breaths. Merrick accompanied that command with a twist of his wrist and a tight grip, and Elia screamed, whole body arching, hands clinging.

He came, harder than he ever had on his own, quick, hard jolts across Merrick's belly and hand and their cocks, and Merrick held him by the hair, taking his mouth in a deep kiss, swallowing the end of his cry.

Merrick came on the heels of Elia's orgasm, and Elia fell limp in his arms, uncaring of the sticky mess between them. He lay sprawled on top of Merrick, the larger man shuddering in small waves as he came down from his own peak, arms coming up slowly to wrap around Elia's back, holding him as they both calmed, breathing slowing, occasional twinges of pleasure singing along heightened nerves. Elia was unable to pick apart which emotions and sensations were uniquely his, and which belonged to Merrick.

With Merrick's heartbeat beneath his ear, and his arms heavy and secure around him, Elia's eyes drifted shut. A kiss

landed on his brow, fingers tracing along his shoulders, the heady scent of sweat and release filing his senses.

Sleep came quickly, and Elia was helpless to resist.

Part Three

THE HELLEBORE EMPIRE

Chapter Twenty-Two

No other messages came from the high king or his children, no unexpected visitors, and the city grew more boisterous as people from both kingdoms continued to pour onto the island. The night passed without further dramatics, and Merrick spent a relaxing evening with Elia asleep in his arms, his young lover deeply asleep, not even rousing for dinner.

Elia slept so deeply that Merrick briefly left his bed and called for Sitka, who took one look at Elia before declaring that Elia was fine, getting much needed rest. The amused Hellion left with a quickness to seek out their own lover.

Merrick canceled their dinner plans, sending apologies to Magi Cora, and spent the night in bed beside a softly snoring Elia, catching up on correspondence from Vastok that had accompanied Sergeant Ulric to the Holy City. His sister had everything back home well in hand, as expected, and Merrick determined there was nothing pressing that couldn't wait until he returned to the palace in Vastok, Elia at his side.

After a peaceful night, morning broke with a sweetly blushing Elia and a growling stomach. There was nothing to do but enjoy their time together, and wonder what High King Hadrix's reaction to Merrick's proposal to wed Elia instead of Aria was going to be.

Merrick stood in the front courtyard, hands on his hips, lips twitching in amusement as Elia played with the cat Lucius, a thin stick with a bit of twine at the end fluttering in the air. The fluffy cat pounced with as much dignity as such a

ponderous fellow could manage, tail whipping back and forth, making Elia laugh.

The cat abandoned his regal attitude, sitting on his hind legs and furiously batting at the twine. His fluffy paws scrambled after the twine, his claws finally catching it, and Lucius rolled to his side, gnawing on his prize, while Elia pretended to try and retrieve it with futile tugs.

“Animals love you,” Merrick observed, pleased. “My sons are the same. Animals delight them, and they spend every moment they can in the imperial menagerie. They’d sleep there if we let them.”

“I love animals,” Elia said, sitting on the ground without a second thought, and Merrick mentally apologized to his valet and did the same, sitting next to Elia on the flagstones.

Rena was in the gatehouse, and she stuck her head out when he sat, obviously bemused by the sight of her emperor sitting on the ground in his fine silks, and he grinned back at her. She gave him a tiny salute and ducked back inside, giving them privacy.

Elia leaned into his side, a delightful, warm presence, and Merrick took Elia’s hand and wound their fingers together, resting their joined hands on Elia’s knee. Elia’s smile was wide and bright, delighted.

“I can hear animals,” Elia shared softly, eyeing Merrick carefully with a sideways glance, as if judging his reaction. Understandable, considering the prejudice he grew up surrounded by—it was dangerous to reveal one’s gift in a kingdom that killed or enslaved their own people for an act of nature. He merely nodded in encouragement, listening, expression open and fond.

Elia relaxed, sitting up a bit straighter, brushing hair back from his eyes. “Animals are easy to read, and they never overwhelm me, not like people can with their emotions. On the road with the convoy, I had to shield myself continuously, but from the people. The animals I can only sense if I’m touching them or I focus on them with intent. People, I have to force out of my head.”

“Training will help you immensely, but you know that,” Merrick said, Elia nodding in agreement. “Do you struggle still? I can ask Magi Cora to come again today. I’m not the best instructor, but I can try to help you if things get desperate.”

Elia shook his head, black hair flashing blue in the sunlight. “Here it’s peaceful. I don’t know why, but here around the Helleborians, it’s quiet.”

Merrick brought their joined hands to his mouth and gently kissed Elia’s knuckles before returning their hands to Elia’s knee. “Most of the people here are magic-born, trained to shield their emotions and thoughts. And those who aren’t magic-born are raised among them, knowing that those with the gifts can suffer from uncontrolled emotions and thoughts, so even the ungifted learn to rein in their wayward inner selves to protect their fellows. Concentration and emotional regulation is sometimes more than enough to keep their emotions to themselves.”

Elia stared at him, blinking as he slowly absorbed what Merrick told him. He sucked in a sharp breath, and then looked down at the cat snoozing in the sun beside them. “Hellebore sounds better and better every single day. It’s like a dream.”

“I hope you’re happy there, Elia. You deserve to be happy and safe, living a full and unfettered life.”

“With you, right?” Summer-sky eyes bright with hope lifted to meet his, and Merrick held Elia’s gaze.

“With me, loved and cherished,” Merrick swore. “I’ll always be with you, until you send me away.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever want you away from me,” Elia vowed adamantly. He fiddled with the stick, biting his lip, obviously struggling with a worrisome thought. Merrick waited patiently, knowing Elia would voice it eventually.

“Your sons?” Elia started, then paused.

“Seth and Sola,” Merrick said, smiling. He missed them with a pang, but by this time next week they would be on the

road to Vastok, heading home.

“Will they like me?” Elia asked, uncertain.

“Without a doubt,” Merrick assured him, meaning it. He sent that certainty to Elia, relaxing his own mental shields enough that Elia should be able to read him with more ease. Not enough to be bombarded by Merrick’s emotions, but enough that he didn’t need to wonder about them.

“Sola is more vocal, boisterous, and loves to laugh. He’s kinda oblivious sometimes, but Seth covers for him and keeps an eye on his brother,” Merrick laughed, thinking of the misadventures his sons got into on the daily, even when under the watchful eyes of his sister and her partners. “Seth is the plotter, quieter and watchful. Constantly informing his brother of details and facts, but Sola doesn’t resent it, he seems to expect it from Seth. He often looks to him first before saying anything. Sola is more excitable, and Seth watches everything like a hawk.”

“I know you miss them,” Elia whispered, leaning into him, his weight a comforting presence. “They sound amazing. Will they let me tag along on some adventures, do you think? This menagerie you’ve mentioned a few times sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll probably need to bar the doors to our bedroom to get any time alone with you once we get to Vastok,” Merrick replied, chuckling. “If the twins don’t want to monopolize your time, Marion will.”

“Your sister?” Elia asked, and Merrick nodded. “What’s she like?”

“A phenomenal empress if she’d been born first,” Merrick declared, proud of his sister. “But alas, I arrived first, and it fell to me. Marion is highly intelligent, a remarkable mother and magic teacher, funny and free-spirited. She loves to be involved in the workings of the court and the city, and she runs the empire whenever I can’t. Like now, for instance. She’s acting as Imperial Regent while I’m here.”

“I...wait. She would have been the empress if born first? Sons aren’t assumed to be the heir over their sisters?” Elia

asked, hoping he got that right. It sounded so much simpler than the confusion in Eistrea. It had been ages since a daughter was born first so the kingdom hadn't had to deal with the issue in generations and now there was too much uncertainty.

"Of course. Unless the eldest is unfit for some reason. The default heir is the eldest born, or who the sovereign chooses if they happen to be unfit, or don't want it. She has mentioned more than once she's glad I was born first."

"She sounds amazing."

"She is, and she'll adore you, I promise," Merrick pressed a kiss to Elia's hair.

"I hope so."

Merrick didn't push it, not wanting to pressure Elia into thinking he had to like Merrick's family, not wanting resentment to fester. Marion was astute and kind, and the twins were tender-hearted and glommed onto new people they found interesting. Elia would be the newest and brightest shiny in their world. He had no doubt his family would come to love Elia just as much as Merrick did, though thankfully not in the same manner.



A loud knock sounded on the gate, and Elia jumped even though he was still seated on the ground. He leaned into Merrick, nervous, heart racing as his mind frantically ran through who could be outside the gate.

He really hoped it wasn't his father, but his luck might've been used up entirely when Merrick fell in love with him.

The guard exited the gatehouse and hurried toward Merrick, who remained seated beside Elia. She stopped a few yards away, and bowed before straightening and speaking. "Your Grace, His Holiness the High Priest of Adracias seeks an audience. Are you available for a visitor?"

Merrick's brows rose in surprise, but he was not alarmed—Elia was still reading Merrick's emotions with ease, his lover

having done something while they spoke earlier to make them clearer to Elia. A vague fondness and curiosity, but no anger or worry. Merrick turned to Elia, one brow quirked. “Are you up for a visit from His Holiness? He’s a kind old fellow, more relaxed and open-minded than his peers in Eistrea, if that’s a worry.”

“Magic doesn’t—he won’t be angry?” Elia asked, being as brave as he could with the guard listening within ear shot.

“The high priest is magic-born, so he won’t mind at all.” Merrick tilted his head to the side a bit, his long braid slipping off his shoulder. Elia remembered Alden complaining about that very fact that first night on the road, and he managed to calm himself. “Shall we see what he wants?”

Elia nodded, a bit nervous but curious. Merrick stood with ease, wiping the dirt from his tunic but not overtly bothered by any potential marks to his clothing left from sitting on the courtyard flagstones for the last hour. He helped Elia to stand, and then nodded to the guard while Elia wiped at the worst of the dirt stains, hoping to make a good impression. “Please let His Holiness in, Rena.”

Rena snapped a smart salute and then jogged back to the gate, another guard coming out from the tiny gatehouse to assist in opening the heavy gate.

The man who entered was nothing like what Elia was expecting of the highest-ranking priest in service to the river god. Tall, though not as tall as Merrick, and slim, a crown of thick white hair fluffed by the breeze coming in from the street, robes a washed-out blue like an old blanket, billowing a bit around his ankles, revealing simple leather sandals and bare skin. He was fit, walking straight and without aid, hands clasped in front of his waist, and a smile on his wrinkled face. Skin a weathered brown, and eyes a bright blue light enough to be nearly white, the high priest had a kind face and a soft smile.

Elia felt nothing from the old man but a serene calm, a soft curiosity that wasn’t intrusive, and a hit of amusement. He came into the courtyard alone, though a pair of guards in deep

blue uniforms awaited him on the street, a large black mule with tans socks saddled, bridle held by one of the guards. They stayed outside, though they watched the high priest with care, hands off their weapons. Elia sensed a bit of fond worry from the pair, and it had nothing to do with who the priest was visiting and everything to do with his age, despite his appearance of good health.

“Your Grace, thank you for seeing me without notice,” the old man said, bowing at the waist, dipping his head low, moving with more ease than Wyle could manage on his best day. Elia was having trouble guessing the priest’s age, but he was probably old enough to be Merrick’s grandfather, if not older. He rose slowly, a smile cracking his wrinkled face, eyes twinkling. He sounded like a courtier from Eistrea, the accent clear as a bell, but Elia did not recognize the old man, and wondered who he’d been before he was a priest.

“Elia, this is His Holiness, Garrand of Marlec Pointe, the High Priest of Adracias. Garrand, may I introduce His Royal Highness, Prince Elia of Eistrea, youngest child of High King Hadrix, and my betrothed.”

Garrand bowed to Elia, though not as deeply as he had for Merrick, his smile unwavering. Elia nodded back, not sure what to say, but he was curious and felt safe beside Merrick. This man was magic-born, according to Merrick, and Elia was feeling something from the old priest, a wave of energy not unlike what he felt from Magi Cora, though not nearly as strong. He was Eistrean, or was at some point, but was trained in magic, and unbound by the crown. He was baffled and entranced by the contradictions presented by the priest’s very existence.

“Your Highness, a pleasure to meet you.” Garrand peered at him, squinting a bit, eyeing how Elia clung to Merrick’s arm, all but plastered to his side, Merrick resting his hand atop Elia’s in the crook of his elbow. His smile widened and a low chuckle shook his shoulders. “I see now why I had a bitter high king knocking on my door before breakfast, with a princess pretending heartbreak trailing in his wake.”

“Oh no,” Elia said, wincing. “I’m so sorry they bothered you.”

Garrand waved a hand, dismissing Elia’s apologies. He walked to the nearby low wall and sat on the edge of bricks, and the orange beast sprang up from his nap and pranced over to the priest, jumping up on the wall and demanding pets. The old man obliged, scratching the fluffy cat as he squinted at Merrick and Elia.

“There’s a story, I’m sure, behind how the youngest prince of Eistrea found himself betrothed to the Emperor of Hellebore in the space of a few days, but I’m too old to pry and not that motivated to soothe spoiled royals,” Garrand declared as he enthusiastically scratched Lucius’ fluffy neck, tufts of hair floating in the air, the cat purring loudly enough for Elia to hear him several feet away.

“I’ll not be swayed by threats or arguments,” Merrick said firmly. “Elia is my choice.”

“Merrick—I mean, Emperor Heremis is mine. Choice I mean,” Elia flushed, but met the priest’s gaze directly. “I won’t go back.”

“I won’t make you,” Garrand declared after a long beat, and turned his attention to the cat, cooing softly to the fat feline who was nearly drooling in delight.

“Then why are you here, Garrand?” Merrick said, a bit on edge, but suspicious more in an amused manner than because of any perceived threat from the odd priest.

Garrand gently set the cat aside when it attempted to climb into his lap, and stood, brushing his robes free of orange and white fur. “I’m here to marry you two, if you’d like. Attend the solstice as a wedded pair, bypass a preventable tragedy, and depart safe and happy as newlyweds the morning after the solstice.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The high priest brushed some more stray cat hairs off his robes, and then clasped his hands in front of him, waiting patiently for them to find their voices.

Elia blinked a few times, trying to understand, and then looked askance at Merrick.

Merrick was thinking, brow furrowed slightly, intent on the high priest, who seemed content to wait them out. Elia opened his mouth, then closed it, not knowing what to say.

“Now?” he squeaked out at last. Heart tripping, he clung to Merrick’s arm.

“If you like,” Garrand nodded once, glancing around the courtyard. “I’m sure we can find a couple of kind souls eager to serve as witnesses to your vows.”

“But I thought...” Elia stopped, trying to recall the order of things in past conversations about the festival and the treaty celebration. “Can we do that?” Elia finally asked Merrick, hope surging. Anything to avoid his family coming close to Merrick—Everett was violent and had little sense, and Hadrix’s temper could be explosive. If they arrived at the solstice celebration already wed, then it might avert the conflicts sure to arise during marriage negotiations.

“We can...” Merrick paused, turning slightly to face Elia directly, shifting to hold both of Elia’s hands in his. “If this is something you want? It means no grand wedding in the temple.” Merrick gestured and Elia looked up and up, realizing Merrick meant the shining temple at the very peak of the

island, several hundred feet above them. He swallowed in sudden nerves, not relishing the hike it would require to reach the top of the island.

“Yes, it’s a bit of a walk,” Garrand said with a rough exhale, a commiserating grin flashing on his wrinkled face before becoming more somber. “Your Grace, if I may be blunt?”

Merrick spared the high priest a sharp glance. “You have never been anything but blunt, Garrand. Go ahead.”

“You aim to end slavery in Eistrea, am I correct?” Hearing Merrick’s goal spoken aloud so plainly by a stranger was a bit jarring.

Merrick’s expression was set in stone, but he sensed no anger from the emperor, merely caution and a faint curiosity.

“You’re a wise man, Garrand.” Merrick finally replied. “That is my goal, yes.”

Garrand grimaced, but as if he expected nothing else. “My priests within Eistrea are slowly becoming corrupted by the greed that accompanies the slave trade. Those who are magic-born rarely return to Eistrea, and the priests who serve there are removed from the plight of the magic-born. They turn a blind eye to the suffering, enabling those in power to continue their evil in return for tithes of gold and coin. Those still loyal to our faith will soon be outnumbered by those who care not for compassion and freedom.”

Elia knew this to be true—he knew many of the priests in Meadowtown who preferred currying favor with Hadrix over caring for the people, and it had been that way for as long as Elia could remember, likely even longer than he’d been alive.

“What has this to do with Elia and I marrying now?” Merrick demanded.

Elia watched the priest avidly, but he merely gave them a faint smile, hands clasped loosely at his waist. He gazed about the courtyard, taking in the manicured trees and hedges, the flowers in their brick-lined beds. Finally, he seemed to be satisfied, and returned his pale gaze to the pair of them, eyes

landing on Elia with a sharpness and weight that hadn't been there on his arrival.

“The future is full of war, no matter the decisions made during the coming solstice. The only things that change are whether or not Prince Elia is alive to see that future unfold. Attend the celebration already wed, standing beside Emperor Heremis as the Imperial Consort, and you both will survive unscathed. If you wait to wed until after the solstice, then I am afraid Prince Elia will face his father's wrath, and the peace will be shattered by grief and retribution.”

“What?” Elia breathed out, scared down to his bones.

Merrick pulled him tightly to his chest, arms rock solid and secure. “Are you sure?” Merrick demanded, voice cutting and hard.

“The waters of Adracias never lie,” the High Priest replied mournfully, and Elia managed to peek past Merrick's arm to see a hint of magic stirring in those pale eyes. “The visions were quite clear, I'm afraid.”

“I don't understand what he means,” Elia said, tugging on Merrick's tunic.

Merrick sent the priest a glare that could have seared flesh off bone. “Explain, Garrand. Quickly.”

“After the high king and his artfully distressed daughter left my home this morning, I went to the river's edge and asked Adracias for wisdom.” Garrand stated plainly, as if describing his breakfast. “He sent me two visions. One of Prince Elia joining the Eistrean delegation for the ceremonial procession into the temple, where the two kingdoms officially come together in peace and exchange greetings—and then his death at the hands of an enraged high king and a prince.” Garrand's expression eased into regret. “In the brief moments you are away from your beloved, a mere room away, you die. Your death results in a war that is unrivaled in our histories. This island is the first to fall. I won't describe how you die, Your Highness. It was too much for me to watch, even after a lifetime of unpleasant visions.”

Merrick spoke quietly in Elia's ear, leaning down enough for Elia to feel engulfed and protected. "I would burn down the world to avenge you, my sweet prince."

Elia shivered at the cold certainty he both heard in Merrick's words and felt with his gift. Merrick was a good man, but grief and rage would push him to a devastating place.

"And the other vision?" Elia asked in a hushed whimper.

Garrand cheered a bit, corners of his eyes crinkling with a faint smile. "Wedded, you of course attend the ceremony at your husband's side, and under the protection of the Hellions, as a member of the Helleborian delegation. No chance for them to reach you, no moment for something horrible to happen. You and your husband attend a stilted and brief greeting, the treaty marriage portion preempted by your vows today, and then we skip ahead to an awkward feast. And Prince Elia lives a long and happy life."

"Adracias told you all this in some visions?" Merrick questioned, suspicious. A deep well of anger stirred in Merrick, and Elia was feeling every emotion swirling in his lover's heart. They echoed what Elia was feeling, and he had no judgment for Merrick at all.

Not surprising, really, that his own father would kill him the second he was in arm's reach. Hadrix never had to face consequences, and killing Elia despite Merrick's intentions to wed him wouldn't hold the High King's impulses in check.

"If my father gets his hands on me, I'm dead," Elia whispered, and Merrick stilled, his anger fading into horror and a fierce determination to keep Elia safe no matter what he had to do. Elia was thankful for that iron determination, and burrowed into Merrick's embrace, hiding his face and trusting Merrick to keep him safe.



Elia was hiding in his arms and Merrick was happy to let him. Garrand waited, having delivered his news, patient even in the face of Merrick's anger and Elia's distress.

“I heard the rumors that you could see the future, but never really believed.” Merrick sighed, rubbing Elia’s back, trying to provide him some comfort.

“Do you believe me now?” Garrand asked curiously, not at all offended by the idea that the emperor might not believe his tales of visions and a warning from a river god.

“It doesn’t matter if I do or not,” Merrick stated with a wry twist to his lips. “I’ll take the warning and do as you suggest.”

Merrick freed a hand and gently lifted Elia’s face from his chest, cupping one pale cheek in his palm. “Marry me, Elia. I love you. Let us confront your family side by side, and begin our lives together.”

Elia was nodding before he even finished speaking, a small smile breaking free despite the fear lurking in his bright blue eyes. “Yes. I love you, too, and I want to be your husband.”

Garrand made them both jump by clapping his hands together once, a resounding smack that grabbed their attention as it echoed in the courtyard. “Summon your witnesses, Your Graces, and let us have a wedding.”



Merrick stood patiently as his valet fussed with the fall of his robes and cape, arranging the material to fall in a dramatic cascade behind him. Merrick let the man do as he pleased as the servants and staff members of the residence all bustled about, preparing for a small, impromptu celebration after the wedding ceremony in the courtyard.

“This is rather ingenious, showing up already married,” Foryne said with a slight shake of his head, also dressed in finery, though without the cloud of servants hovering in his orbit, making sure he was the picture of perfection. “Though I do think you should have married days ago when I suggested it.” He raised his brow at Merrick, a hint of amused exasperation showing through. “But doing it this way with the high priest is a wonderful way to shut them up much faster.”

Talen snorted out a laugh, the captain dressed in his formal uniform, deep blues and greens, with a wine-red cape draped in a dashing style off to one side, the silver emblem of his office sparkling from his left shoulder. He wore his sword on his hip, the blade in a black leather scabbard embroidered with silver thread in a design of twisting thorns around the edges. A swordmaster's blade, the only nod to the honor he held due to his skill.

"It'll certainly cut off any arguments they might raise, especially when it's made known the marriage is pre-consummated," Talen said with a wicked grin, ignoring Merrick's mock glare. "They can choke on their prejudices. Nothing in the treaty says same-sex pairings aren't allowed."

"Been utterly normal in the Empire for centuries," Foryne said, heading for the door of the study, opening it with an impatient flair. "About time the Eistreans catch up. Are we ready?" Foryne asked someone in the hall. He turned back into the room after getting an answer, grinning. "Your Grace, your betrothed is ready and on his way to the courtyard."

"Let's not keep him waiting," Merrick said, striding for the door.

He was more than ready to make Elia his husband.



Elia walked down the hall, with Sitka on his left and Wyle on his right, Oric helping to support the old man on his far side. Elia went at a pace safe for Wyle to maintain, despite the old man's impatience.

"We don't need to stroll! You're marrying an emperor! Let us have some haste!" Wyle chided. "You can take your time in the marriage bed later!" Sitka burst out in a scandalized laugh, a hand over their mouth as they tried not to choke while laughing. Oric remained unflappable, composed, though he looked fondly amused. Elia sighed, but kept the pace sedate.

Sitka and Wyle were his witnesses, and Elia was glad he had people to stand with him as he pledged his life to the man

he loved. Marrying for love was so far beyond his own expectations that it felt like he was living in a dream, and he never wanted to wake up. Yet despite the press of emotions around him, restrained by his newfound training and the upbringing of the Helleborians, he was grounded enough to find his feet mentally and emotionally, so the dream-like quality faded with each step. He was deeply in the present moment when the doors of the residence were opened by Hellions in formal uniforms, and they exited into the courtyard, at the same time as Merrick and his own witnesses.

Ambassador Foryne and Captain Talen escorted Merrick to the far side of the courtyard, and Elia and his witnesses arrived almost simultaneously. High Priest Garrand stood beneath a pear tree heavy with ripening fruit, with Cormand to his side and a step behind holding a silver pitcher and a length of rope. Lucius, the courtyard's feline representative, sat next to the high priest, tail flicking idly as his wide eyes watched curiously.

The servants and staff lined the courtyard walls, imperial guards and Hellions interspersed through the crowd of household staff. Everyone was present, even the gatehouse guards watched through the small building's windows. Everywhere he looked, Elia saw people smiling, happy for their emperor and excited to be involved. In a typical imperial wedding, the crowds would be full of wealthy nobles and merchants, landed gentry and titled courtiers. Here and now, Merrick and Elia were watched over by the people who kept the empire running, the lives that made up the empire in truth.

Merrick held out a hand to Elia, and he took it without hesitation, and together they faced the high priest.

Garrand smiled so wide his eyes disappeared into the wrinkles of his weathered face, teeth as bright as his smile. "Welcome, all, to this joining of kingdom and empire, throne to throne, body to body, heart to heart, soul to soul. His Grace, Emperor Heremis, and His Royal Highness, Prince Elia, stand before a priest of their god, the Mighty Adracias, and seek his blessings on their union. Who stands for these two men?"

“We do,” their witnesses said in response, a blending of Helleborian and Eistrean accents, young and old, rough and cultured.

Garrand held a hand out, and Cormand put the length of rope in his palm. Merrick and Elia held their clasped hands out, and Garrand wove the rope around their hands and wrists, tying it with the knot atop their hands, the ends trailing toward the ground.

“Heremis, son of Valore, speak your intentions,” Garrand said, voice ringing out loudly enough for those gathered to hear.

Merrick turned to Elia, hand squeezing firmly as if they weren’t already tied together. “Elia, I love you with all that I am. I pledge my life, loyalty, and eternal love to you, and I shall strive to keep you safe, happy, and fulfilled each day of our lives.”

Elia’s smile was brighter and wider than he’d smiled in his whole life, face warm from the sun and the heat of his blush, eyes tearing up at Merrick’s heartfelt words. The walls were down between him and Merrick, and he felt the sincere intent and fierce truth behind his vows. Love in Merrick was a deep well, a boundless emotion that Elia let wash over him with joy and relief.

He was loved.

“Elia, son of Hadrix, speak your intentions.”

Elia didn’t even spare Garrand a glance, too absorbed in Merrick, and sighed happily before he spoke. Merrick smiled at him, a slow grin with a hint of devilry in it.

“Merrick,” Elia said, and then corrected himself, hearing a chuckle from their witnesses. “Heremis,” he said a bit louder, feeling odd to call Merrick by his regnal name, but he pushed through. “I love you, with every part of my heart and soul. Loving you is as easy as breathing, and while you saved my life, you did something more vital—your love and care gave me the strength to embrace hope for a better future, and I want that future to be with you. I swear to support you, cherish you,

and devote every day to our union, to a long life of joy, contentment, and happiness. No matter what the future brings, I will always love you.”

Garrand reached out again, and Cormand passed him the silver pitcher. He held it just above their joined hands, and then slowly tipped it, pouring water over the rope that bound them together. “With the waters of the river, the domain of our divine Adracias, I bless this joining of Heremis and Elia, never to be torn asunder. In drought or flood, blessed be this bond.”

The water from the river soaked into the rope, seeping between their hands and falling to soak the stones of the courtyard between them, splashing from the height of the fall. Droplets scattered, wetting garments, the blessings spreading to those lucky enough to be hit by the spilled water. Lucius yowled in complaint, darting off through the crowd to a few sympathetic chuckles.

With the last drop from the pitcher, a wave of energy flowed over their hands. The rope grew warm, almost hot to the touch, steam rising. Startling and unexpected, Elia had no time to be scared before the rope disappeared in a waft of steam and mist, faint red lines on their skin where the rope had been.

Startled whispers rose from the watching crowd, and Merrick appeared just as surprised as Elia felt. Garrand was smug, smiling wide, holding the pitcher to his chest as he declared loudly over the rising exclamations from those gathered— “Our god Adracias has spoken! He has blessed this union, so none may challenge it.”

Garrand handed the pitcher back to a bemused Cormand before gesturing to them. “Your Graces, you may kiss your husband.”

Elia was swept into Merrick’s arms, lifted off his feet, and he wound his arms around Merrick’s neck, kissing him back just as ardently, eyes closing as he enjoyed the first embrace from his husband.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The celebration was small and perfect. Elia spent the rest of that day at Merrick's side, grinning foolishly every time someone greeted him as 'Your Grace.' A title he would need to grow accustomed to, but he was eager to live a life far from the misery of his past life so he embraced the change as graciously as he could manage.

A small feast was held in the courtyard of the residence, and everyone who worked and lived there was invited to partake. Wine flowed, savory bite-sized treats were eaten, and stories were told of previous weddings and parties, making Elia blush at some of the more raunchy tales.

High Priest Garrand left soon after their vows, and slowly climbed atop his tall mule with the help of his patient guards, waving over his shoulder as they left. He'd obviously come for one reason and felt no need to distract the celebrants with his presence once his task was complete.

The only tense moment was when Cormand and Sitka volunteered to take a message to the Eistrean residence to inform them of the marriage.

Elia fretted for their safety, but Captain Talen sent a small handful of Hellebore imperial guards along as well, not Hellions but experienced soldiers and well-armed. Elia knew it was for his sake, as his imagination was running wild with dire scenarios of what could happen once his father read the letter informing him his plans were dashed and Elia forever out of reach.

“We won’t even cross the gates,” Sitka promised him when Merrick handed over the sealed missive bearing the imperial sigil. “I’ll hand it over to the guards on watch at their gate and then turn right back around. We’re not expecting trouble, Your Grace, but we will be careful, I swear it.”

Elia bit his lip and nodded, glancing between Cormand and Sitka, two strangers who somehow had become his dear friends in such a short span; it was almost surreal to realize how much they meant to him. “Come back quickly, then. There might even be some desserts left.”

Cormand shook his head, lips twitching in amusement, and gently patted Elia’s shoulder with one gauntleted hand, then headed for his horse at the gate. Sitka bowed to Elia, then Merrick, and gave Captain Talen a serious nod before backing away with a dashing twirl of their wine-red cape. Both Hellions mounted and then cantered off into the evening, the mounted soldiers following on their heels. The gates to the Hellebore residence closed softly, and Elia leaned into Merrick, trying not to dwell on his worry for the future.

The celebration eventually wound down and Elia followed Merrick back to the imperial suite, hand in hand.

His wedding night.

The door shut behind them, the Hellions guarding the hall at a respectful distance. Elia ignored the grins and winks sent their way, though he did break out in a faint giggle when Merrick picked him up and carried him over the threshold of what was now their rooms. Elia was so grateful he wouldn’t need to sleep in the guest room any longer.

A long, deep kiss followed, and Merrick carried Elia into the bedroom, gently lowering him to the bed.

Elia sat up immediately and tugged off his boots, tossing them out of the way. “Get naked, husband!”

He’d had a few glasses of wine during the feast, but he was clear-headed and knew what he wanted. Merrick laughed and did as ordered, both of them tearing off their clothes and

sparing not a care for the garments, not stopping until they were both naked.

Elia slid back on the bed and held his arms out for Merrick, who came to him immediately, taking his lips in a deep, languid kiss, arms slipping underneath him and holding him close.

Naked skin hot to the touch, Elia arched into Merrick, wanting more. Needing more.

He decided he wasn't going to wait, and put his limited knowledge to use. He spread his legs, thighs around Merrick's waist, and reached down, grabbing Merrick's firm rear with both hands. Two glorious handfuls of muscles and smooth skin, and he realized he should have done that far sooner. Merrick jolted, obviously surprised by how forthright Elia was, and he pulled back from their kisses.

"Yes, my love?" Merrick asked, laughing. Elia grinned up at him.

"I want you in me, please."

Merrick's brows went into his hairline, and his lips twitched, delighted. Elia felt everything from Merrick, and the heat that rushed through him at Elia's words told him how much Merrick wanted it too.

"You sure?" Merrick asked.

"Yes. I haven't much of an idea what to do, so if you would, husband..."

"Yes, husband. As you wish." Merrick leaned down and kissed him, wet and deep, and Elia went lax, running his hands over the muscles of Merrick's back and shoulders. Merrick shifted a bit to the side—from the sound of it rummaging in the nightstand next to the bed. He came back after a moment, and held aloft a small stoppered glass vial. It held an oil of some kind, which released a sharp, sweet scent when he opened it.

"To ease the way," Merrick told him, pressing a quick kiss to his lips before inching back and sitting up on his heels, kneeling between Elia's spread legs.

Elia was hard, and when Merrick wrapped a oil-slicked hand around his cock, he hissed out in surprised pleasure, lifting his hips into the strokes. The wet, hot glide made him impossibly harder, and he clutched at the bedding, crying out in bliss when Merrick added his other hand, tugging on his balls and rolling them gently in his clever fingers, hazel eyes locked onto Elia's every reaction. Merrick chased his gasps and moans, learning what he liked, and Elia loved it all, especially the deep, primal satisfaction he got from Merrick with every touch, every cry he pulled from Elia.

Merrick wanted him, but he wanted Elia to enjoy himself more. To feel the diabolical patience Merrick employed to take him apart was almost overwhelming, nearly too much.

He jumped, almost coming off the bed when two slick fingers found his hole, rubbing with insistent and yet careful pressure. Merrick watched his face, not once taking his eyes away, confident in his actions and what he was doing, and Merrick slid one of Elia's legs over his shoulder, opening Elia further to his touches.

Merrick released his cock, despite Elia's whine, and used that hand to hold Elia's leg, all the while continuing to apply steady pressure to his entrance.

"Too much?" Merrick asked, pausing only long enough to reach for the small vial and pour more oil on his fingers before returning to his task.

Elai shook his head, hair flying around his face and getting in his eyes thanks to the sheen of sweat on his skin. He blew the strands out of his eyes and squinted at Merrick. "Not enough, husband."

Merrick chuckled and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the inside of Elia's knee that was propped on his shoulder, and then Elia lost all thought when one of those long fingers breached the tight muscle and slid inside.

Mouth falling open on a soundless cry, Elia watched the way Merrick's hand moved, the smooth twist of his wrist as he pumped that finger in and out of Elia's ass, the oil making the

glide smooth and impossible to resist. It didn't hurt, and Elia squirmed, wanting more.

He was about to ask for more when Merrick paused a beat and then pressed in another digit, and then carefully sank both fingers as deep as he could before curling them inward. Merrick hit a sensitive spot inside and Elia shouted, legs flying around Merrick's shoulders and squeezing. Elia went wide-eyed and panted for air, utterly flummoxed, and Merrick's grin was smug. He kept on with that devious curl of his fingers, rubbing over that spot deep inside.

Elia's cock was so hard it hurt, balls pulled up tightly, and he felt an orgasm approaching. "Merrick, please!"

Merrick blessedly stopped and gently pulled his fingers away, only to pour what was left of the tiny vial onto his palm, spreading it over his thick cock, then Elia's loosened hole.

One big hand guided that fat cock to where Elia needed it to be, and Merrick slid the other hand under Elia's back and to his shoulder, holding him securely in place, the bigger man all but leaving him in shadows, Elia's entire vision taken up by hazel eyes and a curtain of silky brown hair.

Merrick held his gaze, an intimacy he almost could not handle, when the head breached his hole and slipped inside. It stung for a second, and then the feel of Merrick's hot skin and hard length easing into his body overcame any discomfort and he breathed through it, wrapping his arms around Merrick's neck and holding on for dear life.

"You feel amazing, my sweet prince," Merrick murmured, sinking in until he couldn't go any deeper, and Elia squirmed on his cock a bit, so full and needing more. He felt Merrick's urgency to thrust, to move inside of him, and he sank into that feeling, pulling Merrick's enjoyment and desire into his body like he took his cock.

Merrick was his, and he wanted all of him.

"Please, move. I know you want to," Elia whispered back, and Merrick growled low in his chest. Instead of answering, he

took Elia's mouth in a wild kiss as his hips pulled back and then snapped forward.

Merrick stole his breath, and Elia lost any ability to think when the angle changed and Merrick hit that special spot inside, each thrust making him sob into Merrick's kiss, fingers clawing at tense shoulders, silently begging for more.

His husband thrust in a punishing rhythm until Elia was wrung-out with pleasure, body hurtling toward a powerful climax echoed in Merrick. Lost to the passage of time, he arched his back and came hard, muscles clamping tightly on that thick cock taking up so much space inside of him, stilling Merrick's thrusts as his husband came with him. Wet heat deep inside matched the wet spurts he sprayed between them, and he reveled in the satisfaction of marking his husband, matched by Merrick's own pleasure at releasing deep inside his body.

Both breathing hard, damp with sweat and cum, Elia was happy to stay plastered to Merrick, and his new husband felt the same, content to remain locked together with Elia as their hearts calmed and their bodies cooled, exchanging slow, gentle kisses.

"I love you, Elia," Merrick told him between kisses.

"I love you, too." And he did, more than anything or anyone. He felt Merrick's love for him as clearly as he felt his own, and he promised himself to never take that gift for granted.



Morning came far too soon, at least for Merrick. Elia slept deeply in his arms, clinging even in slumber, as if afraid Merrick would disappear in the night. He made sure to hold Elia as tightly as his new husband could stand, and it seemed Elia liked a firm hold and preferred his nose buried in Merrick's sternum, hands curled under his chin and cuddled as close to Merrick as he physically could get. Any discomfort it brought Merrick was minimal and easily ignored, since he

enjoyed the fierce snuggling far more than he ever expected he might.

The morning light was intense, and Merrick tucked the blanket a bit higher to shade Elia's eyes so he could sleep longer. Merrick dozed, happy to sleep in and do nothing, holding Elia and loving every moment of it.

He must have fallen asleep again, as he woke to a polite knock on the door. He squinted and saw the privacy spell was lowered, meaning it was either Cormand or Sitka at the door. The angle of the sun had changed, and it must have been closer to midday than dawn.

Merrick carefully eased out from under Elia, and sent a flicker of energy across the room to the door, a signal he'd worked out ages ago with his guards to let them know he was awake and would answer the door momentarily.

He took care of immediate bodily needs, pulled on a robe, and then went to the door, pulling his unruly hair out of the way with one hand while he silently opened the door with the other.

Cormand waited patiently in the sitting room of the imperial suite, hands behind his back, dressed in the everyday uniform of the Hellions instead of the formal attire from the day before. He stood straighter when he saw Merrick in the crack of the partially opened door, and bowed briefly.

"Your Grace, my apologies for disturbing you. There's a... minor situation."

"Anyone dead?" Merrick grumbled, thinking unless war had broken out on his doorstep he was going back to bed.

"Ah, no. We have some guests."

"Royals?" If Everett was stupid enough to darken his door again Merrick was going to deal with him however he saw fit, formal challenge or not.

"No, thankfully. Captain Talen is willing to handle the situation, with your blessing. We've had some defectors."

Merrick opened the door enough so he could slip out of the bedroom, and he pulled it closed behind him, hand on the knob to keep it from thudding and waking Elia.

“Explain, please.”

Cormand took a deep breath and then launched into a tale Merrick found to be far too unlikely if he didn’t know the man to be appallingly honest.



The door shutting woke Elia, and he groaned as newly worked muscles complained. He sat up and brushed his hair back from his eyes, confused by his surroundings until his mind woke further and he remembered he was married and in Merrick’s quarters.

A full-body flush swept over him, and Elia recalled in exquisite detail his wanton demands the night before, and Merrick’s enthusiasm in fulfilling them all.

Merrick wasn’t in the bedroom, but he heard people speaking right outside the door and figured that’s where he was—Elia took the momentary privacy and scurried out of bed, heading for the washroom. Refreshed, he went searching for clothing.

He had nothing of his own from the Eistrean convoy, his belongings, including his beloved horse Rose, were still with his family and out of reach. There wasn’t much he missed, he had no particular affection for any of his personal belongings. Any clothing from Eistrea was uncomfortable, badly tailored, and he suspected had been purposefully crafted to make him look as sickly as possible. But he would miss his horse.

He felt bad about using Oric’s clothing, and he mentally promised to speak to Merrick about repaying the young man in some additional way for the clothing. Oric said Merrick paid him, but surely Oric was going above and beyond simple kindness at this point. Elia had never had his own money, and that was a momentary frustration he swept aside, refusing to

dwell on how badly he had been treated in his childhood by the people who should have loved him most.

Elia was touched to find more clothing obviously made by Oric, in a large wardrobe along the opposite wall from the massive bed. Long used to getting dressed on his own, he managed to tug on a bright blue tunic and light gray trousers without help, quietly pleased by the cut and color of the comfortable fabrics, a faint hum of magic along the hems and stitches. He wondered what these specific spells did, and looked forward to asking Oric about them.

Elia paused for a second, struck by the realization that he was looking forward to something, anything, in his day.

He was searching for a hairbrush when the door opened and Merrick slipped inside, dressed only in a floor-length midnight-blue silk robe, his long hair flowing loose down his back, wavy and untamed.

Elia froze, enraptured by how lovely Merrick was, even mussed from bed and wearing the simplest of garments. “Oh.”

Merrick quirked a brow, curious, though his hazel eyes were heated. “Like what you see, husband?”

Husband. Elia blushed hot and gave up caring when Merrick walked across the room and swept him up in a hug, kissing him as if they’d spent years apart instead of minutes.

“Good morning, my love,” Merrick murmured in between kisses, holding him off the ground with ease. Elia ran his fingers through Merrick’s long, dark hair, enjoying the privilege of being able to touch that gorgeous hair at long last.

Merrick set him down, though he still held him in his arms, and Elia was thrilled to discover Merrick was delightfully naked under the thin silk of the robe. He ran his fingers over the silk, feeling hard muscles underneath, and he was viscerally reminded of the night before.

“I want nothing more than to know what you’re thinking, beloved, but there’s a surprise waiting for you outside.” Merrick kissed his brow and then slowly let him go, sighing

dramatically at Elia's pout. "A quick diversion, then we can retreat back to our bed. Let me get dressed."

"What kind of surprise?" Elia asked, hoping it wasn't a visit from a sibling or his irate father.

"One I hope you enjoy," Merrick said, letting the robe pool at his feet as he went rifling through the wardrobe for something to wear.

Elia had no room in his mind for further worry, distracted by the sight of his new husband getting dressed.



They walked hand in hand toward the receiving room of the residence, and Elia heard some soft conversation and smelled more of that delicious Hellebore breakfast dish he'd come to love so much.

A pair of guards stood outside the open doors, and they bowed respectfully as Merrick and Elia passed them to stand in the threshold of the receiving room.

Elia had trouble understanding what he was seeing at first, jarred by the dichotomy of Eistrean uniforms and colors of white, tan, beige, and brown sitting among the darker jewel tones that filled the Hellebore residence.

Lord Calla, Horsemaster of High King Hadrix's court, saw Elia and Merrick first and stood from the chair in which he'd been seated, surrounded by a handful of men and women Elia recognized as his underlings. They stood, too, a bit less smoothly than their master, setting aside bowls and plates and partially eaten meals.

"Lord Calla?" Elia said, confused, taking a second to really look at the people in the room.

Dressed in unmistakable Eistrean colors, it took his mind a moment to parse that the uniforms were not as pristine as he was used to seeing them—the patches on the shoulders denoting their positions and ranks were missing. On some, their uniform shirts were missing, substituted by plain

undershirts or personal clothing. Their expressions were just as haphazard—some peered at him with unease, worry etched in lines around their eyes and mouths, others were smiling, though clearly stressed and tired.

Lord Calla strode through those gathered, and came to a stop immediately in front of Elia, where he bowed, not in the Eistrean manner but that of Hellebore, though he hesitated a moment as if to remind himself of his actions.

“Your Grace, I wish you congratulations on your wedding, and I wish you many happy years with Emperor Heremis. I have brought you a wedding gift, if it would please you to have us.” Lord Calla stood tall, shoulders back, expression guarded, though he was far more emotional than Elia had ever seen the typically stoic man. Elia felt concern, worry, and a deep tension emanating from the horsemaster, but hovering underneath, he sensed a burgeoning hope that ran through the man in front of him, and the others in the room with them. Many of them were guarded, both mentally and physically, taut with frayed nerves edged with excitement.

“Thank you, Lord Calla. What do you mean, pleased to have ‘us’?” Elia managed to get out after a long pause, confused.

His question sparked nervous shuffling from the people in the room, and Elia was not prepared for what Lord Calla said next.

“Your Grace, with your permission, I, my people, and our charges would like to ask for refuge within Hellebore. To serve you and your new husband, as you see fit, if you’ll have us.” Lord Calla tipped his head to those standing behind him, and he took a deep breath and then continued. “Your treatment at your father’s hands has been abominable and dishonorable, and I am sorry for all those years I stood by and did nothing. With your leave, I would like to make it up to you by serving you and yours faithfully for the rest of my life.”

“You couldn’t have stopped him, Lord Calla,” Elia murmured, surprised at the level of remorse he sensed in the man.. He had known the staff and those who served his

father's court knew about his treatment at the hands of his family, but he never thought they wanted to help, or felt bad for him. Anyone who tried would have been released from their positions, or worse—and that wasn't a fate Elia wished on anyone. "And your charges?"

Lord Calla actually cracked a smile. A tiny one, but enough to make Elia smile in return. "I have brought with me ten experienced grooms, trainers, and apprentices, along with twenty horses I trained myself from the Eistrean stables, all of the high king's mounts including Farra, and a capricious chestnut mare named Rose who misses her human quite a bit. She's bitten two of the grooms since you disappeared from the convoy, so if you would please reassure her that you're still alive, it would be a great help to my people."

"My father is going to kill you," Elia said without exaggeration. "He prizes his horses!" More than he ever did his children, that was for certain.

"The horses are mine, in fact," Lord Calla disagreed gently, surprising Elia. "They all hate your father and want a kinder hand to tend them. They've said so, and I made sure to take the ones that suffered through his rough handling. Farra in particular was adamant about joining the gentle prince who treated him kindly. The high king will find the ride back to Meadowtown rather uncomfortable in the carriage, as I doubt any nobles will want his heavy seat on their prized mounts."

Both delighted and scandalized by the outrageous statement from the usually proper horsemaster, Elia snorted out a laugh, slapping a hand over his mouth to stifle his giggles. A twinkle in those usually hard eyes made Elia suspicious, and it took him a moment. "You're magic-born, like me. You actually asked the horses."

Lord Calla surprised him by nodding. "Yes, Your Grace. I and most of my people have the ability to speak to animals, or have healing. We've managed to remain hidden, as a skilled touch and experienced husbandry are both desired and sought after in our profession. Our gifts aren't useful in combat or weather-working, and no butcher needs to know the feelings of the cow being led to slaughter." Lord Calla gestured to the

people behind him, including them in his words. “I was in the Eistrean mews when the Hellions came last night to deliver news of your vows, and I took the chance to ask questions about how you were faring. I asked their horses, too, and learned about a blessing from the river god, and how the young prince glowed with magic.”

“Hellebore is safe for all magic-born,” Merrick finally spoke, having let Elia take the lead, and he squeezed his husband’s hand in thanks, leaning into Merrick’s shoulder. “I offer refuge to you all, magic-born or not, free of debt or obligation. You’re welcome, and need not serve the imperial house if you wish for a different life.”

“Your Grace,” Lord Calla nodded politely to Merrick in acknowledgment. “We’ve discussed it, and would like the chance to continue in our chosen duties. I don’t seek to replace your current horsemaster, but merely hope for a place to tend to those in my care in comfort and safety.”

The imperial family likely had their own horsemaster at court in Vastok, and Elia looked to Merrick, wondering what to do, having no experience with how such things worked. And a city built on a waterfall in the mountains—what space had they for more horses and their caretakers?

Merrick must have read his mind, as he answered easily enough, putting Elia’s worries to rest. “There is more than enough room for you and your people plus the animals, Lord Calla, in court and in Vastok. If it pleases you, the position of Horsemaster to the Imperial Consort is yours until such time as Elia deems otherwise, or my own horsemaster decides she’s ready to retire. She has been reluctant to leave the post, despairing of a suitable successor. I think she will be relieved to speak with you about the position once we all get home.”

“I accept with gratitude, Your Graces. Thank you.” Lord Calla bowed again, and those behind him awaiting the decision bowed a second after, Elia able to sense their relief and excitement.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Elia gave Rose another slice of pear, laughing as her nose tickled his palm, the soft velvet touch and the warmth shed from her familiar, sun-warmed coat made him feel grounded and safe. The sun was hot on his back and neck, even with the wind cooling the courtyard, causing flags and banners to snap overhead. The air was full of scents of hay, horses, and sun-heated stone, the cloudless sky above letting the sun bake everything in the city below.

His little chestnut mare was dwarfed by the heavy-boned steeds of the Hellebore, built to carry armored warriors and travel long distances, and right now the courtyard was full of the members of the Hellebore delegation and their mounts. Elia saw Lord Calla in the crowd, speaking to Captain Talen and Sitka, the horsemaster now dressed in a Hellebore uniform, dark blue and green, a silver medallion pinned to his left shoulder, denoting his new position as Horsemaster to the Imperial Consort, a title Elia was still finding surreal.

He was now Imperial Consort Elia, Prince of Hellebore and Eistrea. He was torn about whether or not to drop the Eistrea title, but according to Housekeeper Renly, it was accurate, but he could change his official address all he wanted once he got more settled in at court at Vastok and he was assigned his own staff. Though the thought of having staff of his own was daunting. He wasn't sure how he felt about it, but Merrick was willing and eager to let him decide such things, and to talk them out with him.

The remainder of the Hellebore delegation had arrived the evening before, the residence now teeming full of officials, nobles, and their people and staff. Elia spent the evening being introduced to more people than he could recall, names and titles slipping away in the rush and excitement, many of the courtiers from Vastok reacting in surprised disbelief that their emperor was already wedded upon their arrival, and to who—though Elia didn't sense much in the way of dismay at Merrick's choice, merely disappointment that they missed the event itself. Some people were surprised by Elia personally, not realizing he existed, or if they knew of him, they were that he was even in consideration for a treaty marriage, when he had three older marriageable siblings.

Elia was used to being overlooked, though the relief at not being bombarded by the emotions of the Helleborian courtiers was immense, and helped him deal with the varying receptions he received from them. Merrick had been telling the truth—a great many of the people of Hellebore were either magic-born and trained, or had rudimentary training in how to keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves and not inflict them on others who might be able to sense them unwillingly.

For the very first time in his life, Elia was in the middle of a crowd, and he wasn't exhausting himself with inefficient shielding, or being tortured by a storm of foreign emotions. He could breathe, and simply be, though he did have to maintain his shields. It was easier, so much easier, and was something he could do for hours if need be, thanks to proper, albeit abbreviated, training from Magi Cora and the right technique.

As if his thoughts conjured her, Magi Cora appeared, weaving through the crowd of horses and people, dressed in her gray robes, her silver hair piled high on her head in a complicated and impressive style, her smile wide and bright.

“Your Grace, marriage suits you,” she greeted him, gently teasing, and she cackled a bit at his blush.

“Thank you, Magi Cora,” Elia said primly, chin up, but he grinned, finding it impossible not to in response to her laughter.

“How are you faring in this crush?” she asked, gesturing with a twirl of her hand.

“My shields are working, and I’m confident I’ll be fine all day. Thank you for your help.”

“You are most welcome, Your Grace,” she said quietly, patting his shoulder. “We’ll do some more training on the road home, so that Vastok doesn’t overwhelm you. We leave tomorrow, I hear?”

Elia nodded. He was nervous about what the day would bring, but tomorrow was the start of his new life and an adventure he once barely dared wish for. All they had to do was survive the solstice. “We attend the solstice ceremony, the feast, and…”

Magi Cora’s lips thinned, aware of the issue it seemed. “Your darling husband has a duel scheduled right before dinner, I believe.”

Elia stepped closer to her and leaned in, whispering. “Is there any way to stop the duel? I don’t want Merrick to get hurt, and while I don’t care about Everett, I don’t want violence to erupt if my father reacts badly to Everett losing.”

She put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close. “I’m pleased to see that you have confidence in your husband winning, Your Grace.” She bent her head, silver braids catching the sun in a shimmer of light. “The High King is an arrogant man, and he might complain of a loss in private. But if he does cause a scene in public, the high king and the other Eistreans are no match for a Guild mage,” she put a hand to her chest, and then gestured outward to the people surrounding them in the courtyard. “The duel will be witnessed by a score of Hellions, and an entire retinue of bored, magic-born nobles looking to curry favor by protecting the emperor and the imperial consort. Don’t fear for your husband. He might not be a Hellion in truth, but he’s more than a match for a mundane, spoiled prince who’s never faced a magic-born fighter in a dueling circle.”

He wasn’t sure of her meaning, but his mood lifted a bit with her confidence in Merrick. He sighed but nodded, and she

hugged him with the arm around his shoulders before letting him go. “Time to mount up. I’ll see you at the temple.” Magi Cora pointed upward at the towering peak above them, caught in the light like a small sun, golden and bright.

“See you at the top,” Elia replied, and she waved goodbye before heading off for her own mount, held by one of the former Eistrean grooms.

Merrick came striding out the front of the residence, and Elia marveled again that he was lucky enough to be married to a handsome and *kind* man like Merrick. Resplendent in a dark, forest-green outer robe lined in silver that fell past his knees, and a shiny midnight-blue undertunic, with black trousers and black boots, Merrick was breathtaking. Shadow lined his eyes, shiny greens and blues, and the imperial sigil glittered where it swayed over his chest on the long chain.

The crown on his brow was almost an afterthought, a twisting, carved metal work of art, made from darkened metals and polished in thin stretches along the edges, like sunlight cracking through stone in an old castle wall. Dark blue gems sat in the metal, large as hen’s eggs, four of them set in equal intervals. The imperial crown gave the impression of gems glittering in a stony hillside, hidden behind twisty pines bent by the elevation and cold mountain winds.

Merrick stopped once he reached Elia, and he bent enough to reach Elia’s lips for a soft kiss. His long hair was braided back away from his face, the crown woven into the silky mass in some magical way that kept it secure on his head.

“Are you certain you don’t want to wear the consort’s crown?” Merrick murmured as Elia settled against his side under his arm. Elia was shaking his head before he even finished the sentence.

“It’s lovely, but I’ve never worn a diadem, much less a crown,” Elia said quietly, thinking of the intimidating crown he’d seen in the trunks unloaded by the Hellebore convoy. Merrick had come with reasonable expectation of choosing a spouse from one of the Eistrean royals, so he’d had it sent along with the rest of the emperor’s belongings. It was a

brilliant gold set with emeralds, but too large for Elia, and he was thankful that Merrick told him it could be resized and reset to fit Elia and his preferences. “It won’t even fit me.”

Merrick hummed under his breath, and then with his free hand, grabbed the imperial sigil and lifted the chain over his head, careful not to snag the crown’s peaks. Before Elia could question what he was doing, Merrick set the heavy chain over his head, the sigil resting with a certain weight on his chest, much lower than it rested on Merrick, but not to a ridiculous degree.

“What?” he squeaked out, startled.

“If not a crown, then the Imperial sigil of Hellebore around your neck, to make sure there is no mistaking who you are, and who you are to me,” Merrick said decisively, resting his hand over the sigil, gently pressing it to Elia’s chest.

“What if I lose it?” Elia worried.

“It’s a fancy bit of metal, and its loss would be nothing compared to losing you.”

Captivated by intense hazel eyes, Elia put his hand over the one holding the sigil to his chest, twining his fingers with Merrick’s. “I love you.”

Their moment was ruined by a spoiled mare who turned and bumped Elia’s shoulder, demanding more treats. He laughed and rubbed her nose. “I’m sorry Rose, no more fruit. When we get back later, I’ll give you more.”

Her thoughts were suspicious, but she recognized the tone he took when bribery was involved, so she settled, impatient, flicking her tail and pointing an ear at him, but willing to behave for more treats.

Merrick shook his head in disbelief. “Watching someone able to speak to animals never loses its wonder.”

“It’s lovely to do so and not fear the repercussions,” Elia shared. “The horses are ready. Time to leave?”

Merrick glanced around the courtyard and nodded to Captain Talen in the crowd, who made his way over to them,

Sergeant Ulric on his heels along with Cormand and Sitka.

“Your Graces, we’re ready.” the captain said when he reached them.

“Time to depart then,” Merrick announced. “Many blessings on this solstice day.”

“Mount up!” Captain Talen said, loudly enough to be heard over the combined noise of so many people and horses in the courtyard.

Merrick had him blushing again when he helped Elia mount, giving him a leg up into the saddle. Merrick mounted his gray mare, Glaciere, and Elia felt a moment of deep familiarity, reining his horse in to stand beside Merrick’s mount. For a moment they were on the road again, traveling in the Eistrean convoy, a forgotten young prince and simple royal guard, talking about anything and everything under the hot summer sun.

Captain Talen ordered the gates opened, and the street was visible past pricked ears of their mounts as both gates opened with a groan of metal, the clamoring of the packed city streets rising to a roar.



The ride to the top of the terraces that wound around the island’s central spire took most of the morning, the streets packed with people celebrating the solstice. Vendors hawked their wares, inns and taverns doing a brisk business. Wine and beer were consumed in copious amounts in the crowds, and more than once a reveler would approach the retinue, holding up goblets and mugs to the mounted riders. A tingle of magic washed over them each time a Hellion riding on the outer edge of their group let someone pass, and Merrick took a mug without hesitation from an ecstatic reveler, draining the mug before tossing it back, to the delight of the crowd.

Sitka urged their mount up closer to Elia’s, and they leaned in enough for Elia to hear them over the noise. “We’re making sure the wine is safe before he drinks it. Don’t worry!”

Elia nodded quickly, realizing that the magic he felt was the Hellions protecting their emperor from possible poisoning, maybe even from getting drunk as people continued to try and get Merrick to drink from their offerings. It became a bit of a game, to see who the Hellions let through, keeping people out by invisible spells and even their mounts, the huge horses more than enough of a deterrent to the overzealous.

His own reception from the crowd was...unexpected. No one tried to get him drunk, but the heartfelt cheers he received as they traveled the road to the temple left him moved and overwhelmed. Instead of being plied with wine by the teeming crowds, he was given flowers.

Rose, named not for her gentle disposition but in memory of Elia's childish fancy, was decked out, her mane covered in a kaleidoscope of flowers of an indeterminable variety, matching the petals lining the cobblestones as they passed. The moment he came into view as they took a turn on the road weaving up through the terraces, the shower of flowers would begin, falling from rooftops and upper levels of buildings and homes, from open windows or from balconies.

He was positively dripping in flower petals, and he gave up trying to keep himself from getting covered, the most he could do was brush petals and short-stemmed flowers from his hair and out of his eyes when the accumulation grew too much.

Hellions gave him amused glances and some laughed, delighted by the rain of petals, though many of them were just as covered as Elia, especially those riding by his side in the retinue.

Sitka caught Elia as he dismounted, keeping him from stumbling as his legs and back complained about the ride.

"How long did that take?" Elia asked, a bit in shock, the roar of the crowd somewhat muted now that they were in front of the temple, a ring of temple guards holding back the crowd as the rest of the retinue entered the temple courtyard.

"Took us about three hours, all told," Sitka said as they brushed a startling abundance of petals from Elia's hair and

shoulders. He stood there and let them, too bemused by the experience to complain.

“Is Merrick drunk?” Elia asked as Magi Cora appeared next to him, eyeing him with an appraising eye before she nodded as if satisfied.

“His Grace is sober, thanks to the Hellions and my judicious application of hangover remedies.” She winked at him, and Elia grinned, delighted. One less worry.

Merrick came to his side and held out his arm, and Elia accepted it with a smile. Merrick brushed yet another petal from Elia’s hair with a smile of his own. “Ready, my love?”

“Ready.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The interior of the temple was a welcome respite from the heat of the sun. Elia was thankful for Merrick's arm guiding him inside, his eyes needing to adjust.

The temple was large, and Elia was startled to see that what he assumed to be a huge building full of dozens of rooms was really just a vast, almost empty space with towering walls of white marble, and a pitched roof of giant timbers holding up the ceiling, from which hung hundreds of torches on long chains of varying lengths, though only a few of them were lit. He felt the hum of magic above them, the starfire lights now easy for him to distinguish from the regular torches and lamps.

In the center of the roof, there was a huge circular skylight, and with the sun directly overhead, the sunlight came down in a near perfect vertical beam of gold to illuminate a matched pool of water, the same size and shape as the skylight above.

On either side of the pool flew standards of the Hellebore Empire and the Kingdom of Eistrea, and Elia was quite happy to walk on Merrick's arm to the Hellebore side of the temple. The standards hung from the ceiling on huge chains, and a gentle breeze made the huge woven symbols of each country's sigil sway slightly.

They walked around the nearest side of the pool, and reached their place in the temple just as sound erupted from the entrance as more people arrived.

Elia turned and was greeted by the sight of his father storming into the temple, his two oldest siblings following

their father like disordered ducklings.

Aria was nearly drenched in flowers, but she was anything but sanguine about them, more unraveled than Elia had ever seen her—she was hissing furiously to the maids fluttering around her, and he didn't need to hear the words to know she was taking her displeasure over the ruin of her perfect image on her servants.

Elia's brows rose and he could not suppress a gasp of astonishment when he saw Everett stagger, holding a mug much like Merrick was passed on the road up—and Elia snorted behind his free hand, realizing Everett was drunk.

Roaring drunk. Sweating profusely, overheated and red from the sun, hair full of flowers, and his white and gold outfit was ruined by some dirt smears and stains on his forearms and knees from what likely had been a tumble once he dismounted. His cape was hanging off one shoulder, and he was glaring at the servants who kept trying to sort him out.

Elia's delight went cold when he finally saw his father for the first time since the night Everett almost killed him.

High King Hadrix was covered in flowers too, though not nearly as discomposed as Aria or Everett, and while he wasn't sporting a mug of ale, he had imbibed, though Elia wasn't sure if his father was drunk. There was a long streak from spilled wine down his left thigh to his knee, remarkably noticeable in his blaring white silk outfit trimmed in gold. Red and flushed as well from the ride to the temple, Hadrix let the servants fuss around him, brushing off petals and helping smooth out his tunic and cape.

Hadrix paid them no mind, as if they weren't people to notice. No, his gaze was locked on Merrick...and Elia. Face impassive, his eyes were burning with rage, jaw tight, lips thin. He'd seen that expression on his father more than once, usually right before he got hurt, and he was thankful he was standing arm in arm with Merrick, beneath the mountain and waterfall emblem of the Hellebore Empire.

"He is displeased, isn't he?" Merrick murmured, tugging Elia a bit closer to his side.

“Don’t joke, not now.” Elia whispered back, looking away from his father and up at his husband. Kind and patient hazel eyes held his for a long moment. “He wants to kill me.”

Merrick sent Hadrix a sharp glance, then looked back to Elia. “Can you sense that?”

Elia sighed, tired and wanting this farce to be over. “I can.”

It came in a subtle thread of rage, slipping through the press of so many people’s energies and emotions, and even though Elia was shielded and surrounded by trained, experienced, magic-born Helleborians, that insidious wrath reached him. With a certainty that was instinct, he knew Hadrix wanted him to feel it. Wanted him to be scared, to know that he was dead if he got in arm’s length of his father.

An image flashed before his eyes, of terror etched on his own face and hands around his throat, jarring and undeniably something from his father, though he doubted Hadrix knew that Elia sometimes got images along with incredibly strong emotions. No, that was a deeply held desire of the High King’s, to snuff the life from his youngest.

Elia drew on his inner strength and increased his shields, forcing away that murderous rage. He poured power into them until he felt nothing from his father, until even the thrum of Merrick’s life energies beside him was dimmed, and his mind and heart were unassailable.

“Are you alright?” Merrick asked.

“I will be,” Elia said, sparing his father one last glance, composure restored.

Hadrix narrowed his eyes, and the corner of his lips curled up in distaste, obviously displeased. He may not have magic of his own, but he knew enough about what Elia could do that he probably suspected Elia wasn’t as vulnerable as he used to be.

Elia let a hint of the anger he felt show on his face, and he stood taller, shoulders back. The imperial sigil moved on his chest, polished metal and gems catching a bit of the light from the skylight high overhead.

He knew when Hadrix saw it. The symbol of Hellebore, and while it wasn't a crown, Hadrix recognized it immediately. The high king glared at everyone beneath the Hellebore standard, taking in the Hellions that surrounded Merrick and Elia in a wall of blue-green uniforms and steel.

Merrick's message was received. Touch Elia, and Hellebore acted.



Merrick let himself smile just the tiniest bit when Hadrix saw the imperial sigil hanging from his son's neck. Elia was beautiful, wearing clothing tailored for him in rich jewel tones, blues and dark greens and silver, and he glowed beside Merrick as if a gem himself, chin up and shoulders back.

"Welcome, fellow celebrants." High Priest Garrand called out, standing at the head of the pool between the two standards. He held out an arm to the Eistrean side. "Your Majesty, if you would take your place. The solstice is nigh."

Hadrix plastered a wide smile on his face and strode to the Eistrean standard, his children scurrying in his wake. Merrick saw Everett stumble, and Aria dodged around her brother with a flip of her golden skirts, hurrying to reach her father's side first.

An Eistrean guard tried to assist Everett with a hand under his elbow, but Everett shrugged him off and managed to stand on his own two feet next to his sister, disgruntled.

"I don't see Alden," Elia whispered at his side, too soft for anyone else to hear. Merrick couldn't see the second-born son either, and he discreetly gestured with his free hand. A slight shuffle in the people at his back and then Magi Cora was at his shoulder, right behind him and Elia.

"Can you search for the missing son? I don't like that he's not here," Merrick whispered, eyes searching the gathering crowd as the Eistrean retinue filed into the temple now that the high king and his party were out of the way.

“I can,” she replied just as softly. “Your Graces, I’m going to be casting right behind you. Don’t react, Consort Elia, it’ll be a bit of a rush for you, standing so close like this.”

Elia dipped his chin in acknowledgement, and Merrick felt when Magi Cora began searching for Prince Alden, her spellwork concise and efficient. He sensed when she loosed the spells, unseen, though a ripple in the crowd at his back from the magic-born told him he wasn’t the only one to sense her power moving.

There were no reactions from the Eistrean side, though he would have been surprised if there were—Hadrix was unlikely to have brought one of his bound mages so close to the border when it was imperial custom to free slaves on sight.

The priests arrived from the far rear of the temple, all dressed in the same dark blue as Garrand and the temple guards, and the lamps hanging overhead were doused, the shadows deepening in the temple, the column of light from above growing brighter in the dark.

“Prince Alden is not in the temple, nor nearby,” Magi Cora whispered as the temple grew darker. “My spells are searching further down the peak. He may have simply stopped at a tavern and gotten drunk, not caring to finish the trip.”

“That sounds like him,” Elia whispered.

“Maybe,” Merrick murmured. “Let’s hope.”

Garrand held his hands above his head as the last of the lamps went out, and raised his palms up toward the light. “On this solstice day we give thanks to our benevolent creator, Adracias, Lord of the Rivers. Our lands overflow with the bounty provided by the waters of life from the mighty Adracias, each great branch of the river connecting the ancient lands of what was once the greatest kingdom to ever grace our world. Velanta is no more, but in her place stand two of her children, Eistrea and Hellebore, bound by custom, faith, blood and tongue.”

Garrand lowered his arms, and the atmosphere in the temple grew strange, as if a storm were rolling in over the

mountains, crackling in the air.

The pool churned, and steam rose from the water.



Garrand spoke, drawing Elia's attention from the steaming pool of water and the odd energy rising in the room.

"This year we are blessed by a marriage of love between Hellebore and Eistrea," the high priest declared, and the combined delegations applauded.

Even Aria applauded, though it was restrained, her smile tight. Everett and Hadrix merely stood there like statues as people called out congratulations to Merrick and Elia.

Merrick lifted his free hand and waved, and Elia managed a small wave, unused to that much attention and not knowing how to react.

"As Emperor Heremis and Consort Elia are already wed, and have received the blessing of Mighty Adracias, we can focus this year on the bonds of fellowship that bind us," Garrand declared. "Come forth, Emperor Heremis, High King Hadrix, and extend a hand of peace to your counterpart under the blessing of Adracias."

Elia did not want to let go of Merrick, but his husband was lifting Elia's hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. "I will be fine," Merrick swore quietly. "Stay here with the Hellions."

"Be careful," Elia said, heart in his throat. "Please."

Magi Cora moved up next to Elia as Merrick slowly headed toward the high priest, and Hadrix did the same. Captain Talen trailed behind Merrick by a few feet, but had to stop about halfway between Garrand and the Hellebore delegation. Everett drew Elia's eye as his brother seemed to notice that their father wasn't standing nearby, and as he had all his life, he decided to follow him. Drunk, he stumbled into Aria, who pushed him off with a scowl. She hissed something

at him, but he waved her off and followed Hadrix, despite not being invited to join the priest.

Elia saw the high priest's eyes widen in alarm as Everett tripped on his cape right behind Hadrix, falling into Hadrix, who also went tripping forward from the impact.

Hadrix caught himself and moved out of the way, but Everett lost control and half-slid on the moisture-slick stones on the edge of the pool, and one boot made a splash as it went into the water. The pool wasn't too deep, from what Elia could tell, but deep enough that Everett's entire leg was soaking wet, as was his cape, the garment having been flung forward over his shoulder, barely holding on by a single clasp.

The weird energy from earlier broke and rose like a wave from a burst dam, and a thick cloud of steam rose from the pool and slapped at the intoxicated prince. Everett was knocked off his feet, blown back from the water, and skidded to a stop a few feet from Merrick and Garrand. Water churned in the pool and the light from the roof was near blinding for a heartbeat. Gasps rose from the crowd gathered and priests rushed toward Garrand.

"The hell was that?" Everett groaned, flat on his back. He wiped at his face, and he sounded like the hit had sobered him up a bit. When Everett's eyes landed on Merrick standing above him, his face twisted in rage. "You did this! Your blasted magic!"

"Merrick!" Elia screamed, feeling Everett's intentions a moment too late—with a snarl Everett lunged to his feet, ripping away the soaked cape and tossing it aside, and from his back, he pulled a dagger.

Screams came from the crowd, and the Hellions moved.

Everett's lunge was fast, and his size made it terrifying—he was a big man, thick with muscle, and he trained often. Too many times Elia had seen Everett send one of the soldiers rolling to the dusty ground of the training yard, bleeding from slashes and cuts, unconscious and concussed. Everett had killed plenty of politically insignificant courtiers over the years, particularly those who protested his ill behavior and

sought to make him face consequences, only to die on his blade.

All that flashed through Elia's mind as he watched in horror as Everett aimed the dagger for Merrick's chest, his husband unprotected. Talen was coming in fast but he was not as close as Everett.

Merrick had just enough time to lift a hand, and Everett slammed into him, both men toppling backward, robes and tunics of gold and greens, whites and blues obscuring where the blade was and if it had made contact, and with a splash, Merrick and Everett landed in the pool.

The Hellions swarmed the edge of the pool, and Sitka and Cormand appeared on either side of Elia and boxed him in, Magi Cora at his back. A heavy shimmer warped the air and rose around the four of them, like the air above the surface of the road on a blistering hot day.

"Merrick!" Elai screamed, again, trying to get past Sitka, who had an arm across his chest, holding him back. The waver in the air cleared and he could see the pool clearly.

Merrick was on his feet, soaking wet, long hair trailing down his back in a saturated mess, robes and tunic askew, cape missing. He held Everett by the thick, stiff gold-thread collar of his once pristine white tunic, and as Elia watched, Merrick hauled back his right fist and slammed it into Everett's jaw. Blood dripped down Everett's chin from the remnants of his formerly straight nose, and his hands scrabbled uselessly at Merrick's wrist, trying to free himself. His shoulders and head were the only part of him above the water line, and he couldn't get to his feet with Merrick whaling on him.

Elia watched as his husband beat his brother, the temple silent except for the sound of the water against the sides of the pools and a few gasps from those in the temple. And the sound of a fist hitting flesh.

Elia wasn't afraid for Everett, but he was for Merrick. Everett was limp, arms floating in the water, either unconscious or dead, or nearly so.

Merrick stopped. He let go of Everett, leaving the man floating in the few feet of water in the pool, and Merrick shook out his hand, knuckles bleeding. There was no sign of the dagger Everett had pulled, it was probably at the bottom of the pool. The water sloshed as Merrick stepped back from his defeated opponent, his heavy overtunic weighted down by water. He ripped at the ties and pulled it off, revealing his soaked silk shirt underneath, clinging to the defined muscles of his torso.

Everett wasn't moving.

Merrick stood tall in the pool, undeterred by his soaked clothing, and the crown that was somehow still in place on his head, even after being tackled into the water, glittered in the sun, a halo of blue and silver, water droplets scattering the light.

"Days ago," High Priest Garrand spoke, startling more than a few people, though Merrick remained unmoved. "Emperor Heremis formally challenged Prince Everett to a duel for crimes committed against the emperor's husband, Prince Everett's own brother, Imperial Consort Elia. Prince Everett accepted. This act of violence today in the temple of Adracias has satisfied the challenge. By the grace of Adracias, the matter is settled. Prince Everett has lost, and Emperor Heremis has justice."

It didn't feel like justice, but Elia didn't really care about vengeance or justice for himself, not if it meant Merrick was in danger.

Hadrix stood unmoving beside Garrand, expression stony. He spared Everett a single glance, then turned his back on the pool and marched toward the doors. Aria appeared torn, glancing at the pool, but when Hadrix passed her she left Everett without another glance.

The Hellions moved, creating a barrier between the stunned, gawking crowd and Merrick while Merrick walked through the pool in Elia's direction. Talen was there to lend him an arm, and Merrick climbed out of the water, water cascading off his remaining clothing in a shower.

Sitka let Elia go, and Elia ran, the shield Magi Cora raised dropping in time for him to sprint past where it had been, and he threw himself at his husband, Merrick catching him in his arms.

“Are you hurt?” Elia asked, muffled by the wet silk plastered to Merrick’s chest. Elia was swiftly getting soaked but he couldn’t care less, refusing to let go of Merrick.

“Not a scratch on me,” Merrick hugged him back, bending down to speak in his ear. “My hand hurts a bit, I will admit. Otherwise, I’m fine.”

“You aren’t allowed to scare me like that again,” Elia ordered, shivering a bit.

“I will do my best, my sweet prince,” Merrick swore.

Elia pulled back just enough to meet Merrick’s gaze. “Consort, now. Your sweet consort.”

Merrick chuckled, pressing a kiss to his brow, wet beard dripping on Elia’s face. “I apologize. My sweet consort.”

“Good,” Elia sighed, tired. “I’m not in the mood for a feast. Can we go home now?”

“Back to the residence? We can,” Merrick said, but Elia shook his head.

“Hellebore.” Elia clarified. “Home.”

Merrick cupped Elia’s face with both hands and leaned down to kiss him. “Yes, let’s go home.”

Epilogue

The City of Waterfalls lived up to its name.

At the highest point of the city, one could see the entire width and breadth of Vastok, from the upriver docks that served as the last point of entry by small boat before the canal system took over, to the massive mountains the held Vastok aloft like a diamond perched between two stones, and lastly to the wall of spray from the south produced by numerous waterfalls that fell from a multitude of terraces of varying heights. The distance from the lowest terrace of the city to the river basin below was nearly a thousand feet, and if Elia had not seen the span himself on the road to Vastok after the solstice, he never would have believed Merrick's tales of his home.

The Consort's Tower was a narrow, thin stone and iron tower protected by hundreds of years worth of spells and architectural wonders, and it was all Elia's. By rights, he could do with it as he pleased, and Elia decided an aerie was more than suitable. He didn't need a space of his own away from Merrick—he was happy sharing his husband's rooms, and gradually adding his own touch to the space made it feel more like home every passing day.

Wyle was ensconced in his own rooms in the imperial suite, tended by experienced nurses and healers who doted on the old man when Elia was called away. He was happy in retirement, and Elia was overjoyed his oldest friend got to experience it. And having Oric to boss around on the days he was feeling spry helped too, the magic-born young man now

serving as Elia's valet in between training with the imperial tailors as an apprentice. Elia had served as an unintentional advertisement for Oric's tailoring skills by wearing Oric's clothes, and that had helped the man earn the coveted apprenticeship.

Elia was an apprentice of sorts as well, though in practice, not in name. Magi Cora agreed to be his official mentor, though for politics' sake he wasn't an official apprentice—being the Imperial Consort made that awkward. He spent each morning learning how to use his magic, and he was proud of himself and his progress.

He had the tools to defend himself now, and never again would he let anyone hurt him.

He brushed aside the old anger he felt when thinking about how he was treated growing up. He was no longer there, at Everett's mercy, or vulnerable to his father's rage. Everett was alive, but his honor was in tatters along with his dignity, Merrick's thrashing and the reason for it had spread through the courts of both countries, and even into the general populations.

Everett would never touch him again.

Alden was missing, though a thorough search by Magi Cora's spells of the Holy City determined he was not dead, merely gone. Rumors abounded, but from what Merrick's spy network was able to glean, Alden left the night before the solstice, with a saddle bag full of gold and a flagon of wine. Reports of an Eistrean prince heading for Pyrderi were yet to be confirmed, but Elia had little doubt Alden would head for the nearest court with the best wine. He was just glad Alden didn't decide to head to Vastok.

The clambering of feet running up the stairs made him turn to the doorway, and two little terrors burst into the newly remodeled aerie, bouncing in excitement.

"Elia! Elia! Lord Calla has the baby!" Sola shouted, jumping up and down at Elia's feet. The spitting image of their father, the imperial twins won Elia over from the first moment they reunited with Merrick after months of separation.

“Shh,” Seth scolded his brother. “Lord Calla said the baby needs quiet.”

Sola, for all his excitement, heroically managed to silence himself just as Lord Calla cleared the door with his precious cargo.

The baby gryphon was the size of a lap dog, but entirely white and cream fluff, aside from the huge blue eyes and fierce beak. Only days old, the chick had been found at the base of a collapsed rock shelf not far from the city, no sign of its parents or nest mates.

Safe in Lord Calla’s hold, the chick blinked huge, wide eyes at Elia, before curiously peeking out of the former horsemaster’s arms, chirping.

“Wait over there, my little princes,” Lord Calla firmly instructed, and Elia was still impressed by how quickly the man got the twins to behave. “Our wee babe is nervous, so you must show him that he is safe with us. Quiet and gentle until he knows you’re his friend.”

Both twins nodded, identical expressions of fierce determination making Elia smile. They were so like their father.

The new Gryphon Aerie was to be a haven for injured or orphaned flying beasties of the mountains, and the chick was the first to call it home. The room was once a solarium for the late empress, and with the ecstatic endorsement of the twins, it was remodeled to be safe for baby animals and rambunctious boys. No climbing out the windows on the tallest point of the city for them. Unless they had wings and could already fly, but that was for the future.

Lord Calla sat on the floor in front of the twins, the chick in his lap, and he talked the boys through letting the wee beastie sniff their hands, and how to pet him without tugging on his downy fluff.

Elia leaned against the wall beside the window and watched, enjoying the peace. He didn’t need to be another

parent to Merrick's children—being their friend was more than enough. He rather liked it.

“Your Grace,” Sitka called from the doorway. “Emperor Heremis has returned from the council meeting.”

“Thank you, Sitka,” Elia replied. “Lord Calla, are you alright here?”

“Absolutely, Your Grace. I'll mind all three wild beasties.” Lord Calla smiled at the boys, who giggled at being called beasties, something that fit rather well.

Elia followed Sitka down the spiral stairs out of the tower and into the imperial wing he shared with his husband.

Evening was creeping into the city, the lower levels already in shadow, the sun not yet having set on the tower high above. Sitka pointed to the library and left Elia to find his husband alone.

Merrick turned to face him when he entered the room, arms open. Elia wasted no time in moving into his husband's embrace, snuggling into his chest. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Merrick replied. “Only a handful of hours and that was nearly too much.”

“If only council meetings weren't so horribly boring,” Elia lamented. “Can Marion take over again? Our honeymoon wasn't long enough.”

He adored his sister-in-law, and her partners. It had taken him a minute or two to adjust to the fact that she wasn't actually married, had children out of wedlock, and by two different men. And two different men who were her lovers, and each others' lovers, and had been for years. She steadfastly refused to marry either unless she could marry both. And while her children were technically bastards, they were still in the line of succession and acknowledged as members of the imperial family, with all the honors included. The Helleborians did things differently, and Elia enjoyed it immensely, if it did make him blush a bit from time to time.

“It was about how the embargo fares against Eistrea, and an update from our allies. Both Pyrderi and Corainia are

holding strong, and our generals are predicting we should get Hadrix to surrender in less than a year.”

“I hope so. Were any more slave ships stopped?” Elia asked.

“A few. All were captured without loss of life and were diverted to Pyrderi. Those freed will be safe there.”

“Good,” Elia murmured.

“Marion told me she’s expecting again, so she won’t be letting us get away with another honeymoon so soon.”

“Another?” Elia said, thrilled. He had no experience with babies of the human kind, but he was sure they would be a delight. “I’m so glad she has two lovers.”

“I am too,” Merrick chuckled. “I will be selfish here and say I am glad I won’t be changing diapers again for the foreseeable future.”

“I don’t even know what a diaper looks like,” Elia said, and Merrick laughed.

A cool breeze came in from the window, opened a bit to get the late summer air. Autumn was still far off in the lower valleys of Eistrea, but here in the mountains of Hellebore, winter came swiftly. The pines outside swayed a bit in the wind, and the sky overhead finally gave way to twilight, stars winking to life in the inky sky.

“I love it here, so much,” Elia whispered. “I love this place, this land, your family. And you. I love you so much.”

A kiss landed in his hair, and Merrick held him tighter, warm and comforting and glowing with love. So much love.

“I love you too, Elia.”



About the Author

My name is Sheena, and I also write as SJ Himes, the soon-to-be retired pen name for most of my backlist.

I reside in MidCoast Maine, close enough to the beach to be annoyed by seagulls and enchanted by the views.

I live with Wolf and Silfur, two cats who love me but hate each other. I write urban, epic, and sci-fi fantasy romances with an emphasis on plot and character development, and almost all my characters are LGBTQ+ and that's on purpose.

To keep current on what I'm working on and where to find me on social media, go to my website: www.sjhimes.com

I am Nonbinary and go by they/them pronouns.



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