



AN M/M/M
EPIC FANTASY

THE TRIAD SERIES: BOOK TWO

ENDURANCE

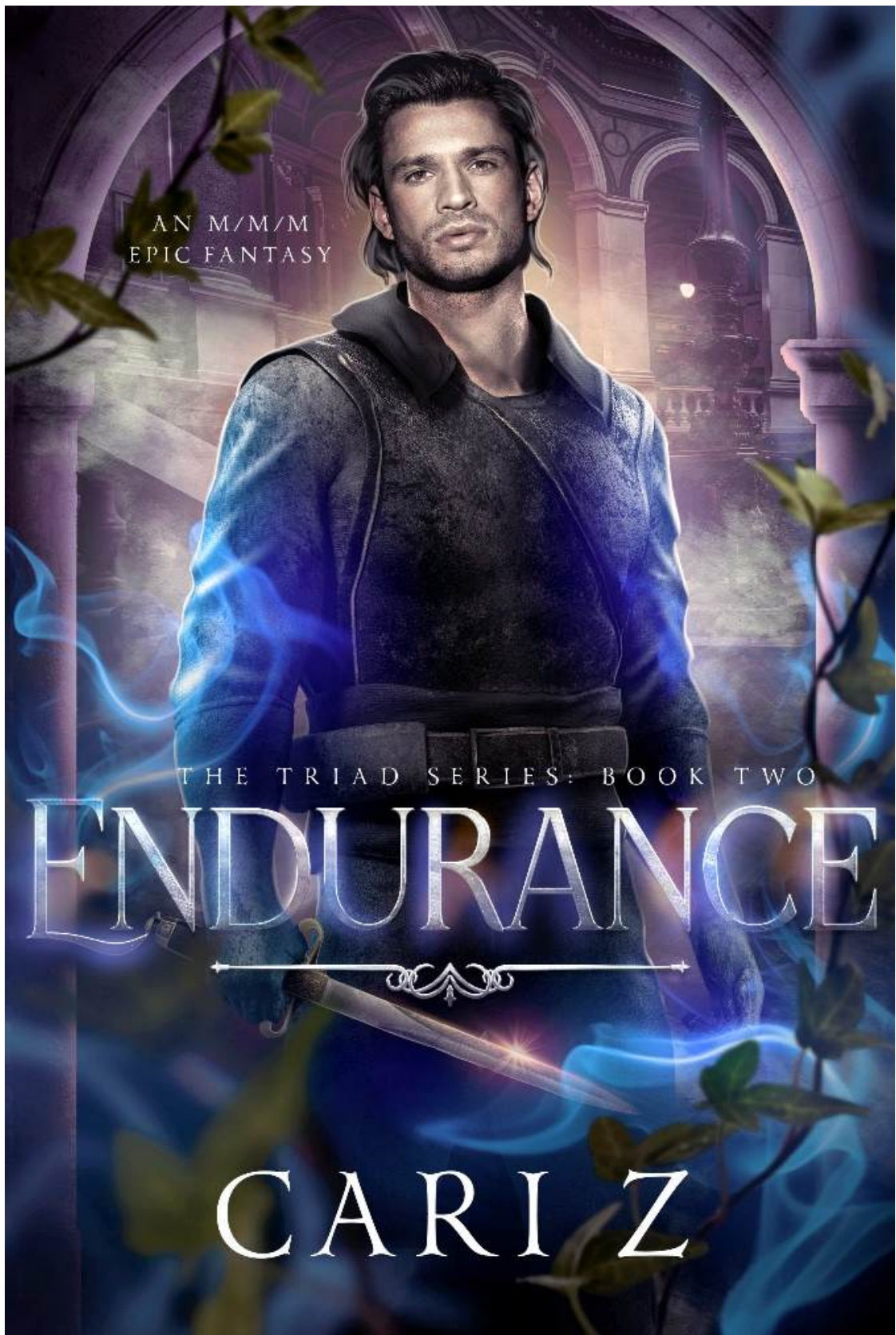
CARIZ

Endurance

The Triad Series: Book Two

Cari Z

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Warning: this book contains adult language and themes, including graphic descriptions of sexual acts that some may find offensive. It is intended for mature readers only, of legal age to possess such material in their area.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, companies, events, and locations are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, or events is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author and publisher.

Alliance

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About This Book

Three royal lovers, one goal: to make an alliance with their neighboring kingdom before war takes away their chance for peace.

Now that Symon is happily married to his husband Petur and in love with Petur's longtime lover Deyvid, things should be easier...right? Not with the Harrier clans of the north stirring up trouble. Tasked with escorting Petur's nephew Arven to his wedding in neighboring Mersaighe, Symon hopes that things will go smoothly.

He ought to know better.

Not only are they heading into a nation where shifters like Petur are distrusted, Petur and his nephew fight constantly, an assassin is still trying to kill Deyvid, and Symon is hiding a secret of his own...one that could mean his days of happiness are numbered before a family curse drives him insane.

Endurance is a polyamorous M/M/M fantasy with enemies to lovers, graphic violence, snarky humor, and explicit sexual content.

Part One: Symon

Chapter One

The day Symon met Prince Arven, his husband's nephew—his nephew too now, he supposed, and wasn't that awkward, since Sy was nearly a year younger—he didn't look his best.

And that wasn't his fault! He'd received exactly no warning before one of Petur's agents knocked on his door, calling through it, "Your Highness! Prince Arven's ship has been sighted! The royal family is expected to meet him at the docks in under a quarter hour."

Sy, up to his elbows in alchemical components and about to begin casting a complex spell of protection, looked frantically at his work. It would take at least ten minutes to wrap it up, and he'd been working on it for a solid week already. If he stopped now, all of that time would go to waste. "Tell them I'll be there as directly as possible, Vandry!" he called back, then started the incantation of this new spell as rapidly as he trusted himself to.

Sy hated rushing his work, hated courting disaster with a poorly made spell, but this wasn't the first time he'd cast something this involved. He'd practiced the incantation over and over again, leading up to this moment, and by the time he was done, all the components brought together, magic combined and sealed and sinking into the piece that lay on the table in front of him, twelve minutes had passed.

Only twelve! For a work of this magnitude, that was excellent. And it left him with ... three minutes to get to the royal family of Riyale's private docks.

Sy's hands were stained, his robes were worse, and he smelled of brimstone. He could either show up and offend everyone with his appearance, or he could clean up, arrive late, and offend everyone that way.

Better to be late, then. The entire royal family were shifters, highly sensitive to smells. Sy would rather not increase the chances of making a bad first impression by stinking of spellcraft.

Sometimes he envied Deyvid, Sy thought as he washed hastily in a cold-water basin with the pungent herbal soap that Petur assured him smelled better than most things to his delicate nose. Deyvid walked through life untouched by the chaos of magic and all its inconveniences. He would never stink like hoarstooth and salamander-leaf extract; he would never leave a shadow of himself in every trail in the entire palace that lingered for hours. Deyvid was untouched by magic because he was immune to it, which meant he was immune to many of the fouler things in life.

Of course, he was also immune to most of the best things in life, in Sy's humble opinion. That might change someday, but for now ... Sy shrugged out of his filthy robe and into a fresh one, then activated a cleansing charm that would help dissipate any residual smells on his skin. He looked at his reflection in the polished-silver mirror on the wall beside his bed, which was still ruffled from three energetic bodies lying in it this morning.

Sy's straight black hair was sleeked back, his slim, sharp-featured face was free of dirt and any magical ingredients, his protective golden necklaces gleamed, and his red-gemstone earrings sparkled in the light from the window. In his rich red robe, with fresh black leather breeches on beneath it, he looked quite princely ... or well, almost. He sighed and picked up the simple gold circlet that was his sign of rank, the palpable reminder of his marriage to Prince Petur of Riyale, the court's spymaster and assassin, and set it on his head.

Ugh, this thing always gave him such a headache. He couldn't wait to take it off.

Good enough, though. Sy left his suite and triggered the locking spell before taking off down the hall at the closest thing to a run he could get away with. Maybe he wouldn't be too late. Maybe the prince wasn't even—

Nope. There went the royal fanfare, horns shouting to the world that Riyale's crown prince was returned to them. Sy gave up on maintaining his dignity and ran for it.

He slowed down only once he was within sight of the royal family, and even then he was too loud if the harsh glare Queen Tania shot him was any indicator. She was easily distracted again, at least, by her daughters, Delainie and Givencie, who had abandoned royal protocol and were running forward to meet their brother.

The prince had just stepped down the gangplank from his personal warship, a powerful, dark-timbered beast that sat in the water like a predator. He looked every inch a prince—far more so than Sy felt like he himself looked—but his bearing softened as soon as his sisters were near, and he laughed and pulled them both into his arms, swinging them around with a shout.

“You’re finally back!” Delainie, the older girl, exclaimed.

“You took *forever!*” Givencie complained. She was only twelve but already had the strongest backbone of any of the royal children from what Sy had seen. “Why were you gone for so long?”

“I’m sorry,” Prince Arven said, and he sounded genuinely apologetic. That was refreshing—someone in the royal family, other than the girls, who could be genuine.

Sy’s view was cut off as he joined Petur one level back from the reunion, behind the queen and her consort. Petur smirked at him, then sniffed.

“What?” Sy hissed almost soundlessly. “What? I washed up, I changed everything! There’s no way you can smell anything but—”

“Boots,” Petur whispered.

“What?”

“You forgot to change your boots. You must have spilled something on them. They smell very ... complicated.”

Oh my gods. Sy was going to melt into the cobblestones, he was going to throw himself into the sea, he was going to—

“Arven!” Queen Tania moved forward, her consort, Jemal, following quickly as Prince Arven finally came close enough for them to displace their daughters in his arms.

Their affections were so exuberant as to be overwhelming. Sy had been living in Riyale for months now, and he’d never seen the queen like this with anyone—not her husband, not her daughters, not her brother. Certainly not her brother’s new husband or longtime lover. Petur had told him it would be like this, but ...

He activated the silver charm on his ear that limited his speech to the wearer of the charm’s mate and said out of the corner of his mouth, “You told me it would be like this, but I honestly think Tania is about to faint from happiness.”

“Everyone in the family is in love with Arven to some extent,” Petur replied, with a half-smile on his face. “You’d think the girls would be jealous over the obvious favoritism, but he’s such a fond brother to them that it hasn’t fazed them yet.”

“And you?” Sy glanced at his husband. “Is he your favorite too?”

Petur shrugged. “I was one of his regular minders when he was a small child. I love all of my sister’s children, but I will say that Arven has proven interestingly ... determined. I never thought he’d pull off a match with Mersaighe, and here we are about to spirit him off to his wedding to Princess Kira. He’s a good shifter and a decent fighter. A kingdom could do a lot worse as far as its future rulers go.”

Like Bekkon. Sy’s country of origin was tiny, a mountainous speck on the border with the Harrier territories, continuously skirmishing with them. It had a powerful queen in Sy’s stepmother, Melisse, who was a very competent mage as well as a seasoned ruler, but her only child from her first marriage was, to be succinct, something of a wastrel. Darius was self-centered, overly proud, and had shown little interest in either statecraft or magic.

What would Sy's home become once Melisse abdicated or passed away? What would become of Sy's father if he survived her? There was no love lost between Darius and his stepfamily, sadly; in the beginning, the only positive Sy had latched onto about his arranged marriage with Petur was the prospect of getting away from Darius.

Things had turned out way better here in Riyale than Sy had ever dared to hope, mostly because Petur's lover, Deyvid, had been as invested in Sy and Petur's relationship as he was in his own with Petur. He'd helped them bridge the awkwardness of their situation with respect, curiosity, and a healthy amount of lust. Appreciation had turned to enjoyment, had turned to genuine affection, and Sy was so happy now, in love with two handsome, talented, intelligent men who loved him back that he almost couldn't believe his luck.

So what if the princesses were the only other members of the royal family who bothered to talk to him? Petur and Deyvid were enough ... but maybe Arven could be something more too. Maybe he'd like to be friends. Maybe ...

"So. This is your new husband, Uncle Petur."

Sy snapped his head up, focusing on Arven, who'd somehow walked right up in front of him without him realizing it. *Get your head together!* He smiled at the prince and bowed. "I'm Prince Symon Parador of Bekkon. It's a pleasure to meet you at last, Your Highness."

"I wish I could say the same." The prince's nostrils flared. "You smell absolutely terrible."

Sy recognized that note of ingrained disdain. He'd heard it plenty back home. Wonderful. Just fabulous. Arven was another Darius after all.

Enemies it would be, then.

Chapter Two

When Queen Tania decided that it would just be the immediate family dining with Arven that night, Sy was glad. That meant he and Petur could go and have dinner by themselves, or better yet, with Deyvid, who ought to be back from his lurking by now.

“Patrolling,” Deyvid always corrected.

“Lurking,” Petur always replied, delighted at teasing an eye roll out of his lover. “Lurking around, snooping and sneaking, and trying to trick my agents. Which, frankly, still happens way too frequently for my peace of mind. You don’t have any magic, and you don’t have an animal form; they ought to be able to find you easily.”

“I suppose I’m just special,” Deyvid usually answered. From there, things either became a list of increasingly childish insults or more often intercourse, usually with Sy joining in these days.

Trust Arven to smash that plan to bits in less than a second.

“Uncle Petur has to be at dinner,” he told his mother. “He’s the one escorting me to Mersaighe, after all. We need to discuss plans for that, and I assume you want to be part of that discussion, don’t you?” His tone said that he was equally happy for her *not* to be part of that discussion, which of course only left her with one reply.

Tania sighed. “Of course, dear. Symon, why don’t you get back to your work? I’m sure you’ve got *something* to do in your rooms.”

Sy was more than happy to be dismissed from a dinner that promised to be the opposite of enjoyable for him, but Petur forestalled him by taking his hand. “Sy is also going to be escorting you to Mersaighe,” he told his nephew in a voice so mild that Arven winced. Yep, he had experience with Petur in this mood, then. “Don’t you think that merits him joining us?”

“Uncle Deyvid is going with us too, as well as probably half a dozen of your guardsmen, but that doesn’t mean they’re all coming to dinner,” Arven said, a little stiffly.

“Speaking of Deyvid,” Sy interjected as smoothly as he could, “I ought to go and meet with him. See if he managed to pick anything interesting up during his time in the city.”

Arven scoffed under his breath but didn’t say anything. Petur looked at Sy for a long moment before slowly nodding his head. “Whatever you think is best.”

“Let us go inside, not stand out in the sun like common sailors,” Tania snapped, tucking her hand in Arven’s arm and pulling him along toward the palace. The rest of the family fell in behind them, and Sy nodded encouragingly as Petur again hesitated.

It’s all right, I’m all right. He didn’t enjoy being treated like a second-class citizen by the people he was now grudgingly related to, but he couldn’t say he wasn’t used to it either. Besides, he really needed to speak to Deyvid now because ... *Uncle Deyvid?* What was the story behind that?

The story was one that had to wait until a good long while after Deyvid’s actual return because he was naked when Sy walked into Petur’s suite, which was connected to his own via a door that was permanently open these days. Still, Petur’s was larger, and more of Sy’s space was taken up with his laboratory, so Petur’s rooms ended up being where they spent most of their time as a group. And seeing Deyvid naked was always a treat.

Sy had long since grown used to the lack of color in Deyvid’s skin, how everything from his hair to his eyes to even the color of his blood was a shade of gray. Deyvid was a Harrier, one of the mobile clans from the north, and beyond that, he was a High Harrier, a member of a tiny sect within the clans who foreswore all magic and, through a series of rituals that Sy hadn’t yet gotten up the nerve to ask about, purged themselves of both the ability to use magic and the liability of having it used against them. That meant that none of Sy’s

spells, either for healing or for hurting, had any effect on Deyvid. He had the scars to prove it too.

“Enjoying your view?” Deyvid asked after a moment of Sy’s silence.

“Very much so.”

“Then perhaps you’d care to get a closer vantage point.”

Closer meant “in the tub,” which in turn meant “putting our hands all over each other,” which culminated in Sy dragging Deyvid, still damp and laughing, over to Petur’s ridiculously enormous bed and sucking his cock until all he could say was Sy’s name, moaned over and over again as Sy took him as deeply into his throat as he could manage, stroking the base of Deyvid’s length and thrusting one slick finger inside of him until he came at last.

Sy was more than ready to come himself by then, and when Deyvid pulled him further up his body and moved him so that Sy could thrust into his mouth, Sy eagerly went with it. He stared at Deyvid, watched his cock slide between his lover’s lips, felt his hands curl against Sy’s ass to urge him deeper, and when Sy came, the last thing on his mind was Prince Arven and his cold, unfriendly introduction.

Lying together in bed, though, the reality of his meeting with the prince came back. “Prince Arven is home,” Sy said, finally deciding to broach the topic as Deyvid stroked his fingers through Sy’s hair.

“So I heard.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t make the best impression.”

To Sy’s relief, Deyvid rolled his eyes. “There’s no such thing as a good first impression with Arven. He’s the very definition of ‘slow to warm’ when it comes to people. He didn’t even like his younger sisters for the first few years of their existence from what Petur tells me, and now they’re all very fond of each other.”

“He told me I smelled bad.”

Deyvid craned his neck a little to look at Sy's face. Sy wasn't sure what he saw there, but it made him frown. "Right there in front of his mother?"

"Yes."

"Being at sea has been bad for that brat's manners," Deyvid muttered.

"And he referred to you as Uncle Deyvid," Sy said because *that* part he was really interested in. Given how little the queen and her husband liked Deyvid, it seemed incongruous that their beloved son should refer to him so familiarly.

"Oh, we were enemies from the first moment we met, in his mind," Deyvid said with a chuckle. "I was stealing his beloved uncle away, after all. Petur might be the only person that Arven loved right from the start from the stories I've heard. He *loathed* me, which was hard because he was close to the same age as my daughter, and ... I missed her." Deyvid sighed. Sy resolutely kept his mouth shut so he didn't end up blurting out secrets that had no business being shared yet.

"I tried everything I could think of to get him to like me, and none of it worked," Deyvid continued. "It wasn't until two years after I first came here that we finally reached an understanding, and I literally had to be stabbed in front of him for that to happen."

"Stabbed? Where? Why?" Sy pulled back so he could get a better view of Deyvid's body while his lover just laughed.

"It was a long time ago; the scar's completely faded," Deyvid teased. "The dagger got me in my right thigh, but it had been intended for Arven, so ... it was worth it. I held the assassin off long enough for Petur to show up, and he proceeded to murder the hell out of him. He should have kept him alive for questioning, but ..." Deyvid shrugged. "Sometimes Petur's emotions get the better of him."

"The number of assassination attempts this family weathers are truly alarming," Sy said flatly. No one had *ever*

tried to murder Melisse before, after all ... until this past year.

“It’s an old political gambit among Riyalians. Practically expected,” Deyvid said. “Not that that makes it any more welcome. Arven came out of it all with a bit of hero worship for me, which has evolved into a decent relationship between the two of us.”

“Ah. So the key is to nearly sacrifice my life for him. Got it.” Sy would *not* be doing that unless he had no other choice, though, and even then ...

Deyvid smiled and pressed a kiss to Sy’s shoulder. “I’m sure it won’t come to that.”

Suddenly, the door to the suite slammed open with a bang. They both startled and looked over at Petur, who was busy glaring at the world. “I’m going to kill that boy,” he snapped, throwing his gloves down on the nearest table, then starting in on his soft, knee-high leather boots. “I have never been so tempted to cut Arven’s throat just to keep him from talking.”

“Well,” Deyvid said mildly. “I was wrong, Sy. It looks like you’ve got a chance to save Arven’s life right now.”

Chapter Three

“He is opposing me at every turn,” Petur went on, pointedly ignoring Deyvid’s gentle needling as he stripped out of the rest of his clothes. “Just for the sake of opposing me, it feels like. I want to bring four of our best agents with us to Mersaighe; he says eight would show more respect, never mind we’re going to be moving as quickly and quietly as possible, and Kira knows that. His fiancée isn’t an idiot. She won’t take a lack of retinue as an insult, and if her parents do, they’re fools. And then there are issues with the colors, and the food, and the fact that both of you are to come with us rather than just Deyvid, and—”

“He was against it?” Sy had been expecting that, but that didn’t mean he wanted to hear his expectations confirmed. “Me coming along?”

“He tried to make the argument that having you along would slow us down, as you’re a mage and not a fighter.” Petur scoffed. “I pointed out that after a year at sea, Arven probably isn’t much of a fighter right now either, and that your magic has saved the lives of almost every member of the royal family since you’ve come here.”

It was a slight exaggeration, but Sy still felt warmed by his husband’s support. “That was kind of you.”

“That was too aggressive,” Deyvid countered with a sigh. “Now Arven is going to get even more stubborn about accepting Sy. You could have placated him easily enough, but instead, you fed his worst impulses.”

“I’m not going to toss pretty little lies at my nephew and wait for him to adjust his mood whenever he fucking feels like it,” Petur said, crawling up into bed with them. “He’s an adult, and he’s going to be the consort of the most powerful ruler on this half of the damn continent. He needs to learn how to act decisively and correctly, and that means putting his unreasonable affront aside and working with what he’s got because it’s not changing.”

“You prevailed, then?” Sy asked.

Petur scoffed and cupped him behind the head, murmuring, “Of course I did,” before pulling Sy into a kiss.

Sy could immediately tell that for all of his snappish words, Petur wasn't as bothered as he acted. If he had been, this kiss would have been harder, a prelude to sex that felt almost more like combat than release. Sometimes Sy liked that—although Deyvid liked it more—but right now, he was just as happy to go with something more languorous after expending himself already with Deyvid. He softened in Petur's grip, wrapped his arms around his shoulders, and spread his legs, welcoming Petur between them.

“Tell me you two have already fucked, and you're open for me,” Petur mumbled against his mouth.

“So sorry,” Deyvid said with a grin, “but we didn't pleasure each other for the sole purpose of making it easier for you and Sy to enjoy each other. You poor thing.”

“Mmm, I'll forgive it this time,” Petur said. He kissed Sy again. “May I?”

Sy had yet to turn down the chance to have sex with either of his lovers, and now was no different. He nodded but added, “Go slow.”

“I will.”

Deyvid handed Petur the oil before he even had to ask, and as Petur slid down Sy's body to begin opening him up, Deyvid leaned in and kissed him this time.

“You're so good to us,” he said with a smile.

Sy knew he was blushing; his whole face felt like it was on fire, but he tried not to be self-conscious about it. “You're good to me too.”

They were; they were *so* good to him that sometimes Sy didn't quite believe how much he enjoyed his life now. He'd come to Riyale expecting a purely political marriage with a man who already got everything he needed, physically and emotionally, from his lover of over a decade. He'd never expected Deyvid to be so kind. He'd never expected Petur to

reach out to him. He'd never, ever expected to fall in love or to crave their touch and attention the way he did.

A slick finger touched his entrance, and Sy gasped as it slid inside. He was relaxed from his orgasm, though, and Petur was able to follow one finger with a second fast, sucking Sy's cock to renewed hardness before he finally added a third. Sy grabbed Petur's thick brown hair in one hand and gave into the urge to fuck his throat just for a moment. Petur chuckled around him, then pulled back.

"You want this so much?" he teased, looking up at Sy with glittering, mischievous eyes.

"I want you," Sy told him honestly, breathlessly. It used to make him feel vulnerable to be so honest and open with his husband, but now he liked the way it made Petur's gaze linger. "So much."

"You have me." Petur pulled his fingers out, smoothed oil over his cock, and moved Sy's legs into a better position, then—

Gods, he was *massive*. Sy's body never quite got used to how big Petur was, how far he stretched Sy's body. He could take him fairly well now, but it still felt like so much. Petur went slow, moved with perfect control and attention as he eased himself inside, his expression intent. By the time he was all the way in, Sy was gasping, clutching his shoulders, and torn between pulling him in closer or pushing him away.

"Breathe," Petur said, stroking one hand down Sy's body until he reached his flagging cock. "It's all right, darling, breathe. I won't move until you tell me t—" His eyes widened, and his own breath caught for a second before he looked behind him. "Deyvid!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you not want me to touch you?" Deyvid asked, sounding innocent. Sy couldn't see him well as he was kneeling behind Petur, but he could guess what was going on. "Right ... here?"

Petur closed his eyes and groaned, his hips flexing a little, and Sy laughed. His own body relaxed as Petur's

became even tenser. “You two will be the death of me,” Petur said. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes, then looked at Sy. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Sy said, and he was now—he still felt stuffed, but bearably so, and he knew it would only get better. “It’s all right, you can move.”

Petur did so but slowly to start, just a slight shift backward before pressing in again, stretching the rim of Sy’s hole. It was completely different from how he fucked Deyvid; with Deyvid, Petur was rougher, pressing inside much sooner and going hard from the first moment. Sy had asked him once how he preferred it, and Petur had said, with a light of genuine honesty in his eyes, “However you do.”

Right now he was doing it how Sy liked it best, with a smooth glide back and a slightly harder thrust in. He laid kisses across Sy’s neck and the point of his jaw, down to his shoulder and across his chest as he fucked him, slowly and thoroughly, only breaking his rhythm to shiver every now and then as Deyvid’s fingers moved inside him *just* so.

Sy’s cock was leaking across his stomach now, leaving clear, sticky smears wherever it touched. He was ready to grab it and stroke himself to the finish—how had coming earlier made him *more* desperate for another orgasm? How could he want it so much, so often?

“You want it because we’re irresistible,” Petur bragged, and Sy bit his lower lip when he realized he’d said at least the last part out loud. “We’re your mates, darling, and you’re young and strong and hungry. What else should you want, hmm? Who else would fill you up so well, who else would fuck you the way you crave it?”

“I don’t—crave it—” Sy stuttered, but he knew he was lying even as he said it. Deyvid laughed and looked over Petur’s shoulder.

“Every morning and night and sometimes during the day? It’s a good thing you want both of us,” he teased. “Otherwise, Petur would be worn to a thread.”

“I’ll show you worn,” Petur snapped, and he spread his legs a little wider and thrust a little faster, and Sy could tell when Deyvid found the right spot again because Petur made a noise like he’d been punched and drove inside of Sy as deep as he could get, then began to come.

“Touch yourself,” he snarled. Sy spent less than ten seconds working his cock before he came as well, sparks lighting up the corners of his eyes with the force of his second orgasm. He felt exhausted afterward and let his eyes close. A few seconds later, Petur pulled out and rolled to the side, then Deyvid was taking care of them both, finally joining them with a kiss to Sy’s cheek once they’d been cleaned up.

For a while, they didn’t speak, just listened to the sound of each other’s breathing. Sy put his head back on Deyvid’s chest and laid his hand on Petur’s so he could feel both of their heartbeats at once.

“So,” he finally asked. “When do we leave?”

“In two days,” Petur said. “I pushed for tomorrow, but my sister wouldn’t hear of it. We’ll go early, though, so really, just one full day here.”

“That’s decent timing,” Deyvid mused. “At least Arven won’t be able to complain about not having time to pack.”

“Oh, watch him do it anyway.”

“Are you sure he’s all right with me coming along?” Sy asked.

Petur lifted his chin up, meeting his gaze. “He will be,” he said confidently. “He simply doesn’t know you yet. He’ll soon understand how invaluable you are.”

“And if he doesn’t, then at least you won’t have to put up with him for long,” Deyvid added. “It’s a solid two weeks to Mersaighe’s capitol, Rorech. Another week of wedding preparations, perhaps less, and then we return. Overall, less than a month in Arven’s company. It could be worse.”

“It could be Tania,” Petur agreed.

“Exactly,” Deyvid said.

“You two are terrible,” Sy said, but the conversation calmed him. Less than a month? He could handle that.

He'd have to because he wasn't letting Petur and Deyvid go without him.

Chapter Four

Packing for this trip was a lot different from packing for Sy's last one.

When he had left Bekkon, he'd been packing up his entire life—he'd filled chest after chest with scrolls, magical supplies, more scrolls, clothes, a few palimpsests, and, oh yes, books. Plenty of books. He'd worn his strongest protective jewelry, each piece enhanced to help keep him and the people around him safe. He'd brought his personal mount, Darkmane—really Dax—for the trip, and he'd be bringing her this time as well. At least now he'd done enough riding over the past few months that he hopefully wouldn't be a mass of blistered pain by the end of the first day.

The guards Deyvid had chosen—and of course, Deyvid had chosen them because Petur might be the mind behind the extensive spy network that was the royal guard, but Deyvid was the hand that guided them—were all familiar to Sy as well, which was pleasant. Three of them, Herow, Lilian, and Keelie, had accompanied Sy from Bekkon and were people he was comfortable with. The last was Lise, an older woman with a rare owl-shifter form who, according to Deyvid, had a mind like a map. She knew every road on the continent and every city between them and would act as their scout if they needed one.

“Petur could do it, of course,” Deyvid said, folding a piece of dun-colored bedding into his saddlebag. He and Sy were taking the morning together to pack—alone since Petur had been at his sister's beck and call from the moment he woke up. “That raven form of his makes for good cover, and most of the route to Rorech is wooded. It's not until you're within a hundred miles that the trees finally give way to fields and lake country, but he'll have enough to do working with Arven in the evenings.”

“Working on what?” Sy asked as he deliberated between blue gems and red for his next spell. The red ones were traditional and responded to the catalysts well, but the

blue ones were less likely to be remarked upon in Riyalian company and would match the party's livery.

"Another shift. Apparently, Arven's trying to get a third form down. It will be impressive if he manages it," Deyvid added, stowing a plain steel blade in a side pocket. "Very few shifters have three forms. Petur's always been a savant in that area." Petur could hold four shapes other than his human one—a wolf, a raven, an otter, and a fighting form that blended the scariest aspects of all of those with his human shape. Sy had only seen it once, after Petur had been struck by a vile spell and nearly lost his mind. It still made him shudder to think of what could have happened.

"What are Arven's other forms?" Sy asked. Blue gems, he decided. Blue, easily made into broaches or pendants. He brushed the red gems aside, then began pulling together the ingredients for the spell. It was a simple one, but it should prove very effective on the journey.

"Oh, let me think ... I believe he's got a seagull and a dolphin form," Deyvid said.

"Dolphin?" That was ... rather large. Arven would be too big for any of the streams they happened upon in a body like that, not like Petur's otter.

"His mother's idea." Deyvid rolled his eyes. "Something about them being noble creatures, beloved of the goddess Bes, who of course is the patron goddess of Delomar. Tania's got a dolphin form herself, so that was an easy one for him to pick up."

"Huh. What's the new one he's trying to get down?"

"Wolf. Which would be quite useful if he can manage it, but ..."

Sy paused in his preparations. There was a tone in Deyvid's voice that he couldn't quite place. "But what?"

"I think it might be too confrontational for his nature," Deyvid said. "That's the watchword for shifters—be true to your nature. You can only understand a creature well enough to shift into it if you've got an innate understanding of it, and

Arven has never been that kind of predator. He's smart and strong, like a dolphin, and he's always been upfront about asserting his independence and persisting in what he wants. Very gull-like traits. But wolves are a different matter."

"Why?"

"A lone wolf has to be ready to leap on an opportunity," Deyvid replied. "Violently if necessary. They do what they must to achieve their goals. They're vicious and determined. The only vicious thing about Arven is his tongue." He shook his head. "I shouldn't gossip. It's not as though I have any personal experience with the matter, after all."

"I think you'd probably make a good wolf," Sy said. He could see it—Deyvid as a wolf would be a lean, gray beast, quiet as snow falling as he stalked you through a forest or down a dark alleyway ...

"And you would make an excellent cat."

Sy blinked. "A cat?"

"Playful and curious and willing to speak out against whatever they don't agree with," Deyvid said with a smile. "Or maybe a magpie, with a hoard of trinkets. What are you planning to do with those stones anyhow?"

"Ah." Sy got his mind back on track. "They're for a protection spell for the party. It's a passive one, a matter of ... linkage, I guess is the best way of putting it. The spell forms a connection between these stones, making them magically appear as one, just with many facets to its aura. Whenever we get more than half a mile apart, that aura will begin to fracture. If the person holding a gem is injured, their facet of the aura will stain."

"We'd better hope you're not the one injured, then," Deyvid said. "Since you're the only person I know of who can read auras. Will me being in the group make problems for this spell?"

Sy shook his head. "Not at all. It won't recognize you, of course, but you won't be able to disrupt it either. It'll be fine. Let me just—" He turned to grab the vial of oil infused

with metal shavings and herbal ingredients, held it in front of his chest for a moment, and closed his eyes. Deyvid stepped back, making sure Sy had enough space to recite the incantation without issue, and then ...

This was the part of magic that often confused people. It wasn't like baking a loaf of bread—there was no set list of instructions you could follow that would work the same every time. It was more like smithing a blade—the ingredients you used varied a little every time, and for Sy, so did the incantation he used to activate them. The words themselves were nothing more than a carrier for Sy's will, a way to verbalize his magic so that it permeated the object he was focused on. Some mages said the same thing every time; a few managed to work without speaking at all.

Sy said whatever words came into his mind as he held the vial, shifting it this way and that, smelling the pungent components and feeling the *tink, tink* of little pieces of metal shifting inside the glass. A little more volume here ... a stronger, more guttural sound there ... and ...

He upended the vial over the gemstones, then slapped his hand over the entire mess and spoke the final words that would bring it all together. It flashed beneath his hand, burning hot, but he was immune to the heat of his own spells. A second later, he could feel the charm settle into the gems and see their combined aura in his mind's eye, shining like a beautiful blue shield. Excellent.

“Is it done?” Deyvid asked.

“It's done.” Sy lifted his hand up, then winced. What—

“Good, because you're hurt.” Deyvid came back from where he'd partitioned himself and took Sy's palm into his own hand. “One of the shavings got stuck,” he said, focusing as he used his slender fingers to pry the metal out of where it had lodged just beneath the skin.

“It's not bad,” Sy said, but he didn't do anything to pull away.

“It doesn’t have to be bad for me to want to soothe it,” Deyvid replied, familiar tenderness in his voice. Sy ached for him and ached to tell him the truth, the truth about who had tried to kill him, about who might yet try again.

Surely the time had come for Deyvid to know? If he found out on the road somehow ... If they were attacked, and he was forced to defend himself to the death against his own daughter, the child he’d had such high hopes for, and who in the end had been forced down the same path as her father ...

“What’s wrong?” Deyvid asked. Sy looked up at him, gray hair falling over the edges of his face, a face lined from years of hardship and trials. “Is it worse than you thought?”

“No,” Sy whispered, then cleared his throat. “No, it’s ... it’s just that—”

“Milords?”

They both startled and turned toward the main door, where Vandry, the palace’s resident spy, was standing and looking a bit awkward. “Yes?” Deyvid said after a moment.

“Your presences have been requested at the training grounds. The princes are having an ... argument over the journey ahead, and Prince Arven has insisted on a test of skill.”

If Sy had been the one in charge of the conversation, his mouth would have dropped open as he blurted, “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Since it was Deyvid, he merely nodded and said, “We’ll be there momentarily, thank you.”

“Aye, milords.” Vandry bowed and saw himself out, and Deyvid sighed and reached for the closest clean cloth.

“It looks like our young prince is feeling more combative than I’d thought,” Deyvid said as he wiped Sy’s hand clean. “He’s never called for a test of skill before setting out on a trip. Petur must be on the verge of grinding his own teeth to stumps.” He tossed the rag aside. “Bring something flashy for this, would you?”

Sy thought about it for a moment. “How about the spell I triggered when we first arrived in Delomar?”

Deyvid grinned, bright and savage. “Perfect.”

Chapter Five

“—ince when has my judgement been considered insufficient for anyone in this household when it comes to the protection of our family?” Petur’s roar could be heard halfway across the palace.

“Oh, gods above and below.” Deyvid sighed and picked up the pace toward the courtyard. “He’s got his dudgeon up. We’d better hurry.”

“It’s not like him to yell so ... loudly,” Sy said, more than a little concerned. Petur *did* have a sense of dignity, as little as that seemed to concern him most times, and he wasn’t the type to let his emotions get the better of him when logical argument would serve just as well.

“You missed some of the worst of his fights with his sister over the years,” Deyvid replied dryly. “Those tend to be the loudest. But she’s always been indulgent of Arven, and it seems like Arven is trying to insist on having his way.”

Sy understood Arven’s impulse. Gods, did he ever understand it. It had been so hard sometimes to be commanded by Melisse, and yet as monarchs went, she was a kind and understanding one for sure, even better as a stepmother. He’d fought tooth and nail against any order given to him by Darius, though, and if Arven’s relationship with Petur was like that ...

But it wasn’t. Everyone said they got along, and that Arven was friends with Deyvid as well. So was he simply pushing for control because he was nervous about what he was headed into, marriage into another royal house, or because he was that upset about Sy?

Perhaps a bit of both.

Regardless, the tension was definitely on the rise. When Deyvid and Petur entered the courtyard, Tania was standing between her son and her brother, turned toward Petur and frowning viciously. Her consort stood off to the side, looking like he had a massive headache, and the princesses were nowhere to be seen. Various royal guards had assembled,

and if Sy himself felt uncomfortable, they all looked on the verge of running away.

It wasn't that tests of skill were all that uncommon. Many artisanal professions gauged the height you could rise to in a guild by measuring your artistry against your peers, and some kingdoms allowed military advancement—to a certain level—by performing tests of skill against superior officers. The Harrier clans in the north worked almost solely off tests like this from what Deyvid had said. Only clan leaders and specialists like High Harriers were immune from being called out to defend their positions. To see it happen here was perhaps unusual but not unheard of.

The dissent among the royal family, though, so viciously vocal and *public*, was what was making this so damaging. It could have been dangerous, even, if it had happened a few months earlier while the assassination attempts had been in full swing. Petur ought to know better.

Deyvid seemed to think the same. He strode right up to his lover and tapped him on the back to get his attention—not that he needed to, because Petur had surely sensed them coming with his shifter awareness. But Sy knew that touches from Deyvid, and from himself these days, were grounding for Petur and could help stabilize his moods after a long period shifted.

Perhaps that was part of the problem here. He'd been human for too long. It was an intriguing thought, and Sy wanted to explore the web of it, but now wasn't the time.

“Your Highness,” Deyvid said, inclining his head to Petur. He repeated the salutation to Arven, then bowed low to the queen. Sy joined him in time for that. “Your Majesty.” He straightened up. “So. Who's going first?”

“None of you are,” Petur snapped, but he was at least not shouting any longer. “Because I've had the best people for this task picked out for months, and I will not—”

“Task? This is some simple *task* to you, like filling out a report or delegating jobs to your spies?” Arven demanded. “These are not merely the people who will accompany me to

Mersaighe, they're the ones who will *stay* with me there. I cannot—”

“A permanent retinue wasn't discussed beforehand,” Petur said, his voice hard. “I'm not saying you aren't due an entourage, but they will *not* be members of this party. They can come later, once you're settled and the threat of attack isn't so high.”

“Oh, the threat of attack!” Tania scoffed, entering the fray in the least helpful way possible. “As if there will be any attacks after the last attempts were so thoroughly routed!”

That wasn't what she'd been saying just last week. Apparently, speaking with her son had really changed her song.

“I want my own people to come with me,” Arven insisted. “Those who are faithful to me, who've been by my side for the past year as I traveled abroad.” He pointed to the four guardsmen wearing a slightly more aquamarine shade of blue.

“Two of them can't shift at all,” Petur said.

“What does that matter? Neither of them can!” Arven pointed an accusatory finger at Deyvid and Sy. “Shifting isn't everything!”

“It's important that this retinue be made up of the best protection for you on the road, and that means shifters! Deyvid and Sy are exceptions because they are *exceptional*.”

“Prove it!” Arven crossed his arms. “Prove that they've got anything that my guardsmen don't or better yet—prove that they have something that *your* people don't!”

Oh, hells. This was turning into something that could lead to injuries and would almost certainly lead to resentment among the guards if it wasn't handled carefully. Petur, strangely enough, looked appeased.

“Done,” he said, then turned to face Deyvid and Sy. “I'm going to attack you now,” he said calmly. “And so are all of my guards. You have, oh, perhaps two seconds with which to defend yourselves. I suggest you use them.” He started

transforming on the last word, his body twisting up and out as he began to transform into his monstrous battle shift.

“Now, Sy!” Deyvid said, and thank the *gods*, Sy already had his hand on the spelled gem at the bottom of his necklace. He jerked it free and threw it high into the air, then spoke the words of the spell just as Petur’s claws came out.

The spell expanded like a dome, capturing everyone in its power. Time seemed to stop; all movement slowed down to a mere crawl.

All movement except for Sy and Deyvid’s, that is.

Sy focused on stabilizing the spell to give Deyvid as much time as possible, but in truth, it was hardly needed. Deyvid pulled one of his daggers, slid forward like a shadow, and proceeded with a series of vicious cuts to each of Petur’s limbs, finishing with one across his throat. He whirled through the rest of the guards like a deadly gale, slicing to disable them before finishing each one with that same simple, terrible neck cut. Arven was his final target, and Sy felt the time-slowng spell, on its last legs, quiver as the prince fought desperately against its hold.

His efforts were useless. Deyvid cut him like he did the others, with four quick and debilitating strikes, before almost gently drawing the blade across his throat. “You’re dead,” he said, then stepped back over to Sy and sheathed his blade.

The spell finally dissipated, and to a man, the guards touched their necks, verifying that it was the dull side of Deyvid’s blade he’d used against them, not the relentlessly sharp side.

Petur began to laugh, long and loud. Arven, by contrast, looked stricken. He stared from Deyvid to Sy, his eyes wide, and opened his mouth. He wasn’t quite able to make words come out, though. Sy felt bad—they’d proven Petur’s point but at the expense of the dignity of everyone in this courtyard. At least Deyvid hadn’t played favorites, mock-killing Petur along with everyone else, and he’d wisely left the queen and her consort alone.

Apparently his largesse wasn't appreciated by Tania. "You—insolence! Outrageous! How dare you!" she shrieked at Deyvid and Sy, then rounded on her laughing brother. "And how dare you for encouraging them!"

"They did as ordered," Petur said, unrepentant. "And proved that they're both well equipped for this venture. What better protection could we have than a powerful mage and a man immune to the magic of those who might attack us?"

"What better protection indeed?" Jemal said, stepping forward to take his place by Tania. He set a soothing hand on her shoulder. "And what a demonstration. They managed so well with everyone here, I think it's clear proof that they'll be able to do the same once you're all on the road. Together."

"Yes!" Tania picked up the thread immediately, her fury melting into vindictive pleasure. "It's decided. You'll have your four guards as well as your husband and lover, and Arven will have his four men as well."

Petur's face darkened. Arven exhaled loudly, shakily, then turned away from his family and went back to the company of his chosen guards. Sy glanced at Deyvid, who grimaced but shrugged minutely. It wasn't their place to step into this fight.

And a quarter of an hour later, the argument was decided, with Arven prevailing. That, it seemed, was that.

Chapter Six

The rest of the day was pure chaos, pandemonium wrapped in icy obedience and deathly silences. Petur was more than put out, he was offended—offended that all of his careful plans were being swept aside at the last moment on what seemed to him like a whim and offended that his family was treating his expertise like it was nothing.

“He’ll be on a tear for the rest of the day,” Deyvid said quietly after the confrontation in the courtyard, watching Petur speak with each of the new guards who would be accompanying them with a briskness that bordered on rude.

Of course, he was a prince, and a prince could speak how he liked to the people under his command, but Petur usually made an effort to get his guards and agents to, if not like him, at least appreciate that he understood their strengths and would use them appropriately. “This isn’t the worst I’ve ever seen him, but it’s pretty close. I can’t believe Tania cut his legs out from under him like that.”

“She had to side with her son, didn’t she?” It was a dynamic that Sy knew a lot about after growing up with Melisse and Darius.

Melisse had been loving to him, but when it came down to choosing sides between Sy and Darius, she almost always went with her son. It wasn’t favoritism so much as it was politics. He was her only heir, so she had to maintain a good relationship with him. The easiest way to do that was to give in to him on little things, things that didn’t matter beyond their own family circle—mostly things that concerned Sy. He’d stopped being raw about it years ago.

“But Arven’s not Tania’s heir,” Deyvid reminded Sy. “That mantle passed to Delainie after his engagement was finalized. Arven has come a long way during his time at sea, it seems, but Petur has decades of seniority when it comes to the nuances of defense. If Tania were really serious about keeping our party well protected, she would be listening to her brother, not her son.”

“Then it’s just ...”

“Pettiness. Potentially deadly pettiness.” Deyvid shook his head. “Petur will never admit it, but he’ll need help. I’m going to stand by and help ready the rest of the party. Do you mind finishing the packing in our rooms? I’m not asking this to be dismissive,” he added. “It’s an important task, and I wouldn’t trust anyone else to touch my things, much less let them handle any of yours.”

“Of course.” Sy leaned in instinctually, and Deyvid caught his mouth in a short but tender kiss. One kiss became another, Sy wanting more of his lover’s comfort, and then—

“You can’t be serious!” Arven suddenly shouted. Sy and Deyvid broke apart to look over, and Sy was disconcerted to see the prince’s attention entirely on him. “What sort of marriage *is* this?” he snapped at Sy, fire in his eyes, “where you feel like you can disregard your husband in such a manner?”

“The kind that’s none of your business,” Petur said coldly. His nephew rounded on him.

“It’s my business if your spouse disrespects you in public!”

“Why don’t you bother asking me if I feel disrespected before yelling at my husband *or* my lover?”

Arven’s mouth tightened—in annoyance, in fury, Sy couldn’t tell. “Mersaighe is a more conservative country than Riyale,” he said after a moment of visibly pulling himself together. “If your *paramours* can’t keep their hands off each other there, it will reflect badly upon you and therefore on me. Maybe they shouldn’t come with us after all.”

“*Arven.*”

Oh, that was a *bad* tone, that was the sort of tone that would lead to broken bones if no one stepped in. Deyvid moved a split-second faster than Sy, walking over to the prince and bowing respectfully. “We’ll do our utmost to keep your honor in mind at all times once we’re in Delomar,” he said.

“We won’t do anything to tarnish it, my prince. You have my word.”

Arven’s face relaxed slightly. “I—I know you’ll keep it, sir.”

“Absolutely.”

“If you expect me to sleep without both of them in my bed, either on the road or in Delomar itself, you can think twice,” Petur said then, entirely unhelpfully.

Voices rose, and Deyvid made a gesture that Sy interpreted as “run while you can.” Sy obeyed, inclining his head to no one in particular before heading back inside the palace, toward his suite.

He walked in a daze, his mind awash in a strange sensation. It was ... he hadn’t felt it for so long, he hardly knew what to make of it, but it was ... *shame*. He felt vaguely but persistently ashamed of being called out by the prince for doing something that felt completely natural with Deyvid, but that was undeniably bad form in public. It would have been bad form if he’d done it with Petur, and they were married! How much worse would it be with their lover, in a foreign court, where no one knew what to expect, but everyone was inevitably ready to judge?

It would be quite a bit worse, actually, since Sy was slightly known to the court of Mersaighe as Melisse’s stepson. He’d actually met Kira once on a trip she made to Bekkon three years ago, and he had appreciated her straightforwardness. If she disapproved of anything he did, she would tell him straight out, and that would be that. But the potential repercussions, not just to himself but to the kingdom he now called home if he was somehow found wanting in propriety or honor ...

Mersaighe really *was* a more conservative kingdom in many ways. Women wore their hair and bodies covered, with only their faces bare until after marriage. Men were not permitted to marry other men, nor women other women, although the relationships weren’t illegal as such. While a woman could hold high office, she was also expected to be a

wife and mother, no matter what her work entailed, and it was expected in most cases that she would step aside for her familial duties as required. Most women in positions of power had finished with childbearing.

Kira was the exception to many of these practices, of course, since she was her family's sole heir and wouldn't be allowed to step aside for a consort, but still. It was a lot to head into for Arven. For all of them.

Sy frowned as he felt his heart speed up. Why? He was just walking, not running, not exerting himself in any real sense. But all of a sudden, his heart was *racing*, and then he couldn't breathe, and a second later he couldn't move.

Sy staggered over to the nearest wall and leaned against it, sliding down onto the floor and putting his head against his knees even as he fumbled for one of the other spelled charms on his necklace. He finally found it, activated it with a hoarse mutter, and felt a comforting shield of silence fall over him.

There. Now he might be visible, but at least no one could hear him panting like a dog dying of heat. Gods above and below, what was *wrong* with him? Why was his body reacting without his mind's permission? This had never happened to him before. Was it—

An icy chill went down Sy's spine, and he squeezed his eyes shut as the stuttering pain in his chest built to a brutal, crackling crescendo before cresting and slowly, begrudgingly, filtering away into mere tremors. A few moments later he was fine—weak but fine.

In body, at least. Now it was his mind that he couldn't trust.

It couldn't be the curse. No, he had escaped it, escaped the madness that had plagued every one of his female forebears for generations. Each woman had died of it in the end, including his mother—but not before she'd tried to kill Sy. His father had saved Sy's life, but he hadn't been able to prevent his wife from taking her own life a few weeks later.

No. It can't be. His parents had gone to great pains to make sure he wouldn't be afflicted. Besides, this was nothing like the fury and rage that had overtaken his mother, wiping her senses clean of everything but violence. His mind had remained clear, and if anything, he'd become weak, not full of vicious energy.

"It's a fluke." It was just a fluke, a one-off, nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. Certainly nothing to mention to Petur or Deyvid. *How could I tell them? What if they tried to leave me here?* He couldn't bear to stay behind when they needed him so much.

Sy got to his feet and dispelled the charm. He took a deep breath and was heartened when he felt no residual ill effects except for fatigue. Good. He headed off toward his suite at a brisk pace, mind already on his packing, resolutely steering clear of his momentary lapse.

It was momentary. It had to be.

Chapter Seven

They set off the next morning as a party of twelve, far larger than any of them had been counting on, but in the end, neither Arven nor Petur had been able to convince the other that their group ought to be further culled. Petur insisted he was cutting back already, with only four guards in addition to himself and his lovers, while Arven shot back that his contingent was only five people strong compared to Petur's seven, so clearly he was the one making compromises.

It was ugly. It was awful. It was *stupid*, and that stupidity, the pettiness of the argument between two people who ought to love each other—who did love each other, Sy thought, but not without reservation—was painful. He watched the two princes bid their family farewell and turned away, rechecking his saddlebags as he considered the issue between them for what felt like the hundredth time.

There had to be more to it than the petulant insistence that they couldn't *both* be right. Perhaps they'd simply outgrown each other or grown in ways that made it difficult to recognize each other. In the time Arven had been away, Petur had gotten married—married to someone he had learned to love, Sy knew, and he was so grateful for that. The comfortable dynamic of a devoted uncle and his interesting but nonthreatening lover had been irreparably damaged by Sy's arrival.

At the same time, Arven had matured, grown from the boy Petur remembered into the man he was now—a man on his way to marry the most powerful heir on the continent in a time of disruption and danger to his family, all while trying to learn a new shift and prepare himself to let go of everything he'd ever known before to make a new start. Sy felt *bad* for Arven. He understood why he wanted his people to come along, and he knew that Petur did too.

But Petur also hated being dictated to, especially when it came from his sister. He had always been second in every way—second to their parents, second to her husband, and

second to her children. He had worked hard to become the most gifted shifter of his generation, the most gifted shifter in *three* generations, and it still wasn't enough to get his sister's respect. Sy understood that dynamic a little too well. Oh, how he understood it.

Perhaps this trip would provide uncle and nephew with an opportunity to reconcile. After all, it was a two-week journey to Rorech, three if they tried to be cagey. The wedding itself was in a month. That seemed like plenty of time to Sy, to bring about some sort of new balance to their relationship.

If only his own relationships could be so balanced. He glanced mournfully at Deyvid, wishing he was riding with them, but understanding why Tania had insisted they bend on this point.

“Arven mustn't be shamed!” she had insisted last night. “Now that you're married, brother, if you are to be seen with anyone in public functions, it should be your husband. Don't disgrace our family with your strange ways in a place where such things will reflect badly on my son. We don't want his new family thinking that *he* would be all right with this sort of behavior, after all.”

Arven hadn't said anything at that point, just stared at the floor. Petur had looked on the verge of calling off his involvement in the whole thing, so Deyvid had once again stepped in.

“We will be perfectly discreet, I promise you,” he'd said with a bow.

“Fine words. You're very good with those,” Tania had replied sharply. “But I'm not so easily seduced by your smooth voice, Harrier. Consider this your opportunity to restore some of my brother's honor by supporting him and his new spouse as they *must* be supported under the circumstances. Do I make myself clear?”

Clear enough that later that night, it was all they could do to keep Petur from punching the walls.

“Nothing we do together shames me,” he’d snapped as he prowled across their room like the wolf he was. “Nothing *any* of us do together shames me. The two of you could do nothing but lie in bed fucking all day, and I would be pleased, not shamed. How is it that the best people in my life are the darkest spots to her?”

“She’s a traditionalist,” Deyvid pointed out, rubbing a tired hand over his face. “Most of the people here in Delomar are. This is one place where Harriers actually have a leg up—marriages are traditionally between a man and a woman, but they are little more than a tool to bind two clans together. Keeping to a single partner is rare, and children are raised by everyone in the clan, not just their parents.”

“That’s all fascinating, but I don’t see what it has to do with my sister being a piece of—”

“Sweetheart. Please.” That tone of voice rarely failed to make Petur comply. He’d stopped moving long enough for Deyvid to come over and cup his face. “Don’t give her the power to hurt you with this.”

“She already has,” Petur said, deflated. He turned and held out a hand to Sy, and Sy came, making their two into three, accepted so easily and lovingly that he could hardly believe it himself. He was so fortunate ... Two men who were so deeply in love had nonetheless made room for him, and he could never do enough to thank them for that, not for the rest of their lives together.

I can’t tell them about the problem I had earlier. I just can’t. He could hear them worrying in his mind, see the concern on their faces. It simply wouldn’t do. “We’re all right,” he said and prayed with all his heart that it was true. “We’ll be all right. If getting through this means we must be a bit farther apart than we’d like for a while, it’s not forever.”

“Deyvid is the one who will suffer the most from it,” Petur pointed out, and Sy winced. He had a point. “You and I will be expected to be together, whereas his presence will be an anomaly.”

“I’ll survive,” Deyvid said, then smiled. “I’ve survived worse over the past few months.”

“Not funny,” Petur said.

“Not at all,” Sy agreed.

Deyvid’s smile only got wider. “Then perhaps you should punish me. It’s our last night alone for some weeks, after all.”

“You claim to be the mature one in our relationship, but you’re such an imp sometimes,” Petur said, moving them all over toward the bed.

The rest of the night passed pleasantly, but then it was morning and time to go. The shadowy predawn sky was purple, spotted with lighter clouds here and there as the sun made its presence known somewhere beyond the horizon. They were all riding lightly—Arven had a haul of things to go with them, but it was distributed across all their mounts now, so no carriage or wagon was necessary. They wore no official colors, and although their party was large and well-dressed, it wasn’t impossible that they could be mistaken for any group of nobles and not particularly a royal party.

Sy, for his part, had made some modifications to his spellwork. More people meant more blue jewels, and it had taken some time to get them all set and strung, but now each member of their party wore a close-fitting bit of braided leather with a spelled jewel in it so Sy could keep track of them all. Arven had taken his with ill grace, but the rest of his party had been stoic enough, and the guards who were acquainted with Sy already were enthusiastic to be receiving something magical.

“It’s so pretty too!” Lise said to him as the others were mounting up.

“And it’ll resize itself to stay on no matter what form you’re in,” Sy added. He was almost more pleased by the spell on the leather than he was by the gems. “So you can shift and not worry about losing it.”

“Gods above and below, that’s clever.”

Sy grinned. “Thank you.” He glanced around, looking for Deyvid. He’d gotten up even earlier than Petur, preparing to make himself scarce from the beginning. If there was one stupid advantage to be scraped from their forcible separation, it was that Deyvid would have a special kind of freedom when it came to looking out for the group.

Sy didn’t like him being out of sight, though. It was strange to be so worried about it when they were still inside the outer wall of the palace, but he couldn’t help it. He hadn’t traveled with Deyvid since his journey to Delomar, and back then he hadn’t understood how important Deyvid would become to him. And he’d been able to *see* him, unlike now.

He’s all right. He has to ... oh, no.

The feeling was creeping up over him again, the increase in heart rate and hesitance of breath. Not now. Not now!

Sy activated the covering spell at the side of his necklace before his companion could do more than stare a little quizzically at him. He’d modified the spell yesterday to present an acceptable baseline to the shifters around him—total silence would just worry them. A steady pulse, a smooth inhale and exhale—that was better. Sure enough, she turned away a moment later, leaving Sy to turn his face toward his saddle and breathe, just breathe.

The same swell crested and broke inside of him, faster this time, milder, but ... It had been less than a day since the first attack.

What was happening to him? How long did he have between these bouts of ... of ...

Nothing! He straightened his spine and dispelled the cover, managing to mount up when everyone else did. Petur glanced over at him, and Sy pulled off a smile.

They rode out of the palace yard in the loudest silence Sy had ever experienced.

Chapter Eight

The tightly packed houses of Delomar eventually gave way to the expanse of surrounding towns, and an hour of concerted riding after that, to broad-trunked trees and marshes that marked the road to Mersaighe. They were heading due south, and the climate changed quickly down here, nothing like the thick forests of pine that Sy had grown up with. The air was muggy but full of bright smells—citrus in the carefully managed orchards to the right, slowly flowing water in the streams to the left, and the verdant heat that came from sunlit water on leaves and low carpets of blueish-purple grass and emerald moss.

It was actually quite beautiful, tantalizing to all the senses in a way Sy hadn't realized he'd desired until he was in the middle of it. He breathed deeply, his chest absolutely pain free, and for the space of a score of miles and two breaks for the horses, he actually felt better than he had in his laboratory earlier in the week before any of these problems had come up.

“You're looking cheerful!” Lilian said as she brought her horse close to his. They were riding in the middle, a protected position, with two more guards on either side of them. Petur was riding in the front because of course he was, and Arven had insisted on being right there with him because of course he had. Keelie and Herow had them flanked, two of Arven's guards followed just behind, and then it was Lilian and Sy. She'd asked to be his escort because, as she'd put it in a low voice, “I prefer to feel like I'm not guarding someone who'd just as quickly bite *my* head off as a person who was attacking them.”

“I'm happy to be on the road again,” Sy said to her. “I didn't even know how much I missed traveling. It's not like I did all that much of it back in Bekkon, but ...” But he had, he realized. He'd gone back and forth between the capital of Kestre and the major towns freely and had spent plenty of time in his home village, researching herbs for spells. It was only since he'd moved to Delomar that he'd become effectively cloistered from the outside world.

“It’s something special,” Lilian agreed, her long blonde braid bouncing against her back as they slowed from a canter to a trot. “I love it, personally. I know the reason I was invited along for this assignment is because of my shrike form, but as much as I love flying, there’s nothing like feeling the ground beneath my hooves when I really get going in my deer form.”

Sy grinned broadly. “A deer! I’ve never seen someone shift into a deer before.”

“It’s a little awkward in the city,” Lilian said with a shrug, but he could tell she was pleased with his enthusiasm. “I come from a family of fliers on my father’s side, but the only shifter on my mother’s side was my grandmother, and her form was a white-tipped deer. When I learned I needed two forms to become a royal guard, I decided to work on the deer shift as a way to honor her. It was pretty easy for me to pick up, actually.”

“How do you pick up new forms?” Sy asked. “Petur told me it’s a little different for everyone, but there must be *some* similarities in the process from one form to the next.”

“There are some,” Lilian agreed. “The shrike was my first, and I figured it out as a child. That one was a matter of being surrounded by it, every day—I saw my father become a shrike, my brothers, my niece ... it made sense to me that I should be able to do it as well, and eventually I did. I just needed to settle into my human body before I could take another. Toddlers,” she added with a wry smile, “don’t become shifters, thank the gods above and below.”

“Blessed be,” Sy said fervently.

“As for the deer ... that was harder,” Lilian admitted. “I had to spend a lot of time observing them in the forest since my grandmother had passed by then, and it wasn’t a form for anyone else I knew. I’d fly in toward a herd as a shrike, shift to being a human, and watch them from the trees. Looking back, I might have had an easier time of it if I hadn’t been shifting so much *before* trying to learn a new form. It took me nearly a year, and I almost gave up by the end of it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. And I’m grateful every day for that because I’m the first in my family to master two shifts.” She beamed at him. “My parents were so proud. And it let me try for the rank of the guards, which is a high station for any shifter not born into the nobility. I—ah.” She pointed ahead toward a broad-winged shape flying toward them along the road. “Look, there’s Lise.”

Sure enough, the owl flew straight at the party. Petur called a halt, and Lise alighted on his outstretched arm, then hopped down onto the ground. A moment later, Lise stood up, naked but for her gemstone necklace and a little dusty. She brushed her hands off and shook out her graying hair, then said, “There’s a good place to stop about a mile ahead, a little way off to the west. Decent foraging for the horses, and it’s fairly defensible.”

Petur threw her a spare set of loose clothing. “Lead us there, then. Herow, you keep watch from the sky.” Herow, the most taciturn of all of Petur’s chosen guards, nodded and dismounted, then handed his reins over to Lise. He stripped down, bundled his clothes and shoes in his cloak, and tied them to his saddle, and a moment later a gorgeous blue heron took off into the sky.

“Pretty, isn’t he?” Lilian said when she saw Sy gaping. “His form’s rare north of Delomar, but the farther south you go, the more you find families with shifters that do well in the marshlands. It’s—ah, we’re off.” Lise had taken Herow’s horse, and now they were moving again, too quickly to make conversation easy.

Sy extended his senses to his spell, feeling out the course that Herow was taking in the sky, watching the strings of blue light interweaving in his mind as they rode. It was working, working well—he could sense everyone in the party and knew exactly where they were in relation to himself.

Except for Deyvid. It was disconcerting to look for him and not be able to see him the way he had last time they’d been on the road. Perhaps Petur would relax the strictures that Tania had insisted upon before they left the palace. He knew he wasn’t the only one missing their partner already.

They quickly reached the location Lise had spotted, and the guards began to build up their campsite as Arven and Petur helped tend to the horses. Sy went to unpack his bedroll but was distracted by one of Arven's guards, cursing as he slapped at one of the biting flies that had found them almost as soon as they stopped.

"Damn the creatures," he swore, then glanced at Sy. "Don't you have some sort of spell that would keep them off us, Highness?" There was a slightly mocking quality to his voice, but Sy ignored it.

"I'm afraid not," he said politely.

The man scoffed. "All the magic in the world, and it can't even hold back the bugs."

"Consider keeping your disrespectful mouth shut, Marc," Keelie said, hip-checking him as she walked by. "Before someone decides to shut it for you."

Marc laughed as he stood up. He was easily the largest of Arven's contingent of guards, even taller than Petur. "You think you could shut it, little girl? In your, what is it again ... *fox* form?"

"Better a fox than a big lumbering bear who couldn't take two steps through these woods without breaking a branch," she shot back. "And no, I think his highness could shut it for you quite effectively on his own."

"Easy way out, to lay capability at the feet of someone I'm not allowed to fight," Marc called after her. He glanced at Sy. "I'd never stoop so low as to challenge you to a match, Highness," he said, and now Sy was certain he was being mocked. "It would be terribly unfair."

"It would," Sy agreed. "Since my magic could freeze you in an instant. Unless," he added as the guard frowned, "you were insinuating we should have a match where I didn't get to use my magic while you were allowed to shift. You're right, that *would* be unfair."

"That's not ... I wasn't ..." Marc's voice stuttered to a halt, and his face went white as Petur stepped up to him from

behind and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“If you’re so eager to get the fire out of your blood,” he said in a companionable voice, “then you can have a match with *me*. You’d have to promise beforehand not to scream, though. We’re supposed to be discreet during this trip, after all.”

“Highness ... I’m sorry,” Marc managed after a second. “I meant no offense to you or your husband.”

“Oh, I know you didn’t,” Petur agreed. “Because if you had, we’d be fighting whether you liked it or not, and I’d just rely on Sy to silence your noise.” He let go of the man, who immediately took a step back. “Go see to Arven,” he snapped, and Marc bowed and bolted toward his prince, who was watching the scene with a furrow between his eyebrows.

Petur moved over to Sy and huffed in irritation. “Idiots,” he muttered.

“I don’t think it was really malicious,” Sy offered.

“They’ve been living on a boat for too long, with nobody to fight but themselves,” Petur said, sounding exasperated. “They’ve all got pent-up energy, I imagine, especially a bear shifter. Gods willing, we’ll have the opportunity to point him at someone other than the rest of *our* party before we get to Mersaighe so that he can get the violence out of his system constructively.”

Sy frowned. “What do you mean?”

Petur lowered his voice. “It’s not only because of our problem with assassins that we’re being cautious now. There’s been some talk among the noble circles in Rorech about this match being unsuitable for Kira, that she shouldn’t stoop to marrying Arven when he isn’t bringing his kingdom along as a dowry. They’re mages, you know—much like your nobles in Kestre tend toward magic, only with a more vicious edge. They don’t think much of shapeshifters, and apart from his shifting, Arven doesn’t have a drop of magic in him.”

Sy felt chilled. “You really think they’ll attack us on the road?”

“I don’t know, but I think it’ll benefit us to be careful,” Petur said. “And it’ll benefit Arven to take on another form as soon as he can because a dolphin won’t help him in Rorech, and a gull isn’t offensive enough. Arven!” he called out a second later. “It’s time to show me how far you’ve progressed with your wolf!”

Arven ground his teeth. Petur grinned.

“Don’t torment him too badly,” Sy said.

“Just enough torment, I promise,” Petur replied.

Oh, lovely. This is sure to go well.

Chapter Nine

Sy ended up sitting next to Lilian to watch Arven train, which at this point seemed mostly to amount to ... staring. Staring at Petur and Arven's wolf guard, Gerain, in their shifted forms and meditating. Everyone in the little glen was quiet, but after the first fifteen minutes with nothing at all happening except Arven blowing out a heavy breath and shaking his head a few times, Sy leaned closer to Lilian and asked, "Is this how it normally goes?"

"It's one method," Lilian replied, equally quiet. "Not the easiest way to my mind, but it's not always possible to be in among the creatures you're trying to replicate. If they're too twitchy or completely undomesticated, you can't get close enough for that sort of thing."

"But Arven knows both of them," Sy said, still confused. "Why isn't he sitting beside them, or, or walking next to them, or ... I don't know, anything other than static staring."

"I'm not sure," Lilian confessed. "Perhaps this is how the royal family prefers to learn. It's certainly a little more dignified than scratching at the dirt with the family dog or jumping on furniture with your cat."

But it isn't working. Sy could see how the lack of progress was frustrating Arven, and he wished he could do something to make this easier on him.

Petur abruptly shifted back to his human form, naked as the day he was born and just as indifferent to it. "How long have you been working at this?" he asked incredulously. Beside him, Gerain began shifting as well, more slowly, finally resolving into a well-built but quiet young man with shaggy brown hair and an eternally terse expression. "Because you're not even trembling in the right direction yet."

"I've gotten that far plenty of times!" Arven shot back. "I've nearly gotten to full shift before. Maybe you're just not showing me the right things."

Petur scoffed. “Right, because the gods are in the habit of granting us the magic to take forms that don’t exist in nature.”

“They did with your warrior form. How do I know your wolf is the true thing, given that?”

Everyone watching gasped. Even Petur looked mildly shocked before he schooled his face back into hardness. Arven flushed but held his ground.

“Oh, dear,” Lilian whispered.

“Wait, what’s that about?” Sy asked.

“Warrior forms are considered a hard-won blessing by most of us,” she said, “but some consider them to be abominations, against nature and Dur the Creator, specifically. When Prince Petur first developed his, on top of all his other forms, some said it was a sign that he was going too far and would soon lose his mind to the shift.”

“Lose his *mind* to the—”

“When a boy,” Petur said, interrupting Sy’s unhappy question, “who can’t master his third form and becomes petulant because of it lashes out at me, I don’t blame him. No. I blame the people who put the idea that he could handle a third form into his head.” He turned to Gerain. “Have you set him up to fail?”

Gerain shook his head quickly. “No, Highness. He’s capable of learning another form, I’m sure of it.”

“How many do you have yourself?”

“Three, Highness. Wolf, albatross, crab.”

“Quite the variety.” Petur nodded, but there was no approval in his eyes. “You must have received a great deal of instruction.”

“I have, Highness.”

“Then why is Arven’s shift still so abysmal, when you should have been bringing the benefit of your experience to

bear on him for the past two years? Are you gifted at learning only or being deliberately incompetent with him?"

"Uncle!" Arven shouted at the same time as his guards winced in unison. Petur pointed a finger at him.

"Unless you're a breath away from shifting into your wolf form, you'll shut up and not compromise our location more than you already have."

Lise stood up and bowed into the conversation. "Highnesses ... please. We're supposed to be as covert as possible right now. This yelling is not helping."

Arven swung to glare at her. "How dare you talk to me so!"

"Arven."

All of a sudden, it seemed like everyone was moving, to intervene or join the fray, Sy wasn't sure. He wanted to help, wanted to be a voice of reason, but just as suddenly he felt like he couldn't breathe. The pain was kicking in fast this time, clenching in his chest, radiating out from just beneath his ribs, and making him feel like he was being struck by lightning.

He got to his feet and staggered off, quickly triggering his spell as he did so. He made it about a hundred feet away and got to the other side of a tree, then let his body collapse in on itself, shivering and shaking as the pain roared through him. He felt like he was choking, like he might be dying. *This is so different from my mother's madness ... Is this how the sickness mutates for a male in the line?*

Is this better or worse?

Just like before, the pain gradually faded. His heartbeat slowed, his breath came easier, and a minute later, it was like nothing had ever happened, save for the lingering fear. Sy closed his eyes and rubbed the heels of his palms so hard he saw stars. *I can't do this, I can't do this, gods save me, how will I make it to—*

"Sy?" Warm hands cradled his wrists, and Sy gasped and dropped his hands to look at Deyvid, kneeling in front of

him with a look of concern on his rugged face. “What’s wrong?”

You can’t tell him! New resolve flowed through Sy at the sight of his lover. *You can’t make him and Petur do this alone.* “It’s a rough evening in camp,” Sy said after a moment. It wasn’t even a lie. “Petur and Arven seem like they’re a breath away from fighting each other, and the guards are at each other’s throats, and I feel completely useless. What if they really *do* start a fight? What would I do if ... if they ...”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Deyvid pulled Sy forward against his chest, and Sy gratefully took the opportunity to hide his tear-smearred face against his lover’s shirt. “Even if they come to blows, which I doubt they will, it wouldn’t be your fault or your responsibility. If you really feel the need to intervene and you have the energy for it, use the spell that slows time and shout for me. I’ll come and help you manage these idiots, I promise.”

Sy laughed a little, but it trailed off quickly. “I don’t understand why they’re so angry at each other,” he confessed. “Neither of them seems to have any patience for the other, and their discontent is spreading to the guards. This could be a *very* long journey if they can’t find common ground.”

“I’ve no doubt it will feel like that,” Deyvid muttered. “I think a lot of it’s growing pains. When Arven left, he was a boy on the cusp of manhood. Now he’s come back grown, and neither he nor Petur is sure how to make their relationship work after so much time apart. But they’ll learn, I promise.” Deyvid leaned back. “I could speak to Petur again if you like.”

“No.” Sy shook his head. “I can do it. I need to be able to talk to Petur about everything, right?”

“You can talk to both of us about anything you need to, Sy, you know that.”

I wish I could. “I miss you already,” he said instead, “and it’s only been a day. How am I going to go a whole night without you?”

Deyvid smiled. “Why don’t I give you something to remember me by, then?” He tilted Sy’s head just so, lowered his own, and—

Gods, this *kiss*. It began hot and soon felt like a furnace, feeding a need that poured through Sy and pooled in his groin as Deyvid’s mouth claimed his over and over. Apparently, his new condition didn’t have any sort of deleterious effect on his libido so far.

Sy pulled Deyvid in closer so that their chests were pressed against each other. A little harder and Deyvid would practically be in his lap, and if he was in his lap, Sy could rut up against his ass, and it would take next to nothing to come the way he felt right now.

Deyvid pulled back a moment later, breathing hard. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said, firm in both his apology and the inherent refusal within it. “I’ve got a job to do.”

“I know.” Sy did know, but damn it, he was *so* ready for release.

“I’ll report in person in the morning before you break camp,” Deyvid promised. “In the meantime ...” Deyvid’s look of contrition turned into a devilish grin. “I suggest you mention this to Petur when you have your talk with him later. I have the feeling he’s going to be *very* accommodating tonight.”

“It won’t be the same,” Sy said with a petulant frown.

“Not the same as the three of us together,” Deyvid agreed, pressing a final kiss to Sy’s lips before he moved back. “But that’s all right too. Even separated, we’re always a part of each other.”

Sy had never hated the fact that Deyvid was immune to his magic quite so much before. If only he could include Deyvid in the gemstone aura, they would *literally* be joined, part of a web that he could watch over and keep safe.

I’ll find a way. I swear to the gods, I’ll find a way.

I’ll find a way to let magic back into your life before I lose my own.

Chapter Ten

Sy didn't even have to say a word when he walked back to camp after making sure he was in control of himself before banishing his spell. Petur's nostrils flared as Sy got close enough to smell, and he smiled broadly. "Deyvid's already checked in, then?"

"Yes. He's fine." Sy took a seat beside Petur a little way back from the fire, where Lise was stirring a large iron cookpot full of something that smelled simple but sumptuous. "Nothing to report as yet."

"But plenty to say, it seems." Petur reached out, wrapped an arm around Sy's waist, and pulled him into his lap.

"Wha—" Sy squawked as he was pulled off-balance, righting himself and poking Petur in the chest. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Scenting you," Petur replied, his face already buried in Sy's hair.

Gods above and below, wasn't this awkward? Sy looked around the circle of guards in embarrassment, only to find that none of them looked disturbed in the slightest. Even Arven wasn't frowning for once; if anything, he seemed wistful as he gazed at them from across the flames.

"It's how a lot of us greet our lovers," Lilian said, smiling at him as she handed a stack of bowls over to Lise. "Scent means much more to a shifter than it does to regular people."

Sy stiffened slightly. *Can he smell the sickness in me, even with my precautions?* But no. Petur would surely say something if he could. It was still Sy's secret to keep, his burden to bear. And bear it he would until he made sure that his family was safe.

Petur did pull back after another moment. "Are you all right?" he murmured at near-inaudible levels, his lips pressed to Sy's ear. It was an offer of intimacy, of honesty and

connection—an offer for Sy to come clean even if Petur didn't know what he would be coming clean with.

It was time for Sy to misdirect, then.

He turned in his husband's grasp and reversed their positions. "I miss Deyvid," he whispered, and he knew that his scent would verify his feelings. "He left me something to remember him by tonight, though."

Petur chuckled. "Did he now?" Sy nodded. "You'll have to show me later."

Dinner was a reserved affair, quiet and quick. Three of the guards were posted to take the first watch, and Sy did his part setting up wards that would trip up anyone coming at them from above or up to a hundred feet out. They were nothing more than noisemakers—he didn't want to accidentally injure an innocent hunter or animal—but he wasn't willing to give anyone the benefit of the doubt.

When he and Petur finally settled down together, their shared tent on one side of the still-warm coals from the fire while Arven's was on the other, he checked the connections between the gemstones one last time.

"All present and accounted for?" Petur asked, trailing one hand absently along Sy's leg as he looked up at him from where he lay stretched out on his bedroll. Sy nodded but didn't speak, distracted by his husband's beauty.

It had taken a while for him to get used to the wildness in Petur, the spark of a shifter's magic that was always present in him, ready to leap out at a moment's notice. Petur was handsome, broad shouldered, and strong jawed, but more than that he was *alive*, one of the most intensely alive people Sy had ever met. He was all heat and spark and fierce energy, and Sy felt warmer just being in the same room as him, never mind in the same tent.

"Everyone's fine," he said a moment too late. Petur smirked. "Oh, stop it."

"No, I don't think I will." Petur's hand wandered farther up Sy's leg, fingers probing the fabric of his breeches

until they came to rest over his groin. Sy's breath caught. "I like you this way," he said.

"What way?" Sy asked breathlessly.

"Transfixed," Petur murmured, his glittering eyes locked with Sy's. "Like you can't bear to look away from me. Like I could have you any way I please, and you would only ask me for more."

"I would." It was a confession and a promise all at once, and Sy saw the effect it had on Petur, how his eyes darkened and his cock stiffened beneath the thin blanket that covered him. Shifters didn't seem to like to sleep with their clothes on—Petur claimed it was an impediment in case he needed to react quickly to a threat, but Sy thought that mostly he was just too hot with them on at night. Either way, the clinging cloth left almost nothing to the imagination.

"You said Deyvid gave you something to remember him by," Petur said, and his voice was a low rumble of desire. "Show me."

Sy smiled. "I'll do my best." He would too. Fuck what anyone else in this camp might think—if his time was limited, he was going to take every chance he could to make love to his husband and to Deyvid as soon as he got the chance.

"Our positions were rather different, but it started something like ... this." He swung a leg over Petur's body and settled against his midsection, teasingly close to his groin. "And then he leaned in like ... this." Sy bent over, dark hair falling across his forehead and against his cheekbones as he settled against Petur, whose even breathing had turned to short, sharp pants. "And then he kissed me like ... this." Sy sealed their lips together, and a second later his world turned upside down.

Literally—Petur growled into the kiss, then flipped them over, putting Sy on his back beneath him and pressing him down against the thin, firm bedroll as he began to rut against him. "Fuck," he said in a gravelly voice as soon as he ended the kiss, which had shattered Sy's ability to speak. "You smell like him, and like you, and like you want me."

“I do,” Sy said—begged. “I do, I want you, please—Petur—please, just—anything.”

“Anything.” Petur rasped the words against Sy’s neck, breathing him in deeply, again and again.

“Yes.”

“Anything at all?”

“Yes.” How much more would his husband torment him? “Petur—”

“I want you to scream,” he confessed. “I want you to let the world know how I make you feel, for everyone to hear you and know that I made that happen, *I* gave you pleasure that stripped away all your defenses and left you helpless beneath me.”

“You’re such ... a narcissist,” Sy gasped. “I just want you to fuck me. Will that suffice? Even if I don’t let the entire woods know about it?”

Petur raised his head and chuckled, and the mood went from tangled and dark to something a little brighter. “I suppose it’ll have to do.” He leaned in and kissed Sy’s mouth, then whispered, “But I’m not going to touch your cock.”

“You *fucking*—”

“Ah-ah, do you want the entire woods to hear your filthy mouth?” Petur tutted, leaning back and stripping off Sy’s clothes as quickly as he could without ripping them. He wasn’t usually so careful back at the palace—but then, Sy didn’t have many spares right now. “Absolutely shameless. Who knew I was marrying such a dissolute young man?”

“I’ll give you dissolute,” Sy grumbled and got the laugh out of Petur he’d been looking for. “Are you going to do anything other than stare at me, then?”

“Oh ...” Petur’s smile sharpened. “I can think of a few things.”

“A few things” turned into rolling Sy over onto all fours, spreading his thighs wide, then licking into his hole until Sy could barely breathe, much less scream. It was a little

strange to be in this position and not have a cock to suck on—to have to focus solely on his own pleasure rather than take what Petur gave him while he went down on Deyvid lying beneath him, his hands tangled in Sy’s hair as he pulled him farther onto his length. Sy gasped and groaned and got to the point where every fresh motion of Petur’s tongue made him shiver, each stab going a little deeper into his body, opening him up for his husband’s cock.

“Please, please,” he finally begged, so hard he was dripping on the blanket that Petur had abandoned. “Please, I need you.”

And maybe Petur needed Sy just as bad because he pulled back, and a second later, the light smell of linsoil filled the tent. He expected fingers, but he got the head of Petur’s cock instead, pressing slowly but steadily against his hole.

Sy did his best to relax. He wasn’t like Deyvid, couldn’t take the burn of Petur entering him with next to no prep, but it seemed that his husband had been very thorough with his tongue. Easier than Sy expected, he opened around Petur’s cock, and slowly, steadily, took him into his body until Petur’s hips were finally flush with his ass. With his chest pressed to Sy’s back, he used one hand to steady himself against the ground and the other to stroke Sy from the nape of his neck all the way down to his hip, where he finally grabbed on.

“Are you all right?” Petur asked. Sy inhaled, slow and deep, and asked himself the same question.

“Gods, yes.” It felt incredible, already like a release in some ways just to have Petur inside of him, over him, caring for him, *loving* him. “Fuck me.”

“As you command, my prince.”

Before Sy could snark back at him, Petur began to move. Every stroke was slow and measured, different from the power and abandon he used when he made love to Deyvid. Sy and Petur’s way was different, and that was good—it gave them something unique to enjoy, something that kept them from missing their third too dearly. Sy tried not to think about

it too much, about how Deyvid could be beneath him right now, sucking on him, or how he would have his own legs spread wide, his body cradling Sy as Sy fucked him, taken and taking at the same time, given and giving.

Petur wouldn't let him forget, though. "You feel so good around me," he whispered in Sy's ear before biting gently at the back of his neck. "I can still smell Deyvid on you, just a bit. Can you picture him laid out in front of you? Do you think you could take both of us at once?"

Sy's breath hitched. Deyvid had done that once, taken both of them inside his ass at the same time. It had been slow and careful and incredible. "I don't—I don't—know—"

"Hmm, what about here?" Petur pressed a finger gently against Sy's mouth and Sy sucked it in immediately, swirling his tongue around it and imagining it was Deyvid. "Ah, you feel so good. You'd be so good for him. You're good for both of us, the best, gods, how did we get so lucky with you?"

"Petur—*please*—" he mumbled around the finger. He was on the verge of coming; he needed just a little bit more, anything, the lightest touch—

"I have you, darling." Petur pulled his finger away, then reached down and very lightly ran the slick pad of it over the tip of Sy's cock.

Sy came immediately, clamping down on his husband and spurting so hard he couldn't breathe, much less scream. Petur picked up his pace and came with a harsh grunt of his own a moment later.

When they finally lay down together again, Sy was sore but in the pleasantest way possible. His chest still ached a bit, a memory of earlier events compounded by tonight's exertion, but it didn't make him afraid. Nothing could make him afraid right now. He leaned his head against Petur's chest. "I love you. I cannot even comprehend how much I love you and Deyvid at times. You're ..." He swallowed hard. "You're the best parts of my entire world."

“You make everything about my world better,” Petur said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He might find out soon ... but no. Now wasn’t the time for such thoughts. Sy nestled in more tightly and closed his eyes.

He fell asleep easily, and his dreams were full of light.

Chapter Eleven

The pattern continued, days of riding and strange nights that vacillated between intimacy and awkwardness. There were times when it was simply impossible to patch the hole that Deyvid's absence left behind, and by the sixth night, Petur was beginning to fray in a way that made him particularly snappish. His mood spread to Arven, and before long it was all Sy could do to keep them from tearing out each other's throats.

He was tired already from hiding yet another painful episode as they stopped for a brief lunch that afternoon. He was tired and exasperated and sad, and that was why when the ward first quavered he didn't recognize what was going on. He simply wasn't expecting it—everything had seemed solid since they set out, magic-wise. It was only the people who were buckling, not the spells. But ...

Suddenly, a light flickered in Sy's head. No ... not a light, it was part of the aura, but who ...

The light went out altogether.

"We're under attack!" he shouted. "Southeast corner! I can't feel Herow!"

Arven's guards immediately sprang into position around him, and Petur turned to face the threat, his fingernails already lengthening. "Magic or not?" he asked.

Sy focused, swallowing around the new dryness of his tongue. "Magic," he said at last. "But I can't feel who's behind it, it's too ... broad. It's spreading our way like a ... like a wave, or a swarm, or a—"

"The trees!" Lilian shouted. "Look at them!"

Sure enough, the trees ahead of them were moving like they'd suddenly been caught in a gale. Branches whipped back and forth, sending leaves flying. The *crack-crack-crack* of wood breaking against itself filled the air, the terrible wind steadily bearing down on them through the trees. Wood

splintered and bashed like standing stones falling into each other, a chain reaction of destruction.

A second before the wave of magic hit them, Sy wrenched off one of his earrings and spoke the words to activate the spell it held.

This wasn't like the spell that slowed down time. That wouldn't have helped—it would only have left Sy to deal with everything by himself, and he already knew he was going to need Petur for this. Instead, it created something like a magical anti-wave—not a firm barrier, but a layer of treacle-like thickness for another's magic to pass through. The bubble they were left in was only twenty feet wide, not much for so many people, but it was all Sy had the energy to maintain for now.

A branch swung at them, its tip moving faster than Sy could even see, but when it struck the edge of the spell, it faltered, the magic animating it having to force its way through the bubble. “Watch for the secondary attacks,” Sy called out. There would have to be some if this was a serious offensive. Yes—there—

He pointed, and Petur followed the line of his hand to where a green dart, looking like it had been shaped from the leaves itself except for the faint glow of magic around it, was coming at them.

“They'll burn like acid if you touch them,” Petur called out, and naturally he'd seen something like this before. “Use your weapons to knock them aside.”

“What ‘them’?” Arven asked, sounding surprisingly steady. “I only see the one.”

“There'll be more.”

And there were. It was like every fallen leaf had become a weapon, with tens, then hundreds coming at them, slowly piercing Sy's spell to continue their attack. Some faltered the moment they broke through, some didn't make it at all, but many were powerful enough that they required direct handling.

As many as the shifters cut down, more kept coming, and Sy was getting tired. His head throbbed brutally. One of Arven's guards took a dart through his arm, and he cursed as the wound began to hiss and sputter with poisonous magic. Sy doused it without a second thought, but then ...

Sy's chest began to ache.

No. Not now, I can't take this now. He couldn't take the time to falter—he had to find the mage controlling this storm. He needed to find them *now*. He needed to—

A second later, the magical wind abated. The branches ceased to beat, and the spell that had animated the leaves into the deadly devices they'd become vanished. Sy dropped his defensive spell with relief, and the pressure in his chest eased. Oh, thank the gods, perhaps he could delay it a bit.

“You three, move ahead and look for Herow,” Petur ordered the rest of his guards, who moved into the forest with grim determination. “Keep your noses open for the smell of magic. Don't set off any traps.” He turned to Sy, his warm, broad hands cupping Sy's bent elbows and doing most of the work of holding him aloft. “What happened? Why did the attack end so quickly?”

“I don't know,” Sy said, wheezing. He wanted to rub his chest, soothe the lingering pain that still threatened to break his heart to pieces, but he stopped himself. Barely. Petur's eyes narrowed. He sensed something was wrong and opened his mouth, but Sy shook his head quickly.

No. Not now, please. He didn't want to talk about it now, out in the open where all of the guards could hear. “I'm not sure what happened, but I know there must have been a mage powering this spell, perhaps two. It was too strong to have been left undirected.”

Petur accepted that at face value, thankfully. “What were they trying to accomplish?”

“I don't—know. I don't—” The pain rose up, stronger now, and Sy had no hope of hiding it. “Petur,” he gasped,

“please.” He didn’t even know what he was begging for, but Petur acted decisively.

“All of you, form up, faces out!” he commanded. Everyone left there, even Arven, moved instantly, forming a circle around Sy and turning away. Sy had just enough energy left to activate the spell that hid his reactions before the attack swept him under.

He screamed silently and felt Petur’s arms tighten around him. Gods, it hurt so badly, worse than ever before, and he was going to die, he was going to die in the middle of the forest after a deadly attack and leave his husband and their lover unprotected on the road ahead, what a failure, what a useless failure he was, gods, please, please ...

He wasn’t unconscious long. He knew he wasn’t, knew he couldn’t have been. His spell wouldn’t keep going for more than a minute without his active hold, but when Sy finally opened his eyes, the lines of worry on Petur’s face might have been the work of years of anxiety, not mere seconds.

“What happened?” he asked, voice pitched incredibly low. “Was it the attacking mage? Did they cast a spell on you?”

Sy swallowed against the tears that sprang to his eyes and tightened his throat. “No,” he said. “I wish it was that.”

That was enough for Petur to figure it out, to remember what Sy had shared months ago—his familial curse, the one that had claimed his mother. It had found him. “Oh, darling, no.”

“I’m sorry,” Sy gasped, and that was all he had time to say before Petur engulfed him in a hug, cradling him close.

“No, no,” Petur chanted. “No, darling, no sorries, this isn’t ... it isn’t your fault.” He kissed him again and again, on his forehead and cheeks and the top of his head. “Is this why you’ve been slipping off on your own?”

Sy squeezed his eyes shut. “You noticed?”

“I did, but I thought it was just the stress of everything, and you didn’t sound any different ...” Petur’s face went pale.

“Gods, we’ll have to tell Deyvid. Where is he? He should have come to us by now.”

He should have come to us sooner than now. Neither spell would have affected Deyvid, after all—no spells would. So why hadn’t he come?

What had *prevented* him from coming?

Sy straightened up, the last remnants of his pain fading away as he focused on one thing and one thing only: finding their lover.

Finding Deyvid.

Part Two: Deyvid

Chapter Twelve

It was the change in the wind that first told Deyvid something was wrong. Later on, he would despise himself for taking so long to notice, for something so obvious as magic disrupting the weather to be what it took for him to make the connection. There were plenty of excuses for his inattention, but none of them were good ones.

He had trailed the party by a good quarter mile all day, watching for anything or anyone that might be following them. After they made camp, he gradually slipped ahead, looking all around for signs of trouble, hints of incoming disaster, and finding nothing. His stomach grumbled, informing him that he hadn't eaten since the mouthful of bitter fruit he'd plucked from a low-hanging branch that morning. It was like he could hear Petur saying, *How do you expect to look after everyone else when you're not looking out for yourself?*

Not for the first time, Deyvid wondered how smart it really was for him to be apart from the group. The tactics were sound—he had a different skill set and was looking for different threats—but so far, he hadn't seen anything along the road or its nearest environs that made him suspect they were being watched or followed. More and more, he was convinced that if there was going to be some sort of attack, which with the way their odds had worked out lately was almost a guarantee, it would come from the front.

If it was magical or had been designed by a particularly patient Harrier, it could have been set up weeks or even months in advance. This road was a common one for travel to Mersaighe, and while the extra traffic afforded them some anonymity, the pressure of time and the need for speed made it the obvious choice for an ambush.

Besides, he might be able to detract from some of the tension in camp if he was there. As petulant as he'd seemed lately, Arven *did* like Deyvid. Sy, for all his many winsome attributes, didn't have the time or the innate personality to

charm the prince to his side, and Petur certainly wasn't going to help the situation.

Deyvid would join them in camp tonight and make the argument that he should join the advance guard rather than be the rearguard. He would still leave early and return late every day, but that way, at least he could be in camp at night even if he wasn't able to sleep with Petur and Sy.

He frowned as he prowled forward, eyes on the ground but mind miles away. Sy was looking more fatigued every day—Deyvid had gotten close enough to confirm that much, and he didn't like it. Sy might not be a hardened fighter or scout, but he was in good enough shape that these days ought to be fairly manageable. Instead, he seemed to—

Whhhhssshhht. The gentle, barely there breeze that had been playing along the edges of his cloak all day suddenly sent a flurry of leaves up into the air. Deyvid sank into a crouch and looked around, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Was it merely a dust devil, or was there a worse kind of devil at work here?

His cloak whipped about, but Deyvid could barely feel the air moving against his skin. Magic, then. Leaves fluttered down against his body, and when he saw what they'd been the moment before they impacted him, he swore. *Gods curse this fucking mage to hell.* Deyvid broke into a run, heading not for camp but around the edge of the area he could see the spell impacting. Sy could protect them from magic. Deyvid was the one meant to protect them from the mage.

He found Herow on the easternmost part of the spell's circumference, lying face-first in a stagnant pool of water, half shifted. He looked like he'd been caught catching a fish in his heron form, or perhaps he'd been targeted as he flew above and had partially shifted in his agony. Deyvid's heart ached for him, but he didn't stop moving. He'd covered more than half the circle now—the mage had to be close.

Twenty seconds later, a fresh flurry of leaves erupted around him, spinning and twirling so densely he could hardly see beyond them for a moment. Before his eyes, they lost their

magically induced sharpness and turned back into the harmless detritus they were. This wasn't part of the larger spell, then. This was something set to take out anyone who got close to the person controlling it.

Deyvid stepped out of the swirl of leaves, low to the ground and barely moving except for his eyes. He was surrounded by bushes and tall, broad trees, and the running water nearby obstructed his hearing, but he had been hunting mages down since he was a boy. He heard the gasp and saw the flutter as whoever it was handling this deadly barrage stumbled into their hideaway, a well-concealed blind fifty paces away.

Deyvid set his jaw and advanced, careful to keep an eye out for traps that *could* affect him. He was hit with two more fruitless wafts of leaves before he saw the edge of the beast trap that had been buried in the pile of leaves just in front of the blind. He kicked it, digging his toe in deep beneath the soil it was set on and up into the metal side and sending it shooting end over end into the blind.

It snapped. A man screamed. A second later, the blind was nearly torn apart by the mage inside of it, struggling to free his bleeding, partially severed hand from the trap.

Deyvid cut his throat before he could get that far. *You're welcome, you filth.* The spell died, leaves falling back to where they belonged, and Deyvid heaved a sigh of relief. He ought to go check in on the others, but he would look for more traps before he—

An arrow impacted his right hip, sending him spinning around onto the ground. Deyvid gritted his teeth as he pulled it free—it was lightweight, likely fired from a rider's short bow instead of one of the great longbows that a Bekkon or Mersaighan ranger might use. It had barely managed to penetrate the thick leather belt he wore, leaving him with nothing more than a pinprick of broken skin next to his hip bone.

He saw the next one coming and cut it out of the air as he jumped to his feet. There, in the trees—so well

camouflaged in gray and brown he almost couldn't make them out—there was the shooter. He raced forward, speed his ally now. If this person was working in concert with the mage, they would probably try to run, to keep from being interrogated by the people they meant to kill.

They didn't run. They fired three more arrows, and one came so close to Deyvid that it actually penetrated his hood, ripping it back from his face. Once he was too close for arrows to be effective, they jumped down from the tree and threw two long, spike-like daggers straight toward his eyes.

Deyvid leapt into a roll, coming up inside throwing range. His attacker had already drawn their blade, and Deyvid knew without a doubt that despite the cloth covering their face, he was now facing the same High Harrier he had months ago in the palace garden. The one who'd sent him on a chase that had led through the sewers and back.

Deyvid grinned fiercely. Oh, it would be a *pleasure* to kill them now.

His opponent thrust straight at his face, a bold opening move. Deyvid parried and brought his own sword around in a scything cut toward his opponent's neck. A High Harrier carried blades unique to their status—curved like the Harrier cavalry used but shorter and with a killing edge on both sides of the blade instead of just one.

The assassin dodged his strike as he'd known they would. Deyvid was already bringing his back edge around for the follow-up, though, cutting down toward his opponent's legs. They leapt back but not before he scored a strike across their right thigh. It was a shallow wound but bled messily.

Their eyes were wide where they peeked out through the cloth mask, and their sword hand seemed to tremble for a moment. Deyvid felt an unwelcome sense of compassion for the poor fool in front of him. Whoever they were, they had been duped into becoming a killer, fooled into thinking that the clans cared about them for more than the strength of their terrible skills. They moved like they were young, fast, and fearless, and that was going to be their downfall now.

Deyvid already knew he would cut this poor killer to pieces, lame them until their speed was just a memory, and then move in to kill them with far more ease than they merited. Ah, well. He would say the proper prayers over their corpse.

He struck again, a low gutting motion that was parried aside. On the slide out, he caught them again, this time across their free arm. The assassin hissed, a high, almost childlike noise, and Deyvid felt a kernel of worry erupt inside of him. This person was so slight, so small. Were they still a child? Had it become so dire in the Plains that the clan leaders sent High Harriers who hadn't even reached maturity out into the field?

They tried to kill you, he reminded himself. More than once. They would kill your loves and cut your affection right out of your chest. They don't deserve your compassion. Still ...

"Drop your sword," he said.

The assassin didn't bother to answer, just levied a ferocious attack that actually beat Deyvid back a few steps, forcing him to dodge instead of parry until he caught up. He slapped his opponent's blade down, then hammered a kick right into their stomach. They flew half a dozen feet through the air, landing on their back not far from where Herow's sorry corpse still rested.

"I won't tell you again," Deyvid said, stalking forward. They were gasping, still holding onto their sword, but it was clear they wouldn't be using it any time soon. Still, they gamely tried to bring it to bear as he stood over them. He kicked it out of their hand, then crushed their wrist to the ground with the heel of his boot for good measure. They made another pitiful gasp.

"Surrender, and I may show you mercy." By giving them a quick and painless death, most likely, but it was still a decided mercy.

Narrowing their eyes, they shook their head fiercely. Deyvid sighed. "Very well. Go to our gods with grace." He raised his sword, readying it to stab them through the heart.

“No!”

Deyvid paused. That hadn't been the assassin. That was Sy, stumbling toward him through the trees, Petur right beside him. Half a dozen of the guards flanked them, with Lise heading immediately to where Herow lay.

“No,” Sy repeated, breathless. He looked awful, like he hadn't slept for days. What was wrong with him? Had a spell gotten the better of him? “You mustn't kill her.”

Her. It was a woman? Deyvid looked back down at the High Harrier. He supposed he could see it in her shape, well hidden behind loose folds of cloth. “Why not?” Though rare, a woman could be a High Harrier, and she had attacked him first.

“Because,” Sy began, then stopped. He bit his lip, then stared inexplicably at Petur, who sighed heavily.

“Because she's your daughter,” Petur said, and Deyvid's hearing ...

And vision ...

And every other sense faded away from the force of the shock that coursed through him like a thunderbolt, utterly excruciating in every way.

Alie?

Chapter Thirteen

Deyvid wasn't sure when he ended up on the ground. All he knew was that when he regained his senses, he was sitting slumped over his bent knees, resting his head on his arms. Sy was pressed against his back, holding onto him tightly, like he was afraid Deyvid would simply vanish if he didn't keep him anchored to this place. He felt like he might vanish, honestly—he wanted to. Anything seemed better than confronting the reality in front of him, the truth that he had failed his child, utterly and completely.

His child. His daughter, Alie. Deyvid lifted his head and blinked until his vision came back into focus. The High Harrier was still there, but her eyes were closed, and she wasn't moving. Petur looked up from where he was tying her hands together behind her back.

“I had to knock her out,” he said grimly. “Carefully, I promise, but she just wouldn't stop fighting.”

No, of course she wouldn't. Not when she'd been taken captive by the very people she'd been hunting. Or ... not hunting all of them. Just him.

Just him.

It had been her who'd attacked him in the palace gardens. It had been her, sidling up next to him with a fan fluttering in front of her face at the ball and stinking of marlroot, poisoning him without a second thought. She had worked with the man who'd drugged Petur, taking his control away and turning him into a raging beast in the hopes that he would kill the ones he loved.

She had done all of that to him, without a second thought. His baby girl, who he'd sung to sleep every night from her birth to the day he had to leave her, who he'd taught to ride her first pony and to stitch her first row. He'd shared his mother's blanket with her and watched her face light up with delight as the spells inside of it warmed her on those cold, windy nights when not even the thick walls of their tent could keep the bitterness at bay.

How had this happened? How had she become the very thing he'd longed for her to escape? How had she been turned into a monster like him?

"Alie." He reached a hand out for her, his voice barely a croak. "I need to ... I need to see her, to ... we have to ..."

"Later." Petur knelt down beside him. "Later, all right? I'll tell you everything later, everything I can, and we'll figure out what to do with her, but right now—"

"What do you mean, what to do with her?" Arven demanded. He and his guards were standing off to one side, their expressions ranging from confused to outraged. "Kill her! She's an enemy, she did her best to kill Deyvid! She was working with the mage who tried to murder all of us!"

"We don't know that," Sy said, turning to look at Arven. "It's highly unlikely any mage would want to work with a High Harrier. They'd never be able to trust them."

"And yet *you* seem to trust the High Harrier in your arms just fine," Arven replied dryly. "You give lie to your own words. We should assume they were working together without evidence to the contrary, and that means she needs to die."

"It means we should interrogate her to find out the truth," Petur cut in, his eyes glowing gold for a moment. "Not simply kill off a potential source of information. And if anyone is going to do any more killing here, it's going to be me."

"Listen to you! Look at Herow," Arven said, pointing at the body of their fallen guard. "You would place the life of a clear enemy above the lives of your own people?"

"I would have my nephew sit in reflection for a moment on the other reality at hand here, which is that we've just weathered an attack by a Mersaighan mage." Petur nodded his head toward the other corpse in the woods. "Look at his clothes. Look at the lining of his cloak, the leatherwork of his bracers. Check the stitching. That circular pattern is a court affectation in Rorech."

“We already knew that there were people there who disapprove of the match between Kira and me,” Arven said, sounding a little more subdued. “And we knew they might try to lay in an ambush for us. How does this change anything?”

“It changes things because now we have an idea of the timing. This was an elaborate spell, not the sort of thing a mage could set and forget.”

“He would have had to have been on site to keep so many components in place,” Sy confirmed, his breath warm against the back of Deyvid’s neck.

Deyvid himself felt chill, cold right down to his bones. He knew he ought to be listening harder, knew there were lives on the line right now, but all he could do was look at his daughter. She was thin, so thin, and the wisps of gray hair around her face were lank and lifeless. She looked exhausted. How long had *she* been out here, hunting him?

“We left nearly a week ago,” Petur went on, “and you only returned a few days before that. When did you message Kira about coming to her?”

“Uh ... she messaged me first when I was on the boat, and I responded. Then I, I messaged again the night before we left. But ... the messages are magical, tied directly to her and me. Only the two of us can use them.”

“But other people can *see* you use them, can’t they?” Sy said, not unkindly. “How many people do you think the Princess of Mersaighe privately messages? How many people are expecting her to be married any day now and might correlate seeing a message arrive to news from their spies in Delomar? How many people in her court would be interested in putting a stop to your marriage before it has a chance to happen?”

“But we thought of that, we did,” Arven insisted. “She told me she sends these as a regular part of her correspondence to various officials throughout the day. No one would think it was anything special.”

“Not on her end,” Sy said. “So perhaps, then, it was seen as special on *your* end and communicated to another afterward.” He pressed a kiss to the side of Deyvid’s neck, then stood up. “I think it’s time we checked our party for foreign magic.”

One of Arven’s guards shifted. “You can do that?”

“Of course. It’s simple enough, and I promise it won’t hurt a bit.” He whispered something, rubbed his thumb over the silver ring inlaid with tiny red gems on his hand, and then ...

A brief flash of red light encompassed Gerain, the wolf shifter, the one who was meant to teach Arven a third form. He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked straight at Arven. “You were never meant to be hurt,” he said in a voice full of regret.

Arven looked like he’d just had his heart carved out of his chest and offered back to him still beating, like he was bleeding to death but not given the dignity of actually dying. “But ... you never ... Ger, you’ve always supported me. *Always.*”

“And I am still supporting you,” Gerain insisted. He dropped onto his knees and lifted up his hands in supplication. “I swear, you were never meant to be hurt. The purpose was only to convince you to turn back, to make the marriage not worth the danger you would face in Rorech. This is *nothing* compared to what could await you there,” he said, desperation clear in his voice. “The princess has angered many by choosing you, and it would take the entire court of Delomar to protect you against the lair of magic you’re heading into. It is a death sentence and not something you should be forced to bear for the sake of an alliance you don’t even need.”

“But we do need it!” Arven almost shouted. “The Harriers are pushing harder against the northern border every day! We have no great standing army like Mersaighe and no flying griffin force or advantageous position like Bekkon. Harriers will ride through our country like fire and burn it as

they go, and we don't have the shifters or the magic to hold them back. With my marriage to Kira, we will."

Deyvid closed his eyes. He didn't want to listen to this, didn't want to hear his people's future crimes laid out so starkly, but he also knew there was a great deal of truth to it. Every shifter who wasn't a member of the royal guard was stationed on the border, and they were a subtle and powerful force, but they were still vastly outnumbered. Attempts to create a formal army had been laughed off by the queen, especially after Arven's engagement was secured. Without the griffins and Bekkon's archers backing them up, Riyale would likely already have been invaded.

Without an alliance with Mersaighe, that invasion became a matter of when, not if.

All the more reason to set the royal family in disarray. He looked at his daughter again. All the more reason to send out the assassins. Sow chaos and reap blood.

And my poor Alie caught up in it.

This is my fault.

"You got Herow killed," Petur said to Gerain. His eyes still glowed, his body on the edge of its shift. "One of your comrades. One of my oldest friends."

"I wish it hadn't happened that way," Gerain replied dully. "The attack was meant to be a, a buffeting at best, damaging and dangerous to be sure, but no one was meant to die."

"We would all be dead if Sy hadn't saved us."

Sy, who looked worse and worse by the day. What was happening to him? What was he hiding from them?

Or ... was he just hiding it from Deyvid?

Claws appeared at the tips of Petur's fingers, growing longer and thicker by the second. "The sentence for betrayal is death, so—"

"No."

Petur glared at his nephew. “Arven—”

“I said no!” Arven pointed at Alie. “You wouldn’t let us kill her, and she *also* tried to murder someone you love. And *I* won’t let you kill Gerain.”

“This isn’t a negotiation.”

“Then uphold the law equally and kill the High Harrier.”

Petur and his nephew stared at each other in silence for a long time before Petur finally shook his head, and Deyvid let out a breath he had barely realized he was holding in. “What a fucking mess,” Petur snarled, then whirled on his guards. “Back to camp. Pack up. We’re changing locations.”

“It’s very late,” Lise began. “We could—”

“We don’t know who else the dead mage might have been working with and told our location to, so no. We move, now. Bind him.” He pointed at Gerain. “And take his messaging papers and burn them.”

Order took hold of the chaos, guards moving to get their prince’s orders done. Deyvid didn’t move. Not until Sy came close and tried to embrace him again. Then he leaned back, out of reach. Sy looked puzzled. “What is it?”

“You knew it was her.” The way Sy and Petur shared a troubled glance made Deyvid’s blood boil. “You both *knew* she was my daughter. Since when?”

“Deyvid—”

“*Since. When?*”

“Since your poisoning,” Petur said, his voice rough. “I went out in search of information, and I found her. And your father.”

“Ah.”

When he didn’t say any more, Sy spoke up. “Petur told me about it, and we agreed that it was ... best you didn’t know until you had recovered.”

Deyvid nodded, feeling like a rock had lodged in his chest where his heart used to be. “But I’ve been recovered for months now,” he rasped. “Yet you didn’t speak.”

“Deyvid ...”

“No.” He pushed to his feet. “I don’t want to hear anymore. Not until we’re somewhere safe.”

“But you’ll listen to us?” Sy asked, his voice small but hopeful. “You’ll hear us out?”

Honestly, right now Deyvid would rather eat glass. “We’ll see.”

Chapter Fourteen

Deyvid knew he'd have to be the one to tend to Alie. He couldn't leave her to the care of someone else, someone who undoubtedly wouldn't be as cautious with her as he would be. Caution was important, not just because she was injured but because she was dangerous. Dangerous enough to kill.

Dangerous enough to kill me. To want to kill me. I failed her, failed her terribly, miserably.

Their new camp was a smaller clearing, deeper in the woods, and dank with the smell of rotting vegetation. Everyone was on edge, snappish and snarling and on the verge of shifting thanks to the nearness of Herow's body. Petur had already planned to slink off alone, make provisions for him in the next town, have him burned at an altar to Dur like all shifters should be, and give the priest money for the proper prayers and rites. It was the most he could do. For all that true secrecy had been beyond them so far, there was still sense in assuming they had reason to remain careful. That meant Herow's death must remain a secret for now.

His parents would be devastated. Deyvid remembered first meeting them when their son was brought on to the royal guard. They had been so proud, a shifter family honored to see their son ascend to the heights of his profession and skills. And now he was dead.

Herow was dead, Alie was a High Harrier, Gerain was a betrayer, and there was something wrong with Sy ... the list of heartache went on and on. He had to shut himself off from it or risk it sweeping him under completely, rendering him incapable of doing his duty. Deyvid forced his thoughts into a dark place in his mind, smothered them in the necessities of their situation, in the things he *had* to do, and left them for now.

Grieving would come later. First he had to see to the High Harrier.

By the time they were settled into their new camp, Alie was awake. She watched them all with terrible stillness, and

the hopeless anger in her eyes made Deyvid yearn to reach out to her. He knew what she was feeling, why she was so confused. She had *woken up*. She was alive, not dead; that could only mean bad things for her. Interrogation, torture, degradations of the worst sort—Deyvid could well imagine what her instructors had told her to expect from shifters.

Beasts, utter beasts. They will hurl themselves upon you, rend you, violate you in any way they can. Rape you until you bleed and eat you alive and make you die screaming. It's better to kill yourself than to be taken by an enemy like that.

And here was her father, living with them. Did she think he would do those things too? Did she think that he ... that he ...

Bile rose up in his throat, and Deyvid turned away from Alie and spit to the side, hoping she wasn't watching. Gods, the mere thought of such things gave him horrors and made him feel like he'd never be clean, never be whole. Deyvid had been missing a piece of his heart ever since giving his daughter up, ever since leaving her behind to save what he could of his soul. Now that piece was returned, but it was made of poison.

"Deyvid." Sy was there again, speaking quietly, staring at him with his soft, dark eyes. He didn't touch, but he looked like he wanted to. He looked ... *ill*, exhausted, and Deyvid's heart hurt even worse to see him so unwell. "Are you all right?"

"No." Deyvid could only be blunt right now. "I'm not." Sy blanched and took a step back, and Deyvid let him go. If he touched him right now, he would crack, and he couldn't afford to fall apart right now. "And neither are you, it seems."

"Deyvid, please. Let me explain." He glanced over at Petur, who was discussing something with his guards. "Let *us* explain."

Well, that settled that. "So he does know."

"Deyvid, *please*—"

“I have to see to Alie. We’ll talk,” he offered, unable to crush his lover completely. “I said we would, and we will. But I’m the best choice for dealing with her right now.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

Deyvid tightened his jaw at the slight. “Good to know what you think of my capabilities, then.”

“It’s not that!” Sy cried, then lowered his voice when everyone turned their way. “It’s not that, I promise. I know how capable you are, of course I do, but I also know that you love your daughter. It can’t be easy to face all of ...” He waved his hand in Alie’s direction, a vague but encompassing way of indicating the terrible mess of it all.

Deyvid shook his head, so weary now that the fighting was over. “Nothing in my life has ever been easy. This is no different.”

“It is, though.” Sy stepped back in. “This is your daughter.”

“And I should see to her,” Deyvid repeated, and this time Sy only nodded. Deyvid turned away and walked over to the tree Alie had been placed by. He observed her from a few yards back for a moment before sighing and shaking his head. “Damn fools.” Then he closed the distance, and before she could even shout, used the sole of his boot to push her onto her front.

The bindings around her wrists were halfway severed already, thanks to the sharp, rugged thorn bush the tree was situated next to. Her hands were a mess as well, blood oozing from half a dozen lacerations, but she wouldn’t care about a little thing like that right now.

“You came close,” Deyvid commented, then dodged the kick she sent lashing up at his face. She used the tip of one of her boots to fling a dislodged thorn at his face, but he blocked it with his cloak. “Very good.” He remembered learning such things himself during training. “But not good enough.”

He kicked her leg aside, deliberately hitting bone to bone to deaden her limb with the force of the blow. She screamed angrily, tried with the other leg to the same effect, then did her best to wrench her wrists apart. The bindings held ... barely.

Alie was next to frantic with fury and fear, and Deyvid hated that he couldn't do anything to soothe her. She would never trust that impulse from him. The next best thing was to be as brisk and distant from the process as possible. He took another set of bindings from the small bag that sat at the back of his waist beneath his cloak, a heavy blend of leather and fabric embedded with metallic threads that would snarl and twist the more whoever wore them struggled. They were incredibly effective and terribly expensive as well—once they were snarled, they would stay that way. But they were all Deyvid trusted to hold a High Harrier.

He grabbed his canteen and poured its contents over her bloody arms, ignoring her shriek at the sudden drenching, then followed it with a dusting of cleansing powder that he knew for a fact burned like fire. She was still cursing him when he slapped the new bindings on her, fastening them at her elbows before removing the shredded ones at her wrists.

Her new leverage let her grab another thorn, stabbing it back at him with all the skill of a trained assassin. Deyvid didn't even bother to block it, just let the thorn break against the heavy leather of his breastplate, then wove his right arm in between her bent arms, put his palm on the back of her head, and drove her face-first toward the moist earth.

“Curse you, you son of a—” The rest of her exclamation was swallowed by the ground as Deyvid moved the bindings down, tightening them as he went.

“Mind what you say about my family,” he said as calmly as he could manage, pulling the cords tight enough to make her skin blanch, then backing them off slightly so she didn't lose her hands. “It is, after all, yours as well.”

“You're not my family! You're *nothing* to me!”

“I’m enough for you to try and kill me three times.” Three direct attempts. Three failures. “One would think you weren’t trying hard enough.”

“Give me one of my daggers, and I’ll show you how hard I can try!”

Deyvid pulled her upright and sat her back against the tree, moving on to bind her ankles, then her knees. “If you need to relieve yourself, Lise will help you,” he said, catching the eye of the older woman, who nodded grimly. Lise had fulfilled this role before and knew how to be careful with particularly dangerous cargo. “You’ll be given water and food, but if you need more of either, tell me, and I’ll see it taken care of.”

Alie sneered at him. “I’d rather die than accept anything from your hands, you filthy beastfucker.”

Oh, the bravado. How well confidence and volume covered a multitude of uncertainties and sins. Deyvid leaned in close, raising his forearm just in time to keep Alie’s forehead from hitting the bridge of his nose. He used his arm to press her head back against the tree and held her there, forcing her to meet his eyes.

“I don’t know everything you’ve been told about me over the years, but I can guess at most of it,” he murmured, keeping his voice low for all the good it did—every shifter in the camp could hear what he was saying, and Sy was still standing close enough he could probably make it out as well. “You probably blame me for every moment of pain in your life.

“And you’re right to. I should have taken you with me when I ran, but I thought ...” He swallowed against the sudden tension in his throat. “I thought your mother would do right by you. I thought she would let you grow into your rightful place as a clan leader. I never dreamed she would feed you to your grandfather’s ambitions.”

“What else could she do, after you dishonored our entire family?” Alie hissed. Her teeth were bared like she would sink them into his throat if she had a chance. “After

your actions debased our clan? Grandfather gave me what I needed in order to fix your mistakes!”

It was everything Deyvid had dreaded, nothing surprising him even though hearing it confirmed this way hurt, like a blade in the gut. “Do you remember nothing of it, then?” he asked. “Nothing of me before I left? Nothing of gentleness at all?”

Alie spit on him. He barely felt it. “What is gentleness but weakness?” she asked, equally quiet but still venomous. “All I remember of you is the blackness of a new moon above the Plains. Nothing, in every direction. No love, no guidance, no pride. I wish you were dead. I wish *I* had been the one to kill you.”

How could a heart feel such pain and still beat? “You may yet have the chance,” Deyvid murmured. Perhaps ... perhaps he could—

“Sy!”

Deyvid turned just in time to watch Sy, clawing at his chest with both hands and a look of agony on his face, convulse and fall back into Petur’s arms.

Chapter Fifteen

Deyvid held Sy in a loose embrace, watching his lover sleep. It had been almost an hour since the curse had overwhelmed the younger man, leaving him wrung out with exhaustion, tears seeping from the corners of his eyes. In the face of so much pain, Deyvid had deliberately pushed his anger aside and dedicated himself to making Sy as comfortable as possible. Since that meant putting up with Petur hanging close as well, he did, though his anger in that direction was harder to hold back.

Ten years of devotion, and they seemed to mean nothing to the man. Ten years of love and dedication and faith, the two of them allied together against the world, and yet Petur had decided to keep Alie a secret. To keep what was happening to Sy a secret. Deyvid didn't know how to deal with that yet, but he knew shouting wasn't the answer. A raised voice never worked on Petur—he thrived on the energy of direct conflict, and now wasn't the time for it anyway.

The camp was quiet, everyone subdued after a long and harrowing day. Even Alie had stopped glaring about as though she was envisioning setting fire to them all, finally succumbing to exhaustion. The watchers were silent at their sentinel duty, and Deyvid was almost tempted into letting himself fall asleep as well.

He couldn't, though. Not with what was pressing on his mind, and especially not with the way Petur kept stealing glances at him like he was working himself up to speak. Deyvid didn't really want to listen to what he had to say right now, but he *did* need to talk to him.

“We ought to turn back.” He said it as quietly as he could manage so Sy wouldn't be woken up. Petur still heard it—of course.

He shook his head. “We can't.”

“Petur.” Deyvid put as much steel as he could into Petur's name, and if the way the shifter flinched was any

indication, he felt the sting of it. Nevertheless, he straightened his spine and shook his head yet again.

“We *can't*. There's too much at stake, and the longer we delay now, the harder it will be to come this way again later.”

“We could bring more people later, make a genuine show of force,” Deyvid reasoned. “Sy needs rest, not to be riding fourteen hours a day.”

“We can't afford a show of force with Mersaighe, and you know it,” Petur argued. “It would defeat the entire purpose of leaving like this in the first place and give the doubters in Rorech too many arrows to sling about Arven's precarious position in his own land, much less theirs. No. We have to keep going. We're over halfway there.”

“And what will we do now once we get there?” Deyvid asked. “Will Sy even be *able* to ride at that point, much less able to protect Arven and the rest of you from magical attacks before the wedding? Will we have a sufficient presence in the court there to demand an investigation?”

“And what will we do with Alie?” he went on, not liking to think about it but unwilling to avoid the topic. “We can hardly bring another High Harrier into the royal court of Mersaighe. It was hard enough getting dispensation for me to join you.”

Mersaighans, being a far more magically reliant society than Riyalians, were correspondingly more paranoid about people who could resist their primary defense. Shifters, they didn't fear—a shifter could be halted with the right kind of spell as easily as a regular human. But a High Harrier? They were the stuff of nightmares to Princess Kira's royal court.

Petur shifted uncomfortably. “We may have to handle her before we get that far.”

Deyvid narrowed his eyes. “If you're suggesting we kill her before we reach Rorech, you're going to want to rethink that.” He would tolerate a lot from his lover—had

tolerated a lot from him, over the years—but he wouldn't be moved on this point.

“No. No, of course not.” Petur shook his head tiredly. “Gods, if I thought death was the best option for this situation, I'd have killed her myself before there was any chance of you finding out her fate. I had ample opportunity, and I didn't take it.” His chuckle was bitter. “Which I find I regret now, somewhat, but it's done. Your daughter is alive, and she's going to stay that way if I have anything to say about it.”

Deyvid felt the coil of tension that had wound itself up inside his heart release. He didn't want to think Petur would try and kill Alie now, but Petur was ruthless in pursuit of the safety of the people he loved. Deyvid wouldn't—couldn't—put such an action past him without Petur saying it himself. “Then what?”

“The only option I see going forward is staying together for as long as we can, then sending her north with two of our people once we reach the edge of Rorech. We can cover for her up until then, but once we get into the city, it will be too hard.”

“You would release her?” Deyvid was a little surprised he didn't even have to push for that option.

“What other choice do I have?” Petur asked, spreading his hands. “If I can't kill her and can't confine her, which I'm sure you wouldn't allow for the long-term and wouldn't be feasible in Rorech anyhow, then we have to get her back to your homeland. It will leave her more dangerous than ever, but ...” He shrugged. “She will be dangerous no matter what.”

“You should let me be the one to take her north.”

“You'd be the best choice,” Petur agreed, once again surprising Deyvid. “But it would mean you leaving for a month at best. And with Sy the way he is, that might be. Well. Who can say that he will survive that long? Would you rather be absent for what might be the last part of his life?” It was easy to read the anger in Petur's eyes as he glanced at Deyvid. Knowing that most of Petur's ire was directed toward himself didn't really help either.

He had a point. As much as Deyvid wanted to help his daughter—as much as he hoped he even *could* help her, which was far from assured—he needed to be there for Sy more. He couldn't bear the thought of losing him, and to do so when he wasn't even there ... no, it didn't bear thinking about. And Petur should know that already.

“Gods damn you,” he said, soft but very heartfelt, to Petur. “Is there nothing left of your regard for me but doubt? If you truly think so little of me, then I wish you'd just say so.”

Petur's eyes gleamed with the effort of holding back a shift. “I'm done talking about this,” he hissed, then pressed to his feet and let his cloak drop to the ground. A moment later, he'd shifted into his raven form and taken off into the night. All that was left was a pile of slowly cooling clothes and a stray feather that floated down, side to side until it finally came to rest on Sy's hair.

Deyvid gently plucked it off, rubbing the vanes in his fingertips and fighting against the emotions that had surged up and lodged in his throat.

“D'vid?”

He refocused on Sy immediately. “I'm here,” he said, stroking the hair back from Sy's face. He made room so that Sy could roll over onto his back. “How do you feel?”

“Better,” Sy said. “I always feel better once the curse lets up. Tired, but nothing really hurts.”

“Good.” It was a faint blessing but a blessing nonetheless. “I'm glad of that.”

“So am I.” He craned his head up and looked around. “Where is Petur?”

“Off flying about in a huff,” Deyvid replied dryly. “I'm sure he'll be back by morning.”

Sy nodded, then bit his lower lip. “Deyvid ... I'm sorry we didn't tell you about Alie and about the curse. Please don't —”

Deyvid shook his head. “Stop.”

“Please don’t blame Petur alone,” Sy barreled on. “It wasn’t just his decision; it was mine too. I hoped she would go home once she was unsuccessful, and I hoped the curse would never trouble me at all. You were—you almost *died*, and I didn’t—”

“*Stop.*”

Sy stopped.

“I can’t talk about this right now with you,” Deyvid said. “Because if I do, I’ll be upset with you, and that’s not what I want. That’s not what’s good for either of us, I think.”

“But—” Sy’s breath hitched. “I feel—bad, I feel responsible, and I hate it when you and Petur fight, and—”

Deyvid shook his head. “This is far from our first fight,” he said. “And it won’t be our last, I daresay. But we’ve weathered every storm that’s come our way. You don’t need to worry about this being the thing that breaks us, sweetheart.” At least, he hoped it wouldn’t be the thing that broke them. Once upon a time, Deyvid would have said that such a thing didn’t exist, but that was before he knew his daughter had tried to kill him.

What a mess he’d made of everything in his former life. What a terrible, damnable mess. He’d hoped, with ridiculous optimism, for Alie to have a chance that had never been possible for Deyvid. How could he have fooled himself so much? How had he told himself so many lies, things he *knew* were lies, without even bothering to check? Why had he trusted in the generosity of his father and the steadfastness of her mother, when he’d seen no evidence of either trait while he was part of the clan?

This is my fault. And everything that stemmed from it—Alie’s transformation into a High Harrier, Petur and Sy’s deception, their desperate situation now—was his fault and therefore his responsibility. He glanced over at his daughter, just once, then turned resolutely back to Sy. His lover was his priority now, to make him as comfortable as could be while they dealt with this damn curse. He wouldn’t abandon Sy, no matter what Petur thought.

How could he believe me so faithless? Does he truly know so little of me?

Or does he know me better than I know myself?

“Deyvid?” Sy sounded worried. “What are you thinking?”

“Too many things,” Deyvid replied tiredly, unable to lie. “But they can all keep until tomorrow. Come here.” He pulled Sy into his embrace and kissed him, gently. Sy melted against him and was smiling when their lips parted. “I love you,” Deyvid said.

“I love you as well. And I know that Petur loves you too, more than anything.”

Deyvid didn't speak, just nodded. Perhaps he did.

Perhaps he didn't.

Either way, it would wait a while. Right now, he needed his lover to rest and to try and get some rest himself.

He had a feeling he would need it.

Chapter Sixteen

Deyvid was glad he'd been brought into the fold on Sy's curse the next morning because it was clear to him that he was in a relationship with a pair of impractical fatalists. Petur was still off being a bird, so he couldn't confront him directly about his involvement in Sy's current state of deterioration, but talking to Sy himself was enough to confirm that, apart from identifying the affliction he was suffering from, he and Petur had figured out next to nothing as far as treatment and prevention went.

"What do you mean, what triggers it?" Sy asked him with a puzzled expression as he cradled a cup of tea. He'd already eaten some road biscuit and dried fruit—not as much as Deyvid would have liked, but it was better than nothing. "It's a curse, it's in my bloodline. There's no way to escape it."

Deyvid resisted the urge to sigh. "But the direct effects aren't impacting you all the time," he pointed out. "You have attacks like the one I saw last night, which have been occurring several times a day since before we left Delomar. But is there something that you do, an action you take or a way you feel, something to that effect, that activates the attacks themselves? Are they truly random, or do they pick their time based on something more particular?"

"That is ... an interesting question." Sy's eyes were already brighter as he considered it, always ready to consider the mechanics of magic even when it was something as malevolent as this curse. "I suppose I was taking for granted the fact that the attacks are inevitable, and they may be, but that doesn't preclude there being triggers for at least some of them. My mother ... I remember periods would go by when she'd be all right for days, even a week once. I don't remember enough of her to connect those periods of peace to a specific action or lack thereof, but I'm certainly capable of tracking my *own* attacks. Let me ..." He put the tea aside and reached for his pack. "Oh, where is my paper? I'm sure it's got to be here somewhere ..."

“While you’re looking for it, think about a way to get word to your father as well,” Deyvid said.

Sy stopped rummaging and looked at him. “Why should I do that?”

“You don’t think he’ll want to know that his only child is bearing a curse?” Deyvid asked dryly.

Sy dropped his gaze for a moment. “I mean ... he would want to know, but it will be so terrible for him. I’d rather spare him the pain of this knowledge for as long as possible.”

Gods above and below, save me from shortsighted dunderheads. How could his lover be so smart and so blind at the same time? “Doesn’t that sound familiar?” Deyvid said as soon as he was sure his tone would come out perfectly calm. “How well did that plan work with me?”

“Oh.” Sy immediately looked shamefaced. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking. If I’m to ... I mean, he should know, of course, if I’m to ... well. You know.”

Deyvid nodded, not wanting to make Sy spell that part out. “Apart from that, your father likely knows more about the ins and outs of how this curse might afflict you than anyone else alive. He would be invaluable for consultation. And as we’re headed for the most magical city on the continent, I’d say that with you, your father, and Kira’s allies in the Mersaighan court tackling this problem, the chances of you finding a solution rather than turning to resignation are better than ever.”

Sy beamed at him, his face transforming from sallow and solemn to brilliant and bright. “Deyvid! Of course, why didn’t I think of that? Never mind, because I was wallowing,” he said before Deyvid could respond. “But you’re right, you’re absolutely right, and if I can present them with my notes on the affliction as well as ask my father to bring any documentation he might have from my mother’s family ...” He returned to his rummaging with renewed vigor, and Deyvid finally felt able to step away and see to the other young person he was tasked with looking after in camp.

Alie was lying on her side when he got over to her, eyes closed, breaths even. She was wearing a simple shift now instead of the outfit she'd been in last night. She was also *filthy* and smelled like the sewer he'd nearly dragged her into. Gods, if she smelled bad to Deyvid, then she must be absolutely rank to the shifters. He turned to Lise, who stood a little way away, looking exhausted. "Why is she like this?"

Lise rolled her eyes. "Believe it or not, I cleaned her off less than an hour ago. She's been finding new ways to muck herself up since she woke before dawn. The last bucket bath was her third." She pressed her fingers to her temple and grimaced. "I'll get more water in a moment."

"No." Deyvid shook his head. "I'll handle this. You get some rest." He glanced back at Sy, who was animatedly writing on a piece of slender parchment, light in his eyes and color in his face. "Take the rest of the morning, in fact. I'll handle her until lunchtime."

Lise firmed her jaw. "I will not shirk my duty, sir."

"You're shirking nothing if I tell you to go," he replied. In the distance, he could hear the creek burbling away. In one fluid motion, he reached down, jerked his daughter up off the ground, and threw her over his shoulder. She gave up her pretense of sleep immediately and shrieked like a northerly wind. "I'll be back soon," he said, then marched off in the direction of the creek.

"—uck you, you beastfucking monster! If you try anything with me, I'll—*ah!*" Alie's threats were cut off abruptly when Deyvid threw her into the creek, butt first.

It wasn't deep enough for her to drown. It wasn't even deep enough for her to swim in—the water only came up to her knees once she'd sputtered to her feet, hands still bound behind her. The flow of water had already washed most of the filth away, but when she tried to climb out of the creek, Deyvid shoved her right back in.

"You'll stay in there until you're spotless," he said.

"You can't make me!"

It was like she was five again, only Deyvid didn't think she'd take so well to him chiding her about minding her parents this time around. He decided to take another route instead. "You hide from the eyes of our gods when you abide in filth." It was one of the oldest tenets of the Harrier tribes, a way to maintain worship when there were no permanent temples, no shrines, nothing but you and your horse and the wind.

"If you were still on your mission, it would be different, but your mission is over," he added more gently. "There's no reason to make yourself into a pariah simply to annoy us. I guarantee you, as rank as my company finds your scent, the discomfort you bear from it is far worse."

Alie stood still for a long moment, staring at him from under messy bangs. Deyvid wished he could reach out and brush her hair back from her face. He wished she still had color in her eyes, prairie-sky blue, inherited from him and from his mother. *They were beautiful. Still are.*

She didn't speak, but she did turn around and bend down deeper into the little pool, rinsing herself clean. In the time it took her to finish, Lilian came over with another shift, this one long enough to keep Alie's legs from chafing once she was on horseback.

"Thank you," Deyvid murmured, touched by the thoughtfulness of it.

"It's nothing," Lilian assured him. "Shall I get her changed?"

"If you would."

Alie didn't like being handled, but she abided being dried off and re-dressed with ill grace. "What is this ridiculous garment?" she asked as she watched Lilian tie it up the sides of her body. "Do you keep such clothes solely so you have something to dress your bound prisoners in?"

"The open sides make it easier to get out of if one of us has to change in a hurry," Lilian replied lightly. "Every shifter

wears something like this.” She winked at Alie after she tied the last knot. “Don’t worry, you’re not *that* special.”

“I—” But Lilian was walking back to camp before Alie could work up a rage, which left her no one but Deyvid to scowl at. Which she did, but shivering and small as she was right now, there was hardly any ferocity to it.

“You’ll travel with us for a ways,” Deyvid told her, wanting to get everything out in the open. “Before we reach Rorech, you’ll branch off and be taken north to the border with some of our people. There, they’ll let you go.”

Alie shook her head. “I don’t believe you. You’re trying to trick me into going easy on you, but it won’t work. I know you’re going to kill me as soon as—”

“As soon as what? As soon as we can? We would have done it already. As soon as someone here can get you alone, perhaps me?” Deyvid gestured all around them. “Who is here to care right now?”

“Perhaps you’ll sacrifice me to your heathen gods!”

Deyvid sighed. “None of the Triad have ever required human sacrifice. We ourselves worship them by different names in the North.”

“We do no—”

“And even if they did ask for a sacrifice, what would a ritual gain by killing you or me?” Deyvid went on, and some of the fire in her eyes died. “We have no magic in our blood. It would be an offense to the gods to offer them a High Harrier. We are their beloved worshippers, but neither of us is fit to be their vessels.”

“And whose fault is that?” Alie asked with a sneer, but her eyes were wet. She looked ... she looked like a tired young woman, and Deyvid felt sorrier than ever watching her now.

“It’s the fault of those who made us into weapons.” Invisibility to magic was the sole reason for their creation, that they might be the greatest assassins the world had ever seen.

And they were. And Deyvid hated it, so much.

“Come.” He motioned toward camp. “We’d best get you fed before we ride out.” Ignoring Alie’s quizzical look, he waited for her to start moving, then fell in behind her.

One morning down, six more to go. If they were all this fraught, his heart might not survive. Then again, with Sy cursed and Petur incensed at him, it might not survive either way.

Chapter Seventeen

To say that things got better after that morning would have been a gross exaggeration. It wasn't that there weren't improvements in their general situation, it was more that things had gotten so rough that almost anything could be taken as a turn for the better. At this rate, Deyvid was more than willing to take whatever he could get.

Tending to Herow's body was the easiest part of it. It had been wrenching to hand him over to the local temple, but the priestess assured them she knew all the correct prayers for a shifter and would ensure that word was sent to his family. They said their goodbyes, joined the priestess of Dur in prayer for his soul, and were on their way in under an hour.

The transition in Arven from bratty boy and his enabling entourage to stoic traveler was heartening even if it had come about because of a tragedy. Poor Arven ... the starch had been knocked clear out of him along with any desire to fight with his uncle or talk much to anyone, really. He rode, he helped make camp, he trained in the evenings with his traitorous guard Gerain, and throughout it all, he held his tongue.

It was a bit eerie, actually, and Deyvid gathered from the worried glances that the shifters were throwing toward their prince that they thought he smelled wrong, but there was nothing for Deyvid to do there. He had his hands full tending to one young idiot, after all, and where Arven had many advocates, Alie only had him.

She didn't *want* him, but she had him.

At least she'd stopped spitting at him.

Even Sy seemed to get a bit better now that the stultifying tension in the group had eased. Over the next two days of travel, he suffered only one attack by the curse, laid low during one of their brief breaks for a meal. Petur, who up until then had been resolutely keeping to his raven form during the day, had flown down and transformed by his side before

Deyvid could get there, stroking Sy's back and easing him through it tenderly.

When Deyvid murmured a compliment to him, though, he'd only glared at him and said, "What, you thought I would abandon my husband to someone else's tender mercies? *This* is what you want most of all, isn't it? For him and I to take care of each other?"

I did want that, I do. But I don't want you to push me away at the same time.

That was the hardest part, the thing that was both good and bad—the chill that had taken hold over him and Petur. For Deyvid's part, it was hard to look at his lover and not see the man who had refused to tell him so many things, refused to share them with him and now, after all the truth had come out at last, refused to talk to him about it. He had acted childish, *was* acting childish, and there was no chance for them to work toward reconciliation if Petur refused to have anything to do with him.

Deyvid knew his best chance was to wait it out. Petur was stubborn, but he wasn't totally unreasonable. They would need to be on speaking terms, at least, by the time they got to Rorech, for Arven's sake if nothing else. He could wait that long.

Knowing that didn't make the nights any easier, when he shared a final kiss with Sy before stepping back and letting Petur take his dutiful place without so much as a backward glance at him. It distressed Sy, Deyvid could see it, but this was something that Petur had to work out on his own.

What are the chances of that happening if you don't force the issue? Go on, knock some sense into his head! Make him talk to you!

It was what he wanted to do, but there never seemed to be a good moment for it. He couldn't fly after Petur, and he didn't want to fight with him in front of Sy—the poor man didn't need that stress on top of everything else he was carrying. So Deyvid spent more time in the company of his

daughter, who spurned every comfort he offered her, and his nights were cold, long, and miserable.

One particularly cold evening spurred him to get up and lay his extra blanket over Alie. Deyvid already knew he wasn't going to sleep, but there was no sense in her being more uncomfortable than she had to be, and the single blanket and shift she was wearing couldn't be sufficient.

She woke up the moment he set the blanket down on her and immediately kicked it off. Without thinking, Deyvid said, "We don't waste kindness on the wind, girl."

Alie froze. Deyvid froze as well although he managed to get moving again before she did, resettling the blanket over her from the shoulders down. She watched him, mouth slightly open, and as he got up to walk back to his spot she said, "You ... you told me that before, didn't you? As a little girl."

Deyvid nodded. "Usually when you were being stubborn," he said, then smiled. "Which was frequently. I remember ..." He looked up at the thick tree canopy for a moment and wished he were staring at the stars instead. Nothing but the leather of their tents ever blocked the stars on the Plains. "I remember when you were, oh, just rising four. You wanted to ride my horse by yourself. I said it was all right, but when I got out a child's saddle for you, you started to shout at me. Told me you were a big girl and not a baby, and you didn't need a baby's saddle. And I told you not to waste the kindness on the wind."

"But ... I remember falling off."

Deyvid shrugged, then remembered that, unlike the shifters, Alie couldn't see in the dark. "You did. You absolutely insisted on not using the small saddle, so I let you try mine. You toppled off before the beast went ten feet. But I caught you and put you right back on, and you did better the next time. Fell off again after a few minutes," he allowed, "but I was running alongside and caught you again. Then I got on behind you and let you guide us back home."

"And Mama had spiced milk waiting for us," Alie said faintly.

“Yes, she did.” Deyvid hadn’t thought of spiced milk in years. Sweet, mellow spiced milk, perfect hot or cold, whether the wind had been biting you or the sun had left you faint ... A flood of longing for the lost treat struck him. He pushed back against it—it wasn’t right to crave something so intensely when he hadn’t even remembered it existed for over a decade. “Hers was the best I’d ever tasted.”

“You left us not long after that.”

The sweet memory of the milk suddenly curdled. “About a year later.”

“You were gone for much of that time.”

“I was,” he agreed. “I was off killing people at the behest of your grandfather. People in other clans,” he clarified when he saw her open her mouth to say something he inevitably didn’t want to hear. “Not southern warriors, not heathen mages. Clan leaders. Their champions. Their families.”

“That’s a lie.”

“I have no reason to lie to you.”

Alie shook her head, scowling. “You would say anything to improve your standing with me. I can’t trust a word you say.”

Deyvid shrugged. “I already know that nothing I say *could* improve my standing with you. You wish me dead; I accept that.” He didn’t, actually, but his emotional turmoil wasn’t for her to know about. He had embarrassed himself enough lately.

“I’m telling you the truth, though. High Harriers are supposed to be righteous weapons to be used against those who would oppress us, but your grandfather treated me like his private assassin. Look in the records and listen to the recent songs of passage—you’ll notice when leadership changes hands abruptly. Our people don’t use much magic, but we High Harriers are trained to be able to kill anyone. So I did for years until it became too much.”

“Who did he ask you to kill?”

The lack of outright condemnation in her voice was encouraging. “The leader of Clan Gorsar and her family,” he said.

Alie startled. “My great-aunt?”

“Your grandmother’s sister, yes,” he confirmed. “I’d never met my aunt before, but for my father’s sake, I tried to believe the worst of her. When I finally found her vulnerable, though ... it was late at night. She and her eldest son, her daughter-in-law, and their children were all asleep in her tent. There were, oh, eleven people total, I think.” He knew. He’d counted twice. “I crept in so carefully, disguised my scent so well, that not even her guard-mounts knew I was there. I slit the side of the tent, looked in, looked at them all lying there together, and I knew that I couldn’t do it.

“The adults were all snoring. The littlest baby was starting to get hungry; I could hear the child beginning to grunt, but he wasn’t really awake yet either. I could have set fire to the entire thing and killed them all.”

It would have been so easy, and he knew he wouldn’t have been the first High Harrier to do such a thing either. His father had forever pushed him to be more extreme, to follow in the “footsteps of those who came before him, those who forsook even the gods themselves for the sake of their families.” “I couldn’t do it. I knew your grandfather wouldn’t take no for an answer, so ...” He shrugged. “I left.”

“I don’t believe you,” Alie murmured, but her voice lacked conviction. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“Wouldn’t he? Hasn’t he asked you to do things you weren’t comfortable with?”

“It’s my responsibility to push past my discomfort!”

“But it isn’t your responsibility to kill innocent children,” Deyvid said gently. “And it isn’t your job to kill for the personal profit of our clan and specifically not for the enrichment of your grandfather. That’s what he wants, though. I’m sure you’ve taken actions that have benefited him in this way.”

“You ... you don’t know anything.”

“I don’t know *everything*,” Deyvid replied. “But I think I know enough. And now you’re here, on your own, left to pull off a job that would have gotten you killed if I hadn’t held my hand. I think that you must have disappointed your grandfather.”

“I didn’t.” Her voice was a mere whisper now. “He said I need to prove myself, that’s all. I need to wipe away the stain of your dishonor, and ... and ...”

“All by yourself this time? After how the previous attempts went when you had help? Was it foolhardiness that drove him to ask this of you or a lack of caring? Does he already have a new High Harrier in training back home?” Her silence was telling. “He tried to use you, but he couldn’t twist you hard enough into what he wanted you to be. So he left you to suffer here because of it.”

She shook her head. “He didn’t. He ... he *wouldn’t*.”

“Then he should have taken you home with him,” Deyvid replied as kindly as he could. “Or sent you reinforcements. You’re his only grandchild. Your life should not be so disposable to him. It certainly isn’t to me.”

After a long moment, Alie rolled over onto her opposite side and began to cry.

Deyvid let her.

Chapter Eighteen

They were within fifty miles of Rorech before Sy finally took steps. It figured, in Deyvid's mind, that Sy should be the one to try and mend the gap between Deyvid and Petur since he'd had experience on the other side of things.

On the other hand, Petur had been involved in the difficulties both times and was still a stubborn ass about everything. Deyvid had planned to give it another night, to see if Petur would come to him on his own before there was no other choice, but Sy put an end to that plan.

"I've had a message from my father," he told the two of them after dinner that night before Deyvid could kiss him and slink off to sit in silence with his estranged daughter, who'd gone very quiet over the past few days. "He's going to meet us in the capital, and he's bringing all sorts of texts and some rare ingredients for spells the mages of Rorech can try, and—well."

He looked down at the tiny note in his hand. "He's furious. And worried, I can tell no matter how few words he uses. But the point is, things are going to change for me once we reach Rorech." He glanced toward the group a little way off. "For all of us. I'll need to modify the spell on our amulets to ensure I can keep track of you all in such a crowd of people, and I'll need to enhance the protections on yours and Arven's in particular, Petur."

Petur shook his head. "This isn't something you need to worry about right now—"

"But I *am* worrying about it." The skin beneath Sy's eyes was dark and bruised, likely a result of both his anxiety and the fact that he'd had two bouts with the curse just that day. "I'm here to serve a purpose, not simply to get my own needs tended to. I'm part of this group so I can help you protect Arven, not so I can take resources away from that goal. I'm determined to do my part, but I'm going to need your help for it." He looked between them. "Help from both of you. And

I won't get it if I can't trust you to be within ten feet of each other without fighting or running off."

"We're not fighting right now," Deyvid pointed out, but he knew Sy's accusation was on point. So did Sy if the way he'd raised one eyebrow in disbelief was any indicator.

"You can't afford to be distracted in Rorech. Not just for Arven." He lowered his voice. "For me too. I need your help, I need you on my side, I need—I need to know you're with me. I can't face this by myself. It terrifies me."

"Sy—" Deyvid held out his hand, and Sy took it, then held the other one out to Petur. After a moment, Petur took it as well.

"We can be together in this. But you need to put away the hurt first."

For some reason, his phrasing resonated with Deyvid. Not exorcise the hurt, not forget it. Just ... put it away. For now. He closed his eyes for a moment, focusing on folding up his anger and pain the way he always did, the way he always had, when—

"Stop."

Startled, he glanced over at Petur, who was staring at him with a look somewhere between anger and desperation. "Stop it," he snapped, louder this time. "Don't do that, not with me."

"Do what?"

"Don't—don't *pretend* like everything is all right, when you and I both know it isn't."

"And whose fault is that?" Deyvid snapped back, then immediately felt bad. Petur, however, nodded.

"It's mine. You're right, it's mine—mostly, at least. And we do need to talk about it, but don't put what you feel about me in a box to do it."

"Petur." Deyvid could feel the eyes and ears of their entire party on them. "This isn't the time for what you're angling for."

“It has to be. Otherwise, I can’t do this. And I want to,” he said, turning his attention back to Sy. “I swear I want to. I know my own culpability in this, and I’m—” He looked like he’d be pulling his hair out if Sy wasn’t holding one of his hands hostage. “But I can’t take being lied to. Not by you,” he said, focusing on Deyvid again so intently that Deyvid couldn’t look away.

The irony of what his lover was saying was almost enough to choke him, though. “You really want to have this out?” he said, voice so low and dark it was almost a growl. Petur’s eyes went dark, and his smile turned vicious.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Then get up.” He turned back to Sy, leaned in, and kissed his forehead, then his cheek. “We’ll be back.”

“Don’t kill each other,” Sy said, smiling but clearly nervous despite being the one to push them down this path.

“We won’t.” It hadn’t gotten that far in over a decade, and Deyvid doubted this would be the moment his temper tipped over the line. Besides, if it ever did, there was no chance he could take out Petur. A direct confrontation would only lead to his death.

“Stop thinking about me killing you,” Petur said, rolling his eyes.

“How could you tell he was?” Sy asked faintly.

“It’s in the way his neck tenses, and his heart rate speeds up.”

“The fact that I wonder about it often enough to have a tell is a worse reflection on you than on me,” Deyvid pointed out, doing his best to calm his heart rate regardless. He genuinely wasn’t afraid of Petur, but the thought of fighting him provoked reactions in his body he couldn’t control. That was a fair comparison to their entire relationship, in all honesty. “Get up.”

He got to his feet first and stalked off into the darkness of the forest, far enough away that it would be harder for the shifters to hear them. Sy would keep tabs on Petur magically,

so if they were ambushed, they'd get help fast, and the two of them together could handle any other threat.

As soon as he judged they were far enough from camp, he rounded on Petur and shoved him in the chest so hard that the shifter actually had to take a step back. Petur was immensely strong, so much stronger than Deyvid, but he was fueled by anger so hot that it lent him a surprising amount of force. "You have some fucking gall to talk to me about honesty, when you kept secrets behind my back about not *one* but *two* things that are desperately important to me!" It took all the extra energy he had to keep his voice down.

"I know."

"Sy is our *lover*. He's our *heart*, and you don't just get to decide which of us gets to bear his pain with him, and which gets to languish in the dark."

"I know."

"And Alie—for *fuck's sake*, you couldn't have told me about her before we got into this mess with traveling?" Deyvid started to pace. "I could have *planned*; I could have made provisions against attacks by High Harriers that would have accounted for the fact that we needed to take her alive instead of getting *lucky*. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? I could have killed my own daughter thanks to your insistence on my ignorance, and you better believe that if I'd found out after the fact that you'd known it was a possibility, I would be *gone*. Do you understand me?"

"I do."

"Then why ..." Deyvid stopped and ran his hands down his face. "Why did you risk it?" he asked tiredly, the anger bleeding out the edges of him. Gods, he was too tired to be angry. Everything was an utter mess, and the one person he always felt like he could rely on when things got messy was the person who'd made most of those messes in the first place. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Petur didn't move, just stared at him in complete silence for a moment before saying at last, "Because I didn't

want you to leave.”

What? “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would I—”

“If you’d known your daughter was the one who’d tried to kill you, what would you have done? You’d have gone after her, gone on the offensive. Gone to rescue her. But what if she didn’t want to be rescued?” His voice was cold, clinical. Deyvid knew it was because Petur needed to distance himself from what he was saying, but it didn’t make it easier to listen. “What if she had more reinforcements? What if she led you into a trap, or poisoned you again, or stabbed you?”

“You would have let it happen if you knew you were fighting her. You wouldn’t give it your all. Don’t deny it.”

Deyvid closed his mouth, suddenly aware that he *had* been about to deny it and equally aware that it would have been a lie.

“I’d hoped she would go away,” Petur continued. “I was planning to tell you once things with Arven settled down—we both were, Sy and me—but then Sy started getting sick, and ... I didn’t know about that until just a few days ago.” Not until they were on the road. “He was desperate to keep it to himself, to keep us unaware. You were already essentially banished to the outskirts of our party at that point. How much crueler would it be to tell you he might die, and then keep you apart from him?”

“And I still have to,” he added tiredly. “You know I do. We can’t say we’re not being watched. We don’t know that for sure. If nothing else, our propriety affects Arven and his guards. My sister is wrong about a lot of things, but she’s not wrong about us needing to reinforce Arven’s position as much as possible as we ride into Rorech, and you in the middle of our party, at Sy’s side, won’t do that.”

“I understand that.” Deyvid didn’t agree with any of it, but he did understand it. “I’m not sure how you got Sy to agree to it all, though.”

“It wasn’t that hard. You’ve nearly died in his arms before.”

“You set me up to look helpless to him. To make him feel like *I* need to be coddled, when we ought to be focusing on *his* health.” Deyvid shook his head. “I thought you had more faith in me than that.”

“I have every faith in you,” Petur said, so quiet it was nearly a whisper. “But I have very little faith in myself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m ...” Now he moved, shifting on his feet as he looked away. “I’m not dealing well with things lately. Things that concern the three of us. Not because of you, or Sy, but because of ... everything else.” The words came faster now. “Every second with Tania means another jibe at you or Sy, and her husband is no better.

“Even our home is a source of contempt for the best things in my life. Arven and his people don’t understand and don’t want to, we’re headed into a place that looks down on shifters and despises people like you, and your own former clansmen are trying to take you from us. I’m on edge. All the time.” His voice was ragged. “Everything is a threat. Everything, and knowing where all the threats are just made the feeling of danger from them worse, so I ... I kept the knowledge to myself as much as possible. I cut you and Sy out whenever I could.”

He laughed bitterly. “And that is despicable of me, and I hate myself for it, but it was the only way I could reassure myself that you wouldn’t leave. And now you’re ready to leave anyway, and Sy might leave us despite all our hopes, and then I’ll be alone, and I’ll *deserve* it.”

“Stop.” Deyvid pulled Petur’s hands apart, prying the claws out of the flesh of his palms with a grimace. “You hurt yourself,” he murmured.

“Shouldn’t I? Wouldn’t it make things more equal between us?”

“No.” Deyvid shook his head. “I would never ask that of you. Never.”

“Stop being so kind to me.”

“Stop telling me what I should and shouldn’t do.” Deyvid took Petur by the shoulders and shook him, firmly. “Stop trying to control how I should feel. Stop trying to save me from the truth. Just *share* with me, Petur, share with me like you used to. Nothing you tell me will make me turn away from you.” He was certain of that even now. “Nothing will make me leave you forever.” He paused, then shook his head. “I won’t leave while Sy is in jeopardy. You know that. I couldn’t live with myself if I did. But ...”

“But if the mages of Rorech manage to break the curse,” Petur said, equally soft, “then you’ll leave. To go after Alie and whoever we send with her.”

“I might never see her again after this,” Deyvid said helplessly. “I need to ... be with her as much as I can even if she can’t thank me for it. Which she won’t.”

“I think she might,” Petur said. He looked down at his hands, which had already stopped bleeding. “Eventually.”

“I don’t think there’s that much time in the world. Certainly, it’s not enough time that I’m willing to spend apart from you.” Deyvid shook his head. “I made the choice to walk away from my clan, Petur. I made it before I ever met you, but every day with you has convinced me more and more that it was the right one. I mourn for what happened to my daughter. I feel guilt, yes, and pain that she was ushered down the path I least wanted her to follow. But I couldn’t have saved her if I’d stayed.” He knew that down to his soul. “I wouldn’t have survived much longer there.”

Throwing caution to the wayside, he leaned in and embraced Petur. It felt good to hold him again even though it was like holding a statue until Petur suddenly melted into his touch, drawing him in close and making a sound that was very like a whimper.

“I love you, you fool,” Deyvid said, his throat tight with the strength of his emotions. At times like this, they were as much a pain as a pleasure, but they were his, and he’d be damned if he didn’t keep them all. “Even when you fuck up, I love you. I could never stop. I never will.”

Chapter Nineteen

Petur collapsed against him, sending them both onto their knees in the loamy soil, but Deyvid didn't care. He was so relieved to be holding Petur once more, finally, to be able to hold him with an open heart instead of looking at him with resentment and anger festering inside. It was like a blessing from the Three.

Things weren't back to normal between them yet—the air was clearer, but the problems that had been exposed, Petur's desire to hide things away, and Deyvid's insistence on pursuing dangerous paths, still dogged them. And Sy ...

Sy was still unwell. And might get worse. *Would* get worse if what had happened to his mother was any indicator, and then they would break all over again, but for now, Deyvid was taking the relief for the gift it was.

He slid his hands beneath Petur's jaw and tilted his head up, and the second Deyvid could see Petur's lips he latched onto them, leaning in and bracing himself against his lover's chest as he kissed him hard, with desperate gratitude.

He felt the moment the shifter took over inside of Petur, when the man was relegated to the back of the brain, and instinct surged to the fore. Petur bared his teeth against Deyvid's lips, grabbed his hair, and twisted it in his grasp until Deyvid's throat was exposed, then leaned in and pressed his mouth to the side of Deyvid's neck. He breathed, deep and long, licking the skin of his neck and down to his collarbone, ripping the cloth there back when it got in the way of his exploration.

Deyvid didn't stop him, didn't chide him about destroying his clothes or fight with him over his bestial display. This was still Petur, an indelible and unmovable part of him. Deyvid had known that from the very start, when this part of his lover had nearly killed him. He had held firm then and every time the beast had come out since. He wasn't going to falter, not with so much on the line.

Petur growled as he tongued the skin right over Deyvid's heart, which was beating an eager tattoo, relishing the closeness of his lover, his *mate*. Sy was their heart, the sweet softness they could share, whereas things between Petur and Deyvid had always been ... spikier. Real, though, strong and real, and as Petur's clawed hands grasped Deyvid's shoulders and pressed him back onto the ground, the prick of them against his bare skin was nothing but a goad to his pleasure.

Deyvid managed to push his breeches down over his hips before Petur could rip them apart too, knowing where this was going, but it was still a shock when Petur took him into his mouth. His teeth were *sharp*, sharper and longer than a man's teeth ever could be. Deyvid couldn't remember the last time they'd made love when Petur was so close to a shift, and his head swam with passion and heat. He didn't mind the danger, but he knew Petur would, so he did his best to mitigate things before Petur marked him too much.

"You're so good," he whispered, knowing his words might be heard by the other shifters but not caring. "Gods, you're so good to me, I love the feel of you. Fuck ..." Deyvid had been half hard when Petur took him inside, but now he became fully erect so fast his head spun. "Do you love this as much as I do? Do you love the taste of me? Do I smell good to you?"

Petur growled low, satisfied and yet still so hungry, and Deyvid laughed breathlessly. "I know I do. Gods." He dug his fingers into Petur's thick hair, now thicker and darker than before, and scratched his nails along his lover's scalp. "Everything I am is yours," he said, then groaned as Petur sucked hard on the head of his cock before taking him deep, so deep he touched the back of his throat. "I am, I always will be, as long as I live ..."

Petur suddenly pulled off and pulled back, crouching over Deyvid. His shoulders were hunched inside his clothes, already straining the seams, and the hard length of his cock outlined in his trousers seemed huge. "Outlive me," Petur

rasped, his eyes glowing in the dim light. “You would give me everything? Give me that.”

If only Deyvid could. “Take me,” he said instead, rubbing his palm over the head of Petur’s cock. Petur closed his eyes for a moment.

“It won’t be easy.”

“It never is.” Deyvid didn’t need easy with Petur. He would hardly know what to do with it if he got it. Ease and gentleness were something they shared most easily when they were sharing Sy, and both of them knew it.

“I don’t have anything.”

“I do.” He’d taken to carrying a small container of thick, scentless salve with him, to rub into the marks on Alie’s wrists in the mornings and ease their ache. He grabbed it out of the pocket on the inside of his cloak and opened it with trembling fingers. “Use this.”

Petur stared at it, then at Deyvid. If anything, the sharp, shifted aspects of his face became even more defined. “This is your last chance to tell me to stop.”

Deyvid knew it wasn’t—Petur would stop for him if it killed him to do it—but he also felt the fine tremors running through his lover’s body, felt the need in him. His own need welled up to match it. “Stay,” he said instead.

In less than a second, Petur got a hand beneath him and flipped him over onto his stomach, jerking his pants down far enough that he could knock Deyvid’s knees apart and settle between them. Deyvid heard him open the jar, work the salve onto his fingers, and braced himself on his hands, relaxing as best he could for the first moment of penetration. It would hurt, but he could—

Instead of the thick head of Petur’s cock, he got a finger instead. It was larger than Petur’s fully human fingers, but unclawed, and Deyvid pushed back against it with a groan, twitching as Petur stroked right across his prostate. A second finger joined it almost immediately, stretching him, fucking him, and then a third.

“What a gentleman,” Deyvid breathed out.

Petur leaned down right next to his ear. “I won’t hurt you. Not like this.”

“You never have.” It was a confession, an absolution, and a second later the fingers were gone, huge hands bracketing Deyvid’s hips to line him up just right, and then—

“*Fuck.*” Petur felt huge, bigger than normal, and normal was already a *lot*. Every inch of him stretched Deyvid wider until he practically felt Petur’s cock in his stomach. His ass ached, but it was a dull pain, not sharp, and almost immediately it began morphing into pleasure. “Yes, please,” he whispered with a gasp, and when Petur slammed into him next he nearly forgot his own name.

They hadn’t fucked so roughly in a long time, and Deyvid would feel it on horseback tomorrow, but right now it was everything he wanted—proof that Petur was with him, wanted him, cared about him. He could barely remember why he was supposed to be quiet, and actually accomplishing that was beyond him—it was all he could do not to shout with the pleasure, with how good this felt.

Neither of them was going to last. It had been too long since they’d had each other, and Deyvid’s body was already trembling with the need to come. He held back through sheer will until he heard Petur’s guttural moan, felt his hips stutter-fuck his cock into Deyvid as far as it could go, stretching him around his thick base as he pumped his seed into his lover.

Deyvid let himself go down onto one forearm, touched himself briefly, just one fast, hard thrust into his own hand, and then he was gone as well, come joining the glistening pool of wetness already on the ground beneath him.

“Holy gods,” he slurred, rubbing his face against his arm. His whole body felt numb with pleasure, and he was too out of it to protest Petur pulling out of him like he normally would. Oh, right ... they couldn’t linger, not in a place so unsafe, not so undefended. But he wished they could.

Somehow he found himself clean and re-dressed a few minutes later, with Petur's hands holding him upright as he fought to regain control of his mind. He tilted forward into Petur's embrace and stayed there for a long moment, enjoying the languor that flowed between them and the relaxation of his lover's shoulders just a little longer.

"I have to get back to Alie," Deyvid finally said.

"I know." Petur pulled back and kissed him gently. "And I need to get to Sy." His warm brown gaze captured Deyvid's pale eyes, holding his gaze hostage. "I'm sorry. I'll try to be better."

"Good. I'm not sure how many reconciliations like that I can take."

Petur snorted. "Please, I know you enjoyed it."

"I did. Too much," Deyvid agreed ruefully. "It wasn't smart of us, but I don't regret it."

"Neither do I."

Deyvid kissed a trail along Petur's collarbone, then stepped back, straightening his knees to keep them from buckling the moment Petur let go of him. "Go back to your husband."

"*Our* husband."

Deyvid nodded. "Let him know we didn't kill each other."

Petur smirked. "I'm sure he'll be able to figure it out."

"Go *on* already."

They moved away from each other, heading for different parts of camp, but Deyvid's heart was lighter now than it had been for days even if his body felt heavy from fatigue and fair use.

He and Petur would be all right.

Now if only he could make it so that Sy was too.

Chapter Twenty

By the time they actually made it to Rorech, it felt like they'd been on the road for closer to two months than one. Tension in the party, which had begun so high, mellowed as the journey progressed but was now mounting again. This time, at least, it was a tension they could be united in.

They were headed into uncertain territory, particularly for Arven. It put all the shifters on edge, bringing the wild closer to the surface. It wasn't good for Sy either—his curse struck with greater frequency, leaving him exhausted and fighting off shame and guilt at how he was slowing them down.

Deyvid did what he could, slipping in and out of the party to comfort his lovers and settle Sy, but his attention was more taken up by his daughter. There had been no further attacks on the road, which meant that Petur was more likely to agree to allow Lise and probably Lilian to accompany Alie north to the Harrier Plains. She couldn't go into the heart of the Mersaighan capitol—it was one step down from a diplomatic incident bringing *him* into the city, given his status as a High Harrier. The idea of escorting Alie, who had a history of assassination attempts, within a stone's throw of the heir of the kingdom would be enough to precipitate a war. There was no way.

Which meant she had to go. Without him.

He would probably never see her again.

The idea consumed his thoughts even more when just a day out from the capital, in a smaller town called Grale, Petur sat down with him and Lise and planned out the best course for getting Alie to the border, fast. "Some of the roadways are unavoidable, but here and here you can hire private boats and bypass most everyone who would remark on her," he said to his guardsman, who nodded thoughtfully as she looked at the map.

"Any issues with water?" Lise asked Deyvid.

“To the best of my knowledge, she’s never been on a boat before,” Deyvid replied. “Which actually could be an issue. It took months of exposure before I was able to step foot on one without getting miserably sick a few hours later.”

“Soft stomach,” Petur teased him.

“Says the man who couldn’t stay in a saddle without being tied there the first time I took him riding,” Deyvid replied in kind.

“You don’t ride like normal people! It was terrifying! I could have broken my neck.”

“Perhaps we’ll avoid the waterways, then,” Lise interrupted them firmly. “I estimate we can reach the border in another month as long as she doesn’t try to escape and force us to track her down.”

Deyvid sighed. “That I can’t guarantee.” He wished he could, but Alie hadn’t spoken to him or anyone else for days now. She was as docile as a doll, and he didn’t trust it.

“Eh, we’ve handled her well enough so far.” Lise got to her feet and brushed her pants off. “We’ll be all right. We’ll leave tomorrow morning.”

They had done well so far ... perhaps too well. Alie was a fighter through and through—one night of commiseration with a man she hated wouldn’t have been enough to change that. Frowning, he glanced over to where his daughter sat a dozen meters away, meek and mild, her hands still bound behind her back. There was something about her body language, though ... something off. He decided to watch her more closely tonight just to make sure everything went according to plan.

They spent that evening at an inn, as the land was too populated now for them to find easy camping grounds for a group their size. The innkeeper was a jocular man who was enamored with the idea of putting up his princess’s fiancé, and they got a good rate on the room as well as space in the stable for all of their horses. Alie, still bound, was locked in a room the moment they arrived, its windows barred and shutters

locked as well, while the rest of them unpacked and settled in for a meal.

It should have been fine. After all, the shifters had senses far better than Deyvid's; they would hear her if she started to attempt to escape, or ... or ...

“What’s wrong?” Deyvid asked from where he sat, hood up and skin dyed, beside Lilian at the end of the table. She kept wincing, her usually smiling face falling into a frown every now and then.

“It’s nothing; it’s just been a while since we’ve been anywhere so loud,” she said quietly. She actually held her hands over her ears for a moment. “I forgot how long it takes to get used to it again.”

“Ah.” Right, Deyvid had seen this in Petur before, and although Petur was actually quite good at making the transition from rural to city life nearly seamlessly, even he seemed to be a bit distracted where he sat between Arven and Sy. How had Deyvid forgotten this?

And ... was it something Alie knew about?

He quietly pushed his chair back from the table. “Excuse me for a moment.” He turned and headed for the stairs, walking briskly up to the first floor where Alie’s room was. There was no sound coming from inside it, nothing to alarm him ... or maybe that was alarming in and of itself. He took the heavy key out of his pocket, unlocked the door, and opened it.

A second later, he bolted forward past the severed bindings on the floor, kicked the dangling shutters open, and jumped out the window. He landed heavily on the straw-matted ground below, just adjacent to the pungent stables, and checked the ground for footprints. He saw several different tracks, but all of them were hard soled, heavy enough to make an imprint on dusty ground that hadn’t seen rain in a while. Alie’s soft-soled slippers wouldn’t show here.

He looked around but didn’t see any sign of her.

Where would she go? Where would I go if I were making a break for it?

Deyvid immediately headed for the stable and got there just in time to see someone wearing a familiar cloak, on a *very* familiar horse, vanishing at a canter through the far end of the building. He didn't pause but grabbed the mane of the nearest animal and pulled himself up onto its back. The horse, a sturdy, well-built mare, whinnied and tried to buck, but he kept his seat like it was nothing and immediately goaded her into a run.

"Sir, you can't—sir!" The stable boy ran after him, still holding the mare's bridle. "That's not your horse!"

As though he needed to be told that. Deyvid's last Harrier-bred horse had been exquisite, as well trained as the finest hunting hound and more silent than a cat. This beast was already trying to be troublesome, but he knew how to make a horse do his bidding without the help of whip or reins, and in no time he'd nearly caught up to his daughter's fleeing form.

She glanced back at him, anger and apprehension clear on her face. Her horse was saddled, and she urged it over to the more crowded side of the road and a moment later literally *leapt* over a low wagon being pulled by two ponies.

The timing was wrong for Deyvid to make the same jump, and the next wagon in line was much taller. He split the difference, driving the mare forward with a swiftness that took her straight between the back of the low wagon and the heads of the beast following it. There were shouts and complaints, but they tapered off quickly as he chased his daughter through the side streets of this bustling merchant town, finally catching up to her at a rain-swollen canal that her mount simply balked at, refusing to enter the rushing waters.

Alie looked at Deyvid, closing the distance fast, then back at the water. Then—

She jumped off the horse's back and into the water.

Deyvid didn't even stop to think. He drove his own mare to the edge of the water and leapt in after her.

It was precipitous, unsafe, even stupid—but he had a sneaking suspicion from her earlier caginess in the creek that Alie wasn't a good swimmer. And why would she be? When there was a river to be forded, the Harrier horses did the work for their riders.

His suspicions were confirmed when he surfaced, looked around for her, and saw nothing. No shock of white from her plain gown, none of their signature gray. Nothing. *Fuck.*

He dove back under the water and began to search for her, letting the current pull him along and fending debris away from his face. It was no more than ten feet deep here; she couldn't have gone so far that—wait, *there*. Drifting near the bottom, by a thick, knotted piece of stump that had somehow found its way in here.

Deyvid swam down to Alie, got one arm around her, and kicked off the gravelly bottom of the canal. His head surfaced a moment later along with hers, but she didn't gasp for breath.

She wasn't breathing.

Deyvid swam harder than he could ever remember swimming before in his life, but it still seemed to take forever to reach the edge of the canal. He caught a handhold there and pulled them up out of the water, immediately rolling his daughter onto her back. Blood from a gash in her forehead trailed down into her hair, and there was no movement in her chest, but ... he pressed his fingers against the top of her neck. Her heart was still beating. He still had a chance.

He rolled her so that her stomach lay on his knee and began to pound between her shoulder blades. Water gushed from her mouth, but she still wasn't breathing. *Again.* He struck her, feeling her ribcage creak. *Again.* Still nothing. *Again!*

Alie suddenly coughed, and another few mouthfuls of water joined the mess already on the ground. Deyvid felt the presence of others around them, but he couldn't let them distract him yet. He waited until he saw Alie's eyes open, until

her coughs tapered off into groans, and she began to wriggle to get her arms under herself again, before he finally allowed himself to respond to the people hovering nearby.

The first person he saw was Petur. Behind him, though, was a gaggle of curious townsfolk, who now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was at least one High Harrier in their midst.

“Shit,” Deyvid muttered.

“Quite,” Petur agreed grimly. He glanced at Alie. “Can she still ride in this state?”

“She’ll have to.” They had to get her out of the city *now*.

Chapter Twenty-One

Luckily, Petur was fast enough to bundle Alie up in his cloak and push through the crowd before more than a few murmurs could rise. He broke into an effortless lope as soon as he was back on the road, leaving Deyvid to manage the horses, which he did with numb briskness.

“Beg pardon, sir,” someone nearby said. Deyvid glanced over at a middle-aged man peering from him to the water. “But you’ll want to see a mage about that dunkin’ you took. Kind of you to go in after the daft lass, but that water’s far from clean. Get yourself a healing spell fast as you can to take the worst of the bite from it.”

“Thank you,” Deyvid replied, glad that his skin and hair dye had held up so well in the water. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“Right, right, good. Say, uh, none of my business, sir, but”—he arched an eyebrow and jerked a thumb in Petur’s direction— “was that, er, that man carrying a ... a High Harrier? ’Cause you know, you’ve got to report all sightings of them here in Mersaighe; don’t matter how far you are from the capital, and we’re right close to it.” He laughed a little nervously. “Can’t be having those soulless brutes running around the civilized nations, eh?”

Fuck. “I’ll handle it,” Deyvid said sternly.

“Right, sir.” The man looked into his eyes, and a moment later he flinched. “Right ... sure you will ...”

The timer was truly set now. Deyvid turned away and eased himself onto the back of his purloined horse with the other’s reins gathered in his fist, then walked the poor, confused beasts back to the inn.

He would take care to cleanse himself thoroughly, but he had a feeling he’d be all right. He hadn’t been in the culvert long, and he’d taken care to keep the water out of his mouth. Alie, on the other hand, was probably going to have a raging

infection by this time tomorrow. And it didn't matter, because she still had to get out of here, healthy or not.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath as the inn came into view. Lilian was out front waiting for him, her face a rictus of worry and guilt.

"I'm so sorry," she said as soon as he stopped the horses. "I shouldn't have stayed downstairs; I truly thought I'd be able to see her, and technically it was my watch, so don't blame Lise, just blame me."

"I'm not interested in blame," Deyvid said tiredly. He didn't have the energy to maintain a snit at Lilian, who was as fatigued as the rest of them and forced to do a duty that she hadn't been trained for. "We're all doing our best, but there are bound to be problems along the way. Did Petur already get here?"

"Yes. His Highness took her directly to his rooms."

"Good." He handed her the reins. "Get these two put away, then make sure you're ready to go. It's possible you and Lise will have to leave with Alie quite soon."

Lilian nodded grimly. "I understand." She turned the horses toward the stable, and Deyvid headed inside. He started up the stairs, then diverted to the innkeeper, who was watching him spread water across the floor with a pained face.

"I need to make use of your bathing facilities," Deyvid told him, watching the man's nose wrinkle at the smell flooding off his clothing. "Laundry too. And I need hot water sent to the prince's chamber immediately, along with a stack of fresh towels."

"I'll see to it, sir," the innkeeper replied. "There's a shower on this lower level if you want it—connects to the cistern on the roof. Won't be hot, though. I've got a bucket of water on the boil too if you'd rather that and a ladle."

"I'll do both," Deyvid decided. "Send a message to the prince, letting him know." He would only be in the way right now if he went up and offend everyone's nose in the

meantime. *She's all right. She'll be all right. She's young, strong. She can handle what's coming.*

He rinsed off in the cool water coming through the spigot in the ceiling of a nicely tiled bathing chamber, then followed it up with a soapy scrub and ladles full of hot water to chase away the last of the filth. He scrubbed his boots and left his smelly clothes in the bucket to soak, pulled on the fresh set that one of the guards had left outside the room for him, then hurried upstairs, barefoot, to Petur's room. It was opened for him before he could knock.

Deyvid took in the tableau before him. Petur, who'd opened the door, had clearly just been sitting at the writing table the room had come with, likely glaring down at the map unfolded on top of it. Lise was helping Alie with a makeshift bath—the girl looked disgruntled by it, but at least she didn't smell like a privy. Sy was sitting nearby, grinding something up in a marble mortar and pestle. He looked over as Deyvid stepped inside, a small smile lighting up his face. He didn't say anything, but a thread of tension inside of Deyvid eased just looking at him.

Sy was here. Alie was here. They were both damaged, but they were still all right for now. He could satisfy himself with that for the time being.

“What's in there?” he asked, clasping a hand on Petur's shoulder before heading over to Sy.

“It's a systemic blood and organ strengthener,” Sy replied. “It's often used as a remedy for infections of all kinds in Bekkon.” He lifted a small bottle off the table and tapped a few grains of whatever was inside of it into the mortar. “I'm adding a painkiller and a fever reducer to the mix. Alie will need to drink a strong tea of this every morning and night to help her recovery on the road ahead.”

“I want nothing you could give me,” Alie snapped at Sy, then ruined the moment by sneezing.

“I won't be the one giving it to you,” Sy reasoned, “so there's no need to get affronted for my part in this.” He stopped grinding for a moment and looked at Deyvid. “What

about you? Petur said you jumped in after her. Are you all right?"

Deyvid saw out of the corner of his eye how Alie went still as he considered his words. "I'm well enough," he said. "I think I got the muck off before it got into me."

Sy frowned. "I'll make some for you as well just in case."

"Thank you." He turned back to Petur. "Someone asked about her before I was able to get out of there. There'll be a magistrate checking out rumors of a High Harrier brought here before the hour is out."

"Then she has to go now." He turned to Lise, who was just putting a new set of restraints on a fully dressed Alie. "Keep her hands bound in the front for the time being; you're going to have to move fast while she's still able to. Get your things and Lilian's gear together and tell her to ready the freshest horses. You're leaving in five minutes."

"Yes, sir." She retied Alie's hands in the front of her body, resisting the girl's churlish efforts to pull away like they were nothing, then bowed and let herself out of the room. Deyvid was barely aware of her leaving, all of his attention focused on his daughter.

Five minutes.

She was leaving in five minutes, and he'd never see her again. She'd tried to run, he'd saved her life, and now she was about to fight for her life *again* when infection inevitably set into her lungs, and he might not know whether she lived or died. Lise and Lilian would do their best to keep him informed, he knew, but once they got Alie to the border ...

A brief touch to the side of his face pulled him out of his fugue. Sy moved his hand to Deyvid's shoulder, squeezing it comfortingly while he handed over the bundle of healing herbs with his free hand. Despite the tension of the moment, the curse hadn't touched Sy yet. "Take a moment," he said, then took Petur by the hand and led him out of the room. Petur had time to raise a single eyebrow in Deyvid's direction, likely

over the authoritative audacity of his husband, before the door shut behind them.

Alie and Deyvid were alone. He stared at her, and she met his gaze for as long as she could before finally dropping her eyes, like she'd gazed into the pitiless sun too long. "I won't thank you for saving my life," she said.

"No thanks are needed."

"Why not?" she flared, hypocritically offended. "Are my thanks so worthless to you that you don't even want them?"

"I said they're not needed, not that they wouldn't be welcome," Deyvid clarified. "You're my daughter. Seeing you live is all the thanks I truly need."

"You are ... so bizarre," Alie said, shaking her head. "I don't understand you at all. You know what's going to happen, don't you? That is, assuming your beasts don't simply kill me the moment we're alone." When Deyvid didn't rise to her taunt, she continued. "Grandfather will send me out after you again. It's the only way to regain our clan's honor, whether that's ... entirely fair or not. He's the leader; it's his decision to make."

"He's a poor leader."

"It's not my place to say," Alie replied, though if the wary look on her face was anything to go by, then at least *some* of Deyvid's caution had passed over to her. "He *is* the leader, and he will have you dead one way or another. If it's not me, it might be war. Do you want that for your ... lovers?" She seemed to force the word from her lips, but at least it wasn't a slur.

Deyvid shook his head. "No, I don't. But I won't let you kill me for the sake of an unstable détente between sides either. If war is coming, then it will come whether I'm dead or alive." He shouldn't ask, he really shouldn't, but ... "Do you really want to kill me, still?"

"Of course," Alie said, not able to meet his eyes at all now. "It's my ... it's my duty."

“Hmm.” Part of Deyvid wanted to test her resolve, to see whether or not her stated will could hold when given the opportunity to actually end him. But he hadn’t been lying when he’d promised not to leave Sy behind. He wouldn’t push Alie now, no matter how much he wanted to. “Well, then. I suppose there’s nothing more to be said between us.”

She sniffed and pushed a lock of lank gray hair out of her face. “I suppose not.”

“Just ... allow me a single liberty if you would.” He took a step in, then another, then lifted his hands. “I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“What are you—”

Her voice cut off as he pulled her into a hug. Gently, so gently the pressure was barely there, he clasped her to his chest. Her hands were between them, poised to push him off, to force him back ... but she didn’t. Instead, after a moment of stillness, she gripped the fabric of his shirt so tightly he heard threads rip.

“I wish it could be different,” Alie whispered in a voice full of tears. “I wish I could have kept you.”

Deyvid sighed brokenly. “I wish I had taken you with me.” He patted her back, stroked her hair with one hand, and —

Lise broke the moment with a loud rap on the door. “Sir! The horses are ready; we must go now.”

“Understood,” Deyvid called out. He kissed Alie on the crown of her head, then stepped away and kindly didn’t say a word about the tears on her face before he turned and headed for the door.

Their time together was over.

Part Three: Petur

Chapter Twenty-Two

Their party's entrance into Rorech, and toward the palace, was an exercise in extreme personal restraint for Petur.

He didn't know if people said what they said because they thought he couldn't hear them, or if they said it because they knew he could and were confident that he wouldn't do anything about it. All he knew was that he was going to ride through the midst of this sea of vipers like the godsdamn prince he was, and he wasn't going to flinch, no matter what they said.

“Animals.”

“It's amazing that they even made it here in their human forms. I thought they'd all get distracted rutting with beasts in the forest.”

“They stink of shifter magic. Ugh, it's so raw; how do they even bend themselves into the shapes they need with that?”

“Do you see the one without any aura at all? *Disgusting.*”

“There's a mage among them too ... how does he bear it?”

“I understand their ... utility, but surely the princess must see that such a marriage is so *lowering* for her.”

The insults to himself, Petur could handle. The insults to Deyvid were something he was inured to after so much time in his own court, unfortunately. The deprecations whispered about Sy were actually few and far between, and apart from a bad bout with the curse that morning, Sy was holding up well under the scrutiny. He was a prince, after all—it wasn't like he'd never been judged by ridiculous strangers before.

No, the worst was what they said about Arven, mostly because Petur could see how it affected his nephew. Every whisper made him shrink a little lower in the saddle, every sharp glance and caustic laugh made him flinch. This had been

a nightmarish trip for all of them, but at least Petur knew he'd be leaving this place soon enough. For Arven, his sojourn here was only just beginning.

For the first time in days, Petur drew his horse up right next to his nephew. "Sit up straight," he murmured. "Don't let them have the satisfaction of making you small."

"I'm fine," Arven muttered, but he did straighten up a bit. "Don't talk to me right now. You know some of them are listening in."

"Actually, they're not." Sy pulled up on Arven's other side, a wan smile on his face. "The spell on the jewels I gave you doesn't just let me know your locations and act as a warning signal. A few simple modifications turn it into a basic magical reflector."

"Like what you did with the leaves," Arven said in a tone of understanding. "You can use it defensively."

"Yes, very similar," Sy agreed, "but even simpler. Protecting privacy is one of the first spells any mage learns, and I've figured out how to cast it in all sorts of situations. You don't need to worry that we're being overheard."

"You are perfect, and I love you," Petur said and had the satisfaction of seeing Sy blush.

"Just because you *can* say anything doesn't mean you *have* to," Arven said, rolling his eyes. He urged his horse a bit further forward, leaving Petur to pull his mount in next to Sy's.

Deyvid was acting as a rearguard, discouraging anyone who wanted to be more than simply vocal from striking out against them. Nothing, *nothing* perturbed mages like a High Harrier, and while he didn't look like one right now, he was perceivable as immune to magic if someone was looking at them with the right spell. Which some curious little fucker *always* was, in Rorech.

"Is Arven all right?" Sy murmured quietly once they were relatively alone.

"I don't know," Petur said with perfect honesty. "I thought he'd be better the closer we got to Rorech. We're

about to reunite him with his fiancée, after all. He's been in love with her for years; they've written to each other faithfully, and she's a powerful mage herself. She'll be good protection for him, and this alliance is a good one for Mersaighe, no matter how the court tries to spin it. I thought he'd be ... *happy.*"

"He's definitely not happy," Sy said, narrowing his eyes in thought. "Maybe the reality of his new life is finally sinking in now."

"If the trip to get here wasn't chance enough for this shit to sink in, I don't know what would be," Petur replied. "I —"

"—how long he'll last before she sets him aside for her lover," a snide voice said in passing. Petur turned his head in that direction, shifting his ears just enough to increase his hearing.

"What is it?" Sy said. Petur held up a hand.

"—can't say that!" another voice said with a laugh. "You know such talk is forbidden by the king and queen!"

"It's the truth, isn't it? He's only here because she needs a marriage that will lend us their brute strength, not because she's ever going to love—" The voices faded away, and Petur unclenched his jaw.

"What did you hear?" Sy asked in a soft voice.

"Something ... disconcerting." They were too near the gates of the palace for Petur to discuss it with his husband and too close to Arven to do so without him overhearing them, but he resolved to bring it up later. If what those women were saying was true ... well. That would put a new spin on things. "I'll tell you later," he promised Sy.

"I'll hold you to it." He glanced behind them, past their elaborately dressed royal guards back to where Deyvid followed behind them all. "What about Deyvid?"

"We'll talk to him as well when we get the chance," Petur said. "Protocols are going to be stricter here. Mersaighans in general, but certainly the court of the royal

family of Rorech, aren't very accepting of marriages outside the most basic pairing—male with female. You and I are a stretch for them. You and I *and* Deyvid would make them cry blood.”

“Right, no, I know. They had a few choice words to say to my stepmother when they learned that she'd remarried.” Sy huffed irritably. “Because of course, it would have been better for her and my father to be sad and alone for the rest of their lives. Yes, that makes total sense.”

“I love it when you're snide,” Petur said. “Especially when you're snide at someone who's not me.”

Sy laughed. “Stop making yourself into a target, and you might get to enjoy me like this more.” He looked ahead, and the smile slowly drained from his face. “It looks like our official welcome party is arriving.”

It was more like they were being descended upon than welcomed. A phalanx of black-garbed soldiers wearing dark-red capes was walking toward them. Their uniforms reminded Petur of a grouping of fatal wounds. Each one held a long-bladed halberd in their hands, but he could see the dual-edged daggers at their waists as well. The halberd was proper ceremonial attire—the dagger was decidedly not.

Not taking any chances with us, are they? In the middle of them was a woman riding a tall white horse. She wore a matching white velvet dress, her hair demurely covered but her face a rictus of elderly disapproval. It was as if someone had taken a thunderstorm and distilled it into an expression, then slapped it on the front of her head and called it sufficient. She wore enough jewelry to make Sy look plain, each piece undoubtedly imbued with spells for every occasion. A court mage, a high-ranking one.

She rode to the front of the phalanx, which stopped a few meters away from them. Arven signaled a stop as well, and Petur let him take the lead. He needed to firmly establish his authority. They all halted, and for a moment the air was still and expectant.

“Lords of Riyale,” the woman said at last. “Welcome to Rorech, the heart of the Mersaighan Empire.”

“Princes,” Arven said in immediate response.

The woman tilted her head slightly, like an inquisitive heron. “I beg your pardon?”

“We are princes, not lords,” he corrected her coolly. “Therefore, you should address us as ‘highnesses.’ I know how important proper modes of address are to the royal court, and I would hate for you to be embarrassed when you present us to my fiancée, Princess Kara, and her parents.”

Her lips tightened slightly. “I apologize for the misunderstanding. Welcome, Your Highnesses. We are here to escort you to the palace. Our princess has been waiting for you for some time now, and it would be unfortunate if she had to wait for her intended any longer.”

Combative right off the mark. Interesting. I wonder what the tone of the court will be. His spies hadn’t had much to report of late; there had been so much upheaval in Delomar, he had focused their efforts on finding the assassins plaguing them, not digging beyond the surface of their neighbors’ political situations. That might have been a mistake.

He was here, though, still with Arven. He could help correct that mistake before things got out of hand.

“We’re honored by your escort,” Arven said, his voice barely interested. “Take us to the palace at once. I’m eager to see my fiancée again after so long apart.”

The mage clearly didn’t like being ordered around like a servant, but there wasn’t much she could do about it when she herself had invoked the need for speed. “Yes, Your Highness.” She turned, and the soldiers turned with her, their blades gleaming in the morning sunlight.

Petur glanced at Sy, who looked back without any inflection at all on his face. His eyes gleamed with concern, though.

I know. Or rather, he would find out soon enough just how much cause for concern they really had.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The royal audience went through with all the pomp and circumstance that Petur had expected. Juiel and Fetha Belael, the King and Queen of Mersaighe, were the sort of couple that Petur saw time and time again in the ranks of his own nobility. They were a match made for purely practical reasons, with no affection to soften the fact that they were stuck together for the rest of their lives. Sometimes such matches worked—a child might bring a couple closer together, or they had enough similar interests and capabilities to find common ground together.

Other times, they ended up like this pair: worlds apart in presentation and perspicacity, mutual disdain dripping from the tip of every tooth. Even touching as they were now, with Queen Fetha's gloved hand resting on top of King Juiel's as they stood in front of their thrones, it was clear that she disliked having to touch him even *that* much. The edges of her eyes were tight, and her mouth was lined with the kind of wrinkles that came from persistent strain. Her husband, meanwhile, looked utterly bored with the whole affair.

Princess Kira, at least, seemed pleased to see them. She was wearing the bright-white robes of a Mersaighan mage—about the least practical color Petur could imagine given how frequently Sy's concoctions ended up on his clothes—embroidered across the chest and around the hems with silver-and-blue flowers. She wore a traditional white scarf over her ash-blond hair, shoes that made her at least three inches taller, and a smile so warm and relieved that Petur found himself smiling back reflexively.

“Welcome to Rorech!” she exclaimed, bowing elegantly. “We are most pleased to have you all in our court at last.”

“Yes,” Queen Fetha said, her mouth still a stiff, straight line. “What a blessing that you made it here for the *happy* event of your own *marriage*. If you had been much later, we

would have had to wait another year for the omens to be right.”

King Juiel sighed. “Welcome,” was all he said before dropping his arm out from under his wife’s hand like he was shaking off a particularly irritating bug. He then sat down and reached for a goblet. His hand shook—was it from nerves or from drink? Petur inhaled deeply, but if that was wine, he couldn’t smell it from here.

“Thank you for your kindness,” Arven said, speaking directly to Kira. He was smiling like he meant it, finally. “We’re happy to be here at last.”

“You *did* have trouble on the road, did you not?” the queen inquired, staying standing. “I recall Kira mentioning something about it.”

Don’t give her any more than you have to. The details of their attack needed to be kept quiet until they could figure out who was behind it.

“Some,” Arven replied smoothly. “Nothing we couldn’t manage in the end, thanks to my uncle’s able assistance.”

The queen looked taken aback. “What use is a shifter against a mage?”

So she knows more about the attack than she’s letting on.

“My queen,” Kira interjected, her face red as she turned to address her mother, “Prince Arven’s uncle by marriage is Prince Symon Parador of Bekkon.”

“Oh.” The queen sniffed. “I suppose I do recall that. It’s been so long since I’ve thought of your Uncle Petur as anything other than ‘taken,’ Prince Arven.” Her mouth twisted with distaste as she said it, her gaze drifting back toward the end of their train, where Deyvid stood alone.

Petur wanted to step forward and verbally rip this woman to shreds. Two things stopped him. First—both Arven and Kira seemed embarrassed by the queen’s conduct, and Petur calling it out wouldn’t do anything to improve their

status right now. And second, he could feel Sy starting to tremble next to him. It might not be the curse ... but he didn't want to take the chance.

Arven glanced over at Petur, who simply nodded at him.

Get us out of here.

“It's been a long time on the road, and we would appreciate the opportunity to make ourselves more presentable,” Arven said as if he wasn't wearing his third-best suit right now. He'd packed enough of a wardrobe not to embarrass himself, but he'd need to commission numerous clothes in the Mersaighan style now. Luckily, they'd also come with a great deal of money, not to mention the means that would be coming Arven's way as a marrying-in price.

He had given up a kingdom to come here. It was Kira's duty to ensure that he had the means to live as he was accustomed to, and that meant a large expense account.

Watching Kira nod understandingly, Petur thought she might be good for it. She'd better be. “My lady-in-waiting, Neola, will show you to your rooms,” she said and glanced at Petur. “I've ensured that they're suitable for your entire entourage.” She held out her hands. Arven stepped forward and took them, then raised them to his lips for a courtly kiss.

Petur sharpened his senses, waiting to hear the rush of a heart beating quicker, the scent of fresh sweat and heightened hormones, anything to show that they were more than simply pleased to be in the same room together after years apart.

There was nothing. Nothing at all. The warmth and affection were real, but there was no love there that Petur could detect. Not desire, at least. What was going on between these two? Was it a spell on Kira's part? But that didn't explain Arven's lack of reaction.

“I'm so glad you're here at last,” Kira said, and she sounded earnest but also perfectly composed. “I look forward to a long and happy union between our houses.”

“So do I,” Arven said. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you*. Neola.” She turned and gestured to the young woman behind her, and—

Ah. There was the hitch in her heartbeat that Petur had expected when Arven kissed her hands. There was the flush and the heat, the reaction. Was this young woman Kira’s lover?

And if she was, did Arven know about it?

Neola ushered them out of the palace’s meeting hall, along two different corridors, and finally turned into a section of the building that smelled a little more lived-in. Silent, black-garbed men-at-arms accompanied them every step of the way, and Petur could sense his people’s discomfort with them.

It didn’t help that Sy’s tremors were only getting worse, and Petur was on the verge of doing something impolite before Neola finally stopped in her recitation of the features and history of the hall, the training areas, and where their escort was allowed to go, and pointed them to an elaborately carved wooden door. It had birds, beasts, and fish frolicking together on it, and above them, a pair of humans looked down with their hands clasped across their chests, laughing.

“This one is for you, Prince Petur,” she said, delicately ignoring Sy’s deteriorating state. “It contains a—”

“It will do,” he said briskly, already opening the door. “Have our baggage sent here. Arven, I’ll talk with you soon.” He didn’t look down the hall at Deyvid—Sy had to come first now, and he knew that Deyvid understood that.

“Very well. Um. Enjoy your—”

He shut the door on her a moment before Sy’s eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed in Petur’s arms. Petur sat down with him slowly right there on the floor, murmuring soothingly and running his hand through Sy’s sweaty hair as he did his best to ease his husband’s discomfort. This wasn’t the worst attack Petur had witnessed, not by far, but hearing Sy gasp for breath and watching him clutch at his

chest as if he could claw the pain inside of him out, hurt worse than being stabbed.

“Sweetheart,” Petur murmured, drawing Sy up against his chest so their hearts were close to each other. He breathed slowly, loudly, so that Sy could feel it and try to match it. “Good,” he said when Sy’s labored inhales began to ease. “That’s perfect, darling, you’re doing so well.”

Sy’s response could have been a laugh, a scoff, or even a stifled cough, but it was clear he didn’t think as highly of himself right now as Petur did.

“I wouldn’t lie to you, not about this. I’m proud of you,” Petur soothed him. “You’re fighting something that you can’t help. You’re strong, Sy. You’re so strong.” He kissed his forehead, felt his husband’s heartbeat finally slow, and sighed with relief. One more attack weathered. However many more it took before the curse killed Sy to go.

Petur knew then and there that he’d do anything to free Sy from this affliction. If it meant kowtowing to the Mersaighan mages, if it meant being the brunt of their crude jokes and coarse mannerisms, if it meant ignoring the insults thrown at them and allowing them to separate Deyvid from him and Sy, he would tolerate it. For now. Deyvid knew what was at stake here; he knew what needed to happen, and he wanted the same.

Petur would make it up to him once Sy was better. Which he would be.

He had to be.

That hope was the only thing that promised to get him through this damn visit in one piece.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Petur was so involved in Sy that he almost didn't realize someone else was in the room until they were fewer than five feet away. As soon as he heard them coming, his eyes snapped up, teeth sharpening reflexively before he realized it was Deyvid. Relief was swift as was chagrin. How had he not recognized his own lover's presence?

"There's a door between your room and mine, courtesy of some wrangling by Kira," Deyvid explained as he knelt down. "It's one of the reasons we're being housed in the hall for lesser court dignitaries—the local lords and ladies expect to have connected rooms for their children." He smiled. "It's almost like being home again, except I had to step through a hallway to get from my side to yours."

"A hallway?" Wait, there were hallways in the walls of this place?

"An enclosed passage, seemingly just between our two rooms," Deyvid said. He brushed a hand over Sy's hair, then leaned in and kissed his forehead. "I might have thought the wall between our rooms to merely be unusually thick, but there's something of an echo in there if both the doors are closed, and you stand very still."

"Which you did."

"Which I did," Deyvid confirmed. "It's safe to say that there's *some* sort of secret passage in the walls here, but it's not going to be easy to find an access point. I'll look harder."

"Always looking for the next threat, aren't you?"

"It's part of why you love me," Deyvid said rather dryly, then looked back down at Sy. "How bad was it?"

"It's not bad," Sy said, intervening before Petur could speak for him. "I'm just in the mood to rest here with the men I love for a while."

"We could be resting far more comfortably on the bed," Petur said with mock sarcasm. "Has sleeping outside for

a few weeks dulled your taste for basic amenities like beds? This one should even have a decent mattress.”

“Hmm.” Sy craned his neck to look over his shoulder at the rather elaborately laid bed half a room away. “I only care for it if it’s big enough for three.”

“We can squeeze in,” Petur decided and scooped Sy up into his arms before he could offer a protest.

He offered plenty once he was actually on the bed, though. “I can walk!” he insisted. “I’m feeling much improved, honestly. I need to make the most of the times when I’m feeling well, and right now qualifies, so maybe I ought to ... where do you think our baggage is? I’ve got a lot of gear in it I ought to unpack so I can—”

“It’s with Lise,” Petur said, grabbing Sy around the waist and pulling him back onto the bed before he could escape. “She’ll bring it by later, but for now, you’re not going anywhere.”

“But I ...” Sy’s eyes went a bit glazed as Deyvid leaned in and brushed the hair back from his neck before kissing a path down his sweaty, overheated skin. “You ... can’t actually want me right now,” Sy protested weakly, his eyes on Petur even though Deyvid was the one embracing him.

“Darling, I thought you knew,” Petur exclaimed. “We want you all the time. There’s no ocean of water big enough to douse the flame of wanting you. What I *really* want,” he said, lowering his voice as Deyvid lowered his hand to Sy’s trousers, rubbing his bulge, “is for you to take some time to recover from your latest bout with the curse. Who knows how long we’ll have before we’re dragged off to some horrific social function, and that’s just the two of us? Deyvid is going to be left languishing here alone, with nothing but his sneaking to keep him occupied. Shouldn’t he have a sweet memory to keep him warm?”

“You’re so dramatic,” Sy said with a laugh. “You’d think neither of you could live without me, when we all know that’s not true.”

“I don’t think any of us know that, and I’d rather not test it,” Petur said. He leaned forward and captured Sy’s lips in a kiss as Deyvid worked his way down, the two of them acting in perfect sync, distracting their younger lover with lips and teeth, kisses and caresses, and eventually, Deyvid’s mouth on him. They drew moans out of Sy as Deyvid used all his skill—skill that Petur admired; Deyvid was a consummate artist at this—to please him so assiduously that his orgasm hit with the necessary force to allow him to drift into a restful sleep shortly thereafter.

As soon as Sy was asleep, Petur grabbed Deyvid and pulled him over to the table that had been laid for them, filled with platters of fruit and olives and fresh flatbread. “No talking,” he snapped as he jerked Deyvid’s uniform out of the way, then got down onto his own knees with Deyvid leaning back against the table. “You’ll distract me with talking, and it’ll be something important, and I’ve already *got* something important to do, so just don’t.”

Deyvid grinned. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“You would,” Petur said flatly. “You’d do it just to annoy me out of whatever mood you think I’m in.”

“Oh, are you in a mood?” Deyvid spread his legs wider and ran his fingers into Petur’s hair, gripping tight and tugging. Ah, so *Deyvid* was in a mood as well—he didn’t normally care to direct, but Petur was more than willing to let him as long as it involved both of them coming and soon.

“I swear, you will drive me mad.” Then Petur set about making sure Deyvid couldn’t interrupt the moment by using his mouth as ruthlessly as he knew how. He hollowed his cheeks and sucked, pleased to feel Deyvid respond to him so quickly, filling in and swelling up until he reached all the way back to Petur’s throat. That was good, that was what he wanted—to be held tight and stuffed full, to be consumed, owned. To be reminded that he was more than just a figurehead, a royal puppet who danced for his sister and backed up his nephew, but also someone who had *meaning*.

“Look at you. On your knees for me.” Deyvid’s grip on his hair tightened even further, dragging Petur’s head back so he could look him in the eyes for a long moment. “You need this, don’t you? A chance to be nothing but mine.” He smiled briefly. “Ours. Even in sleep, he knows where you are. He can feel your presence. And you?”

Deyvid thrust in hard, making Petur choke a bit. “You certainly feel mine, don’t you?” He fucked Petur’s mouth with long, deep thrusts, hardly giving him a chance to catch his breath, and Petur reveled in it. It was so rare that he got to let go like this—that he even *liked* to—so he knew he should appreciate the fey mood while it was with him.

“Get yourself off,” Deyvid grunted breathlessly as he picked up the pace. “Get your dick out; touch yourself where I can see you. I want to watch you do it. You need to come before I do, or you won’t be coming at all.”

A goal. Petur could work with a goal. He lowered his hands to his breeches, freeing himself while Deyvid kept fucking his face, and began to stroke his own cock. Would it be soon? How long did he have?

He could hear Deyvid’s heart rate increase and feel the rhythm of his breaths become erratic. He was going to come soon, so soon. Petur stripped himself with vicious enthusiasm, hard the way he only liked when he had to be furtive and fast, and after a few more seconds, he began to come into his fist.

“Oh, gods, yes,” Deyvid said, his face rapt as he stared down at Petur, watching his face distort and hearing the whine rise in his throat. “You’re so good, you’re so good for me, *fuck*.” He hissed the last word as he started to come himself, driving all the way to the back of Petur’s throat and making the act of swallowing irrelevant.

As soon as he pulled out, Petur stood up and kissed him, the soreness in his throat already vanishing thanks to his shifter-quick healing. Their naked groins pressed together, sticky and sated, as they kissed again, slowly, languorously. When they finally parted for a breath, Petur held up his hand with a grin. “Lick it clean?”

Deyvid scoffed. “Not happening, love.” He grabbed a napkin off the table and wiped Petur’s come-soaked hand with it, then wetted down another one and wiped them both clean. “Well. That’ll be fun for the laundress to find.”

“I daresay they’ll expect it,” Petur said, covering himself up again as he glanced at Sy. Still asleep, thankfully. “You’re mated to a beast, after all. No one would expect any better.”

“You noticed their oh-so-subtle door decorations?” Deyvid asked rhetorically. “They’re fools. Don’t let them get to you.”

“They don’t get to me.”

Deyvid eyed him. “That’s not entirely true, is it?”

He was right. “I don’t care about them for *my* sake,” Petur explained. “I’m only a guest here. I might come to this gods-forsaken city once every two or three years. I don’t have to live with these people. Arven does. Moreover, he will have to live here as their queen’s consort. What kind of life will he lead? Kira seems kind, but ... is she going to be conscientious about her husband’s emotional state? What about how their children will be treated?” He shook his head. “It does worry me. I knew they were prejudiced, but I expected the royals at *least* to be on Arven’s side since they approved the marriage.”

“There’s a very good way to assuage your fears,” Deyvid began. Petur sighed and cut him off.

“Go talk to Arven?”

“Go talk to Arven,” Deyvid agreed. “Preferably with Kira there too. I’ll stay here with Sy, try to get some food into him when he wakes up.”

Petur nodded. “I’ll be back soon.” He started to move away from the table, then turned around and pulled Deyvid into a fierce embrace. “Thank you.”

Deyvid chuckled. “I love you too.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

It felt odd to be stared at as he walked toward the room he'd been told was Arven's. One would think a prince was used to being looked at, but the truth of it was that Petur was as close to a nonentity as any member of the royal family could be back home. Everyone within the palace walls knew him as the workhorse of the royal family, always busy, always working to root out corruption and plotting. No one stared at him there, not wanting to risk attracting his attention. And when he was out in the city or most of the rest of Riyale, Petur went in one of his animal forms. Those were the very definition of understated, and he had no trouble fitting in with the true animals, no matter what form he was in. Raven, wolf, or otter—Petur had a body for air, land, and water.

Here, things were different. Everything in this damn place was redolent with magic, a pulse at the edge of his mind that fuzzed his senses and made him snappish. It wasn't like this with Sy—Sy set spells on the things in his rooms, sure enough, and wore enough magic-infused pieces to put many of these mages to shame, but the *feeling* of those spells was different. Less ... heavy, less pervasive.

These were old and strongly maintained; they felt benignly cruel, like having a wet blanket laid over your face and being left there to struggle with it. For the first time in a long time, Petur envied his lover.

At least Deyvid doesn't feel like this damn place is smothering him.

That wasn't fair, of course—Deyvid was in more danger here than any of them, precisely because he was outside the bounds of this court's control. Plenty of people here doubtless wanted them gone, but *someone* here wanted them dead. Petur hadn't forgotten that, and he wanted to know Kira's solution to it. She'd tell him too, damn it, whether Arven made a scene about him bothering his beloved or not, because—

Ah. Here he was. In the spirit of politesse, Petur knocked twice on his nephew's door, which featured more of those genial, godlike mages laughing down at the lesser creatures. A few moments later, Arven opened it. His formal jacket was off, and the top of his shirt was untied. His boots were gone as well, and for a moment Petur wondered if he'd interrupted Arven in the middle of a "reunion," but ... there was no scent of anyone other than Arven in the room and nothing at all to indicate arousal.

"Uncle." Arven looked unhappy, but he let Petur in.

"Thank you," Petur said, glancing around as the door shut behind him. It was a handsome set of rooms, befitting an honored guest, and yet ... it was still in the guest wing of the palace. That Arven wasn't being housed closer to Kira was disheartening. "So. Where's your criminal being kept?"

"Don't call Gerain that," Arven said tiredly as he passed Petur and walked over to a table holding a silver pitcher and several goblets. He poured two glasses of light-red wine and held one out to Petur.

Petur accepted the wine, but he didn't let go of the point. "It's what he is. He's alive, like you said he must be, but he made an alliance with someone from this court to keep you away from it. He could still get you killed. He—"

"He's my first line of defense," Arven cut in before taking a long drink of his own wine. "He doesn't know exactly who he was dealing with, only that they're highly placed here in court. Since he arrived here in one piece, but the mage who attacked us was killed, it's a fair assumption to whoever persuaded him to the original plan that Gerain's part in it went undetected. In that case, he might very well be approached again. When he is, we'll have a better idea of who is behind the attempt on all our lives and be prepared to act."

It made a certain pragmatic sort of sense, yet Petur didn't like it. He wanted to offer up Sy's services to track the original spell on the jewel that Gerain wore, but given Sy's current state, that didn't seem reasonable. Still ... "You're willing to trust your life to a man who was so eager to make a

deal with someone he didn't even know that his naivete almost got you killed?"

Arven sighed. "I have to. I need every advantage I can get before the wedding. Once Kira and I are married, she'll be able to bring me under the aegis of the protective spells set on the palace, which will protect me from almost everything as long as I'm on the grounds."

Unless the perpetrator of the attack was a member of the royal family, but Petur didn't mention that. The wedding ... it wasn't for another five days. That was a long time for things to go wrong.

Well, at least they had a time line to work off of. Petur felt oddly proud of his nephew for his clear-sighted understanding of his own precarious position. Infuriated by it but proud of him all the same. "How do you want me to help?"

Arven arched an eyebrow. "I thought you already had your agenda worked out?"

"Oh, I've got plenty to do here, never fear, but I want to know what you think would be best as well."

"Ah. Well, um ..." His nephew went quiet for a moment as he thought. "I think it would help if you swagger, loudly, where people can hear you. You know, boast about the power of the Riyalian army, how mighty it is, how much we're already doing against the Harrier clans. How important this alliance is to our family, and how you're regularly in contact with Mother about it."

"You want me to make the consequences of interfering with the alliance clearer," Petur surmised.

"Exactly. Play up your marriage with Sy too," Arven added. "So many Mersaighans think we're soft targets because we put shifting before magic, but Bekkon has a reputation for creating powerful mages, though not a lot of them. Make it clear that anyone who acts against us is acting against Bekkon."

"I can do that." It might even work as a deterrent as long as they were able to figure out what was wrong with Sy

and cure him before ... “On that note, I need a meeting with Kira, soon.”

“Why? Oh, right.” Arven’s face fell. “Of course. I’m sure she can send an excellent healer to tend to Symon.”

“Excellent is good, excellent and discreet is better.”

Arven nodded. “I’ll mention it after the banquet tonight. I, ah, I asked that you and I be placed on either side of Kira. To show solidarity and, and, you know.” *So that he won’t be entirely alone at the head table.*

“That’s fine.” Petur smiled. “I don’t think Sy’s going to feel up to an evening of a long dinner and longer talks, but Deyvid will be there to keep him company.”

“Isn’t that ...” Arven stopped, looked down as he seemed to struggle with his words, then looked up again. “I guess I just ... don’t understand.”

“What part?” It wasn’t *that* confusing as far as Petur could see. “My marriage to Sy? Politically motivated, obviously, but we learned at first to tolerate each other, then to love each other.”

“But you’re also ... um ... you like to ... you’re ...”

“Attracted to each other, yes.”

Arven blushed bright red. “But you’re already with Deyvid for that!”

“You can want sex with more than one person; it’s allowed,” Petur replied, amused. “It certainly helps that the two of them want each other as well. I could never formalize my relationship with Deyvid, but he never really wanted that either—his own marriage wasn’t a happy one. So not having that didn’t hurt us, and me being married to someone he finds very attractive as well is a blessing rather than a curse.”

“Are ... and the three of you just ... make it work?”

“Most of the time.” *Except when I’m being an ass.* “Why are you asking about this? Are you worried about having to share Kira with someone?”

“No!” Arven shook his head in disgust. “I don’t even want *her* that way!”

Oh. Oh, that was ... well. From the look on Arven’s face, he hadn’t been intending to blurt that out. “All right,” Petur said, not wanting to rush to judgement but determined to understand what was going on in his nephew’s head. “Does she know that?”

“Yes,” Arven said, and a little of Petur’s tension vanished. “We’re—we really are friends, and we have been for a long time. I think she knew that I didn’t want women like that before *I* knew. She does like them, though. Women. Like that.”

“I see.” *Sort of*. “Do you like men, then?”

“I don’t really like anyone in that way,” Arven confessed. “The thought of that sort of intimacy makes me ...” He shuddered, and it wasn’t theatrical in the slightest. “I don’t want that from a wife, and she doesn’t need it from a husband.”

Petur raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Are you not planning on having children, then?”

“No, of course we want children, but there are spells to help with that. We won’t actually have to ... to ... and Kira knows, is the thing,” Arven said with a sigh. “She *understands*. I know that Rorech isn’t the happiest place I could be situated; I know that my parents would have preferred me to stay in Riyale and marry a noblewoman; I know I might even be in danger here, but. At least I won’t be pressured into something I have no interest in.”

After a moment’s consideration, Petur nodded. “That makes perfect sense.”

Arven’s jaw dropped. “Really? You—really?”

Petur sighed. “You’re not the first person I’ve ever met who hasn’t cared for the idea of sex. If it’s not something you want, and you found someone who will let you continue in your royal role without requiring it of you—someone you care

for—then all I can do is commend and support you. As long as you genuinely think this is the best path forward.”

“I do,” Arven said, looking like a weight had dropped off his shoulders. “I really do. I—Kira is wonderful. She’s happy to hold my hand and kiss my cheek and then stop there, and I’m happy for her to have her lover as well. We’re—in a place like this, with families like ours, I think that’s the best we can ask for.”

“Then I’m very happy for you.” Not to mention enlightened to have the truth at last, a truth that he could understand, and one that he knew took into account his nephew’s heart. “And I’ll support you as best I can tonight.”

“Thank you, Uncle.” After a brief pause, Arven put down his wine and threw his arms around Petur’s shoulders. Once he managed to set his own glass aside, Petur returned the embrace just as fiercely. Their fights on the road and the tension that had ridden with them ever since Arven’s return to Delomar seemed like distant history now.

Hopefully, their accord would last for the rest of this visit because Petur had the feeling he was going to need Arven’s help as much as his nephew needed his.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When it came to royal banquets, Petur was sure of three things: first, it would be sumptuous, because a formal banquet was a chance to put on airs for your nobles that most royalty simply couldn't pass up. Second, it would be impossible to have an actual conversation, between the noise of the servers, the intermittent and yet interminable toasts, and the amount of fawning that went on. Third, and most important—Petur hated these things, but he had to look like he loved them.

He was dressed in his brightest colors, none of the dark, hardy clothes his personal guard wore—this outfit was turquoise and aquamarine trimmed in silver braid, which nicely accented the necklace of charms that he wore. Those were chosen by Sy and performed a number of functions that meant Petur had at least internal privacy—no one could magically listen to his heartbeat, and no one could sneak a peek at his thoughts. The dagger at his hip, a gift from Deyvid, was just the sort of jewel-crusted monstrosity that his lover despised, except this one's monstrousness ended where its blade began. The sheathe was a work of expensive, useless art, but the blade itself was patterned steel with a diamant edge and would cut through nearly anything.

Needless to say, he looked every inch the arrogant foreign prince, and he acted that way too, sure of his own standing and careless of the people around him with the exception of Kira. It wasn't hard for Petur to be kind to his nephew's fiancée.

"I apologize again for the troubles you ran into on your way here," she said in a low tone, not intended to be completely inaudible but quiet enough that hopefully, most of her courtiers wouldn't care what she was saying. "Arven told me about it this afternoon; how dreadful."

Ah, no mention of their private communication in this public place, then. That was fine with Petur.

He smiled gallantly. "We would have endured a hundred times the difficulties to bring my nephew to your side.

The incident in question was dangerous, to be sure, but my husband is an accomplished mage and was more than capable of defending us.”

“Indeed,” Kira said, looking like she wanted to continue, but she was cut off by the woman Petur now knew as Neral Lissus, the mage who had “welcomed” them to the palace. She was Kira’s private teacher and one of the most powerful people in the kingdom.

“I would speak to him about his spellwork,” she said imperiously. “He seems innovative, which can be as much of a curse as a blessing. Bekkon spellcraft has never been orthodox, but you describe him as surprisingly successful. Where is he now?”

“The trip wore him out,” Petur replied. “He’s resting in our quarters.”

“I would expect him to be on death’s door, to not have shown up to the feast thrown for his own welcome,” Queen Fetha put in from where she sat several chairs down on the far side of the king, who was already slumped back and deep into his fourth cup of wine. “Do you need the services of our healers?”

“The princess has already graciously offered assistance,” Petur said politely. The queen didn’t seem pleased by this.

“Overstepping your bounds already?” she snapped at her daughter. “You are not queen yet, girl. And if you continue to disregard your status and offer things that aren’t yours to hand over as though you *are* queen—”

“Mother, please,” Kira nearly begged. “I simply saw a need and fulfilled it for our honored guests. No insult was intended.”

“I’m sure Prince Symon will be feeling his usual self again in no time,” Petur interjected smoothly. “At which point, he would undoubtedly be pleased to offer you an accounting of his spellwork, Mistress.” He smiled at Neral. “It’s a rare

treat for him to be in the company of people who understand his brilliance.”

Neral sniffed. “We’ll see how brilliant he is after I meet with him,” she said and turned back to her soup decisively.

Behind Arven, Gerain shifted a bit. Petur carefully didn’t look at him, just tuned his ears a bit better to hear him. Had he just received some sort of secret message? Was he trying to communicate? Or ... did he just have an itch in a place it would be impolite to scratch right now? Ugh.

Petur took another bite of his own soup, enjoying the food if not the atmosphere of this occasion. He’d have to make sure some of this got sent to his rooms for Sy and Deyvid. “So,” he said brightly, turning back to Kira. “Originally, I was under the assumption that we would have two weeks with which to prepare for your wedding to Arven. Now you’re to be married in five days. Why the change in date?”

“Ah.” She seemed pleased to have a ready answer for that one. “Our astronomers consulted the heavens and decided that the upcoming full moon would be a more auspicious time for a wedding. Luckily, there’s been no trouble moving the schedule up. It will be a most joyous occasion.”

“It’s our wedding,” Arven said and held out his hand. Kira took it with a smile. “How could it be anything else?”

“Look at the lovebirds,” someone cooed from further down the table—a cousin of Kira’s, Petur thought. The young man grinned. “Ha, is it literal in this case? I know that you trained Riyalians can have many forms—can you turn into a bird, dear prince?”

“Not a lovebird,” Arven replied.

“What kind of bird, then? Something magnificent, like an eagle? A hawk? Or are you more of a dove or a turkey?” Several people around him laughed.

“This is hardly the place to be interrogating my fiancé over such things, Detur,” Kira said with a frown.

“I’m simply making conversation!” the young man insisted. “We’re about to have a shifter join our noble house! It seems only prudent that we know what shapes he can take so that someone doesn’t accidentally shoot him down on a hunt or some such.” There was more laughter.

Arven had gone stiff, and personally, Petur was done with his nephew being disrespected for the night. “Don’t worry about that,” Petur said jovially, reaching for the closest silver pitcher of wine. It was a little bit beyond his grasp. He focused, and a second later his forearm was in its warrior shape: longer, leaner, and clawed. There, now he could reach the pitcher. He picked it up and refilled Kira and Arven’s cups, then his own. “If you’re lucky, there will never be a time you need to concern yourself with our shifted forms.”

That sent a murmur through the nearest tables, and Neral looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You think a shifter, in any form, can compete with a mage?”

“That’s neither what I’m saying, nor what I’m insinuating,” Petur said swiftly before some idiot got it into their head to try. “What would be the point in such a competition?”

“To prove who’s the best, of course!” the young man who’d spoken up first blurted.

“What’s best is an alliance between two great nations,” Kira said firmly. “Each with their own strengths.”

“But—”

“We met a mage on the road here,” Petur said, and now he had everyone’s attention. Arven looked alarmed, but Petur shook his head minutely, trying to convey that it was all right. He let his eyes glance toward Gerain, a subtle hint for his nephew to watch for whoever looked at his traitorous guard. “And he cast a very powerful spell that no doubt would have damaged or killed us all if we hadn’t had the strength of another mage on our side. My husband was able to divert the attack.”

“So you admit that mages are more powerful,” the young man said with some satisfaction.

“When given the time to set up an elaborate spell like the one he had, it’s hard to claim otherwise,” Petur replied. “Yet he was only so successful because our scout had been killed by someone else first, and in the end, none of his preparations counted for much. Everyone he had targeted survived, and he himself was killed without difficulty.”

“By your High Harrier, no doubt.” Neral spat the words like a curse. “That you can associate with people such as that ...”

“A person who is immune to magic is truly terrifying in some ways,” Petur agreed with a grin. He didn’t care if he came off as crass now—he was looking to cause reactions, to make people uncomfortable. Every sidelong glance could be another clue as to who had attempted to kill them, and he wasn’t afraid to elicit them. “But isn’t it fortunate that we had him with us? Otherwise, we might never have made it here, though ...” He shrugged. “I think there is a better-than-even chance that most of us would have escaped anyway, given the way we ... well.” He smiled. “No need to go into the details of our training at a formal dinner like this, is there? At any rate, we’re all very pleased to have made it here safe and sound.”

“Aye to that,” King Juiel said abruptly. “We’d certainly never go out of our way to start problems with another friendly nation, particularly not one so well connected. You’re here to marry into our family, and we’re glad of it. Any insinuations to the contrary can be brought to me, and I’ll handle ’em.”

“Thank you, Father,” Kira said with a surprised smile that wasn’t mirrored on many other faces.

What an interesting cesspool of a place this is turning out to be.

The mood lightened, and by the time Petur left the banquet hall—well after Kira, Arven, and the royal rulers had retired—he had more information on hand than he knew how to parse. He would take it back to their rooms and talk it over

with Sy and Deyvid in the morning. For now, though, it was late, and he needed to—

Scratch.

Petur stopped for a moment, absently stretching his arms over his head as he extended his senses, listening for that subtle sound again. It echoed, but he couldn't sense anyone else in the hall with him. That didn't mean no one was there, but there was no scent of fresh magic either ...

Scratch-scratch. It was on the move now ... and in the walls. *A-ha*, that must be coming from the tunnel that Deyvid thought he'd detected. Petur focused on the sound for a moment longer, then continued on—not to his room, but to Deyvid's. It opened easily under his hand, and he stepped inside. The lights were off, and the room was perfectly silent ... but there was something strange about the bed. Petur crept forward, his human form falling away as the warrior emerged, sensing some sort of danger, some sort of—

Wssht! As soon as he was within two feet of the bed, a brief spurt of nearly invisible powder puffed into the air just above it. Petur immediately hunkered down and closed off his nostrils, then turned and grabbed a nearby cloth to wrap his fearsome face with as he watched the powder slowly descend onto the bed. A moment later, the bedclothes began to smoke.

Firepowder. Incredibly rare and expensive and not at all magical—the acrid fire came from some sort of chemical reaction that Petur didn't understand but had seen before. It could burn even underwater. He'd even experienced the powder once, only a little on the surface of his skin, but it had been a memorable sort of pain, even with his accelerated healing. If it had gotten on Deyvid ...

He slunk over to the door that connected their rooms—the one with the hallway surrounding it, behind the stone—and cracked the door. *Now* there was the scent of fresh magic in the air, Sy's magic, slightly piney and resinous and never painful, not to Petur. He heard Deyvid and Sy's deep, regular breaths and was reassured. He stepped into the room to wake them up and tell them what he'd seen, but a moment later—

Wssht! Another bloom of firepowder rained down from a slot on the wall toward the bed. Petur lurched forward with a broken snarl, then stopped as he saw the powder hit an invisible shield a foot above his lovers, then sizzle out into nothing but harmless ash a moment later.

Deyvid, of course, was already awake. “What the—” He half sat up, taking in the fresh ash and Petur’s twisted appearance. “What is it?”

“Assassins,” Petur said around a mouthful of teeth that weren’t designed for speaking. “Stay here.” He ran back into Deyvid’s room, jumped onto the bed, and reached one immense clawed hand around the stone with a tiny hole that the powder had been shot through. It was loose enough around the edges that he was able to rip it free, and a waft of moving air and the scent of fresh, sour body odor met Petur’s nose.

He went from warrior form to otter in an instant, slithering through the hole and taking off in the direction of the would-be killer before Deyvid could finish shouting for him to stop and wait.

There would be no waiting. No stopping.

Only answers, followed swiftly by death.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The secret hallway was dusty.

Oh, there were the slip-slide scatters of footprints here and there, most likely made by the person Petur was now pursuing, from the scent of them, but apart from that? Dusty. Stale. The air smelled old, and the cobwebs were bunched here and there. If Petur had had the time, he would have stopped to groom himself, because *ugh*, he disliked dust in all its forms, but this thick patina was particularly disagreeable to an animal who had to practically wallow in it to run.

Actually ...

A moment later, Petur stretched into his wolf form. It was a tight fit for him in the hallway—even the assassin was crouching down as he ran—but he could make his way more quickly. His nose was better in his wolf form too—he could scent the old magic that this palace was built on, feel it tug at his fur as he went. It tugged, but it didn't catch him, didn't hurt him. *Ha*, trust the Mersaighans to put magic into place that only reacted to human intruders! How fortunate for him.

Shhsht!

Petur flattened himself to the floor as the assassin cast a spell back toward him that sizzled through the air, so hot it would have burned his eyes out if he'd taken it to the face. Another spell followed it, and Petur darted ahead of it in his otter form, grateful beyond measure that he'd practiced rapid shifting between shapes. The assassin was beginning to pant now, fear replacing their cool demeanor.

Good. Be afraid. Your fear will make you sloppy, and when I have you in my jaws, I'll make sure you can't cast another spell.

Death would be too good for them, for the one who'd just tried to murder the people Petur loved most in the world. No, this fool would suffer interrogation as he'd never imagined when Petur got his claws into him.

Wsshht!

This spell was broad and circular—it filled the little hallway in a way that Petur wouldn't have escaped if he hadn't become his raven form at the last moment and flown through a tiny gap in the corner. He still lost some feathers to singeing, but at least he hadn't lost a limb. He flew toward the assassin, cawing recklessly, and dodged two more spells before he got close enough to attack.

He stuck to his bird form, pecking and clawing at the man's face. The assassin shouted in pain and brought his hands up to shield himself. His palms were harder than they should have been and hummed with power that made him hit hard enough to numb. Gods above and below, this bastard was well prepared.

Not prepared enough, though. Petur dodged the mage's magical grip, shifting between forms effortlessly as he drove the assassin backward, toward a spot where, based on the acoustics, the ceiling seemed high enough that he'd be able to take his human form and subdue the man for good. There was no light in this tunnel, but that didn't matter. Petur didn't need light to see the person in front of him, outlined in the smell of magic and his own sour body odor.

They were almost to the spot where he'd be able to stand up. Petur got into his wolf form and snapped, forcing the assassin backward into the spot where in just a moment he'd be—

Ka-chunk.

The change in position happened before he could even register it, going from solid stone beneath his feet to a brief free fall. Petur had already taken his raven form before he hit the cold, muddy ground below him, and he flew back up toward his prey.

Whhst! A net of glowing red magic settled over the top of the chute he'd fallen down. It singed his wingtips and the lower half of his beak as he flew into it, the pain bad enough that Petur couldn't gather himself together in time to prevent a fall. His raven form hit the mud, which was thick enough that it kept this lighter body of his from further harm. He stared

blearily up at the scene above him—the assassin, briefly highlighted by the color of his own magic, let out a quivering breath of relief, then laughed.

“Look at you now!” he called down, and oh—that voice was familiar. A young man from tonight’s banquet, perhaps the one who’d insulted him over and over again. “I think it’s clear that no shifter can defeat a mage, not even when he is the prince of beasts! Your end is coming, *beast*—say your final prayers to your filthy gods, and know that your lovers will follow you shortly!” He vanished before Petur could even attempt to shift into another form, but he didn’t have to shift to see that the magic up there was still in place. There would be no flying out for him even if his wings worked, which ...

Ah. Good. Petur groggily righted himself and shook his feathers out as best he could with all the mud on them. His wings were all right, but his beak ached terribly. It was utterly lightless this far below the level of the tunnel he’d fallen down, and his sense of smell wasn’t the best in this form, but Petur couldn’t just sit there waiting to die.

His death was coming, eh? He’d see about that. The bastard should have killed him before he fled.

Getting into his otter form was difficult but worth it when Petur realized that the hole he’d fallen into was, in fact, not just a hole. It was attached to another tunnel, this one low to the ground and rather watery. A bird could never fly it, a wolf couldn’t run it, and a man couldn’t crawl it. His otter form would be able to get through, though ... as long as the water he was traversing let him out somewhere within the next five or so minutes. Otherwise, this was going to get tricky.

Look on the bright side. If you don’t survive, Sy will burn this entire palace to the ground.

If he survives.

Petur sighed and delicately pawed at his face for a moment. It felt raw, burned. When he nosed at the cold water, the sensation actually helped diminish the pain a bit. *A speck of gold in the dust of this dirty business.* He took a deep breath,

sending the air low into his lungs where it would last the longest, then dove down into the muddy water toward an uncertain future.

At times he could swim while at others it was all he could do to crawl and squeeze through the tight spaces between stones. The water wasn't quite stagnant, but it *was* fairly scummy, and Petur wasn't sad that the darkness meant opening his eyes would have been futile. He clawed and swam and did his best not to panic as the air in his lungs became thinner, as the pressure to breathe turned from ignorable to intense. If he died down here, drowned in muck because he hadn't had the patience to pursue the assassin with a little more care, his lovers had better spit on his memory because he would deserve it.

It was getting hard to move now—his paws felt like lead weights, and the pain in his face had moved down to his lungs, everything burning despite the cold. He was desperate to inhale but more desperate to be free, free, he needed to be *free*, he just had to go a *little closer*, and he might—he would —

His nose burst through into open water, and it was all Petur could do right then not to inhale and ruin everything right at the end. He pushed his lithe little body out through the hole in the stone wall he was crawling through, then up, up until his face finally broke free of the water. He inhaled, a long, snuffly sniffly thing, and blinked desperately to clear the stars from his vision as his body readjusted to having air. Gods above and below, *air*; he would never take its abundance for granted again.

Once his need to breathe had calmed somewhat, and the pain in his face had receded again, Petur looked around. It seemed like a midden pool, but the water was cleaner than that. Connected to the palace's laundry rooms and bathing chambers, perhaps? Where the water was hauled up from wells, then tossed down a drain to flow out here? This pool had an outlet on the far side that probably connected to one of the canals in Rorech.

It didn't really matter. The important thing was to get out of there, get back into his human form, and return to Deyvid and Sy before they got more worried. The walls of this little watery crevice were stoned in, but he could—

The sounds of struggle drifted down to him a moment later, a low grunt followed by an aborted scream. A second after that, a body slumped down the stone wall and into the canal, coming to rest in the pool beside him.

The fresh blood in the water made him feel hungry. Petur inspected the body, but it didn't seem to be someone he knew—Mersaighan from the cut of the clothes, but apart from that ... hmm. Was this an incidental killing or related to him somehow?

“Petur!” an unfamiliar voice called down to him. “Sy's device says you're down there. Come on up; I won't hurt you. I'm here to *keep* you from being killed, son.”

Sy's device? What did this person know about Sy? *How* did this person know Sy and know how to find Petur as well?

Petur sneezed gloppy water out his nose and decided to trust the man. If he was an enemy using Sy as bait, well ... Petur would handle that when he wasn't so mucky. He crawled up the embankment—there would be no flying for a while, not until he was thoroughly dry—then shook himself off as best he could before taking his human form.

A man emerged from the shadows of the palace wall and immediately handed over a blanket. Petur couldn't see his face very well in this dim light, but there was something familiar about him ... “My thanks,” he said, drying himself off as best he could with the coarse fabric.

“Eh, I'm sure you could have handled a single killer, but Symon was worried. Deyvid would have come, but of course he can't follow the spells.” The man—he had to be in his forties or fifties, with those lines around his eyes and mouth—smiled. “And I don't mind being of assistance to my son-in-law.”

Oh. *Oh*. This was Sy's *father* ... and Petur was meeting him stark naked, filthy, and right after the man had killed another assassin for him.

"Come on, then," Jon Parador, Prince Consort to the Queen of Bekkon said, nodding his head toward the palace. "I'll lead you back to them, and we'll discuss what needs to happen next."

"Yes, sir." The *sir* slipped out before Petur could stop it.

The other man chuckled. "No need to be formal with me. Call me Jon. Let's get back to the boys before Sy gets any more anxious."

The boys. It had been forever since Petur had thought of himself as youthful.

He resolutely ignored the feeling of warmth it gave him and followed his father-in-law back into the palace.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Are you a fucking idiot?”

Those were the first words spoken to Petur on his return to his suite, delivered in a long-suffering tone by Deyvid, which Petur felt was appropriate. “Running off after an assassin in a place we don’t know, without additional protections—”

“The assassin wasn’t the problem; the hidden trap in the floor was,” Petur interjected just to see his lover’s face darken a bit more. He would prefer a scolding to tears, or even worse, *acceptance* any day, and better Deyvid lay into him than Sy. “And clearly it turned out all right since Sy was able to track me and send his father to my rescue, which—lovely job on the other assassin who was waiting for me,” he said to the older man.

“I’m sure you could have taken care of him,” Jon demurred. “Whoever wants you dead must think highly of your skills if they sent someone to wait at the exit for you.”

“I’m honored on both counts.”

“You’re a fool. I was already coming *after* you; I found the pit, why didn’t you just *wait* for me?” Deyvid demanded.

“And lead you into a trap as well?” Petur shook his head. “Not if I could avoid it.”

“I’m immune to magic!”

“The floor disappearing wasn’t the result of magic!”

Sy coughed lightly. “Um ...”

All eyes turned toward him. “Are you all right?” Petur demanded, wishing he could shed the damp blanket but not quite willing to bare everything yet again in front of his father-in-law. “Did you have another attack?”

Sy shook his head. “No, I’ve been fine all evening.”

“Lucky that you didn’t drive him into the same ridiculous state of worry that you put me into,” Deyvid

muttered. “Sy at least could track you by magic and make sure you were still alive.”

Petur reached out and tugged Deyvid in close. “I’m sorry,” he murmured with all the sincerity he could muster. He *was* sorry for scaring Deyvid, but he wasn’t sorry he’d gone after the assassin. Now wasn’t the time to split that hair, though.

From the look on his face, Deyvid knew what he was thinking anyway. “You smell like soap scum,” he said, changing the subject as his way of saying he accepted Petur’s apology, for what it was worth.

“I know. I’ll bathe in a minute, just ...”

“I’ll get the water warming for you.” Deyvid nodded his head toward Sy and Jon, who were sitting on the bed together, speaking softly. Jon looked pained, both hands holding one of his son’s as he listened to Sy. Petur didn’t have to listen in to know what they were talking about. “You stay and get better acquainted with your father-in-law.”

Petur held on tighter. “Don’t leave me.”

Deyvid chuckled. “He’s not that bad,” he promised, then headed into the bathing chamber to light a fire beneath the suite’s water tank. The palace might be old-fashioned in many ways, but thanks to the ample rainfall and a massive system of pipes running down from cisterns in the ceiling, it provided every guest room with running water. With patience, it could even be hot.

And by the time Deyvid came back, it probably would be because it was clear that he had no intention of easing the awkwardness that Petur felt right now.

When he turned back to Sy and Jon, the tatters of his dignity hanging as limp as the blanket he was wearing, Petur was prepared for the actual grilling to start. Jon had been kind so far, but there was no denying that Petur wasn’t doing the greatest job as Sy’s spouse. He hadn’t *invited* the assassination attempt, but he should have foreseen it. He certainly should have made arrangements for changes in their rooms to account

for the fact that they were at a disadvantage when it came to knowledge of the location.

He squared his shoulders and walked over, pulling a chair nearby so that he wouldn't muss the bed with his damp and stink. "So, I should start by saying that—"

"No need to apologize for anything," Jon said firmly. "I'll bet your man will more than make you pay for worrying the hells out of him and your husband, and I'm not here to add to anyone's stress. I'm here to diminish it."

"You're off to a good start," Petur said. Sy rolled his eyes. "What else did you have in mind?"

"Proving that Sy isn't suffering from his mother's curse, for starters."

Sy looked down at his hands. "Pa, we've talked this through so many times. I know you did your best, but *you* know that nothing is foolproof. The attacks I've been experiencing—you haven't seen one yet, but trust me when I say they're real, and they're ... there's nothing I can do to stop them except let them run their course."

"And they're *nothing* like what your mother or any of her ancestors ever experienced," Jon snapped. "Did it ever occur to you to check for something *other* than the family curse? Someone else's malignant spell, perhaps?"

Sy frowned, but it was more thoughtful than offended. "Of course, I did. I've got half a dozen gems on that are imbued with spells to protect me against that kind of magic."

"And you never take them off, I presume?"

"Of course, I take them off *sometimes* but never all of them at once, and—" Sy shook his head. "Pa, mages are few and far between in Delomar. There's no one there to cast a spell like this on me."

"There were people around prepared to force me into attacking you and anyone else who got in my way," Petur reminded Sy, getting into the debate despite his better judgment.

Sy turned hurt eyes on Petur. “That was a drug, not a spell!”

“It could just as easily have been a spell,” Petur replied. “There are so many ways to make them portable—you, yourself, are a master of powerful, very portable spells. I bet if you think about it for a moment, really consider the problem, then you’ll be able to think of at least five different ways to curse yourself.”

“Certainly, but I *know* myself,” Sy protested. “How could spies penetrate that deep into your sister’s palace? I can call for Vandry at any hour of the day or night, and he immediately responds!”

Petur, with an empathy he knew was unfortunately rare for him, leaned forward and took Sy’s hand. He *had* to touch him right then despite the film still clinging to his fingers. “Are you more afraid that it is your family’s curse,” he asked gently, “or afraid that it isn’t?”

“I—of course I don’t—I—”

“You know what’s coming, or at least you think you do if this is the same thing that happened to your mother,” Petur went on when it became clear that Sy couldn’t. Jon wrapped an arm around his son’s shoulders. “It’s terrible, but it has a foreseeable end. That much is plain despite you being male, right? It ends in an early death.

“Whereas if this is something else, something you can’t counter or pursue or even understand, where does that leave you? Where does it leave the people who love you?” Sy blanched, and Petur knew he’d struck a sore point.

“We’ll always love you,” he said, raising Sy’s hand to his lips and kissing it. “Always. No matter what’s going on, no matter how much any of us fear it. And I do, sweetheart. You *know* how bad I am with handling my fears, but I’m trying to be less overbearing with you than I have been with Deyvid lately. No matter what, though, we’re here for you.”

Jon cleared his throat. “Well put,” he said gruffly. “Maybe I won’t have to threaten you too badly when it comes

to taking care of my son.”

“Pa!” Sy exclaimed, and the drama of the moment cracked. It snapped all the way when a sudden knock on the door startled all of them. Petur was immediately suspicious—why hadn’t he heard anyone coming?

But then, this was Rorech—there were so many spells cast on these stones that he was lucky he could hear his *own* footsteps.

“It must be the healer Kira told us she’d send,” Sy said.

“It’s not,” his father assured him, and before Petur could stop him, he got up and went to open the door.

He was *not* prepared for the strength of Sy’s reaction to the person who stood outside it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Mistress Deane!” Sy immediately threw his arms around the gray-haired woman standing just outside their suite. “What—how are you—what are you doing here?”

“I came with your father, of course,” she said, a smile creasing her face like a piece of worn parchment. “How else? As for the rest, perhaps that’s better explained indoors where things are safer.”

“*Safer*,” Petur said derisively, and the woman shot him an interested glance as Sy led her inside.

“You must be the husband.” Her tone was bone-dry. “Why do you sound as though you’re doing a poor job keeping my prince here safe, hmm?”

“Mistress, please,” Sy interjected before Petur could defend himself. “He’s doing everything and more, I promise. And yes, this is my husband, Prince Petur Alloui of Riyale.” Sy smiled at him, his eyes bright and lively, and it was like seeing him, truly seeing him, for the first time in weeks. “Petur, this is Mistress Clea Deane, my first instructor in magic. She took care of my mother for the last few years of her life.”

“And his grandmother’s,” the woman added, sitting down in the chair Sy brought her to with a look of relief.

“And she’s the grandmother of my best friend,” Sy went on, then turned back to their guest. “How is Colten? I haven’t received a letter from him in months.”

“Things are getting more and more challenging on the northern border,” Mistress Deane replied with a head shake and a frown. “It’s something we’ll talk about more—”

“*If* Mistress Deane’s news warrants it,” Sy’s father put in. He reached out and took his son’s hand. “I know you think you’re facing your mother’s curse. There’s no one in the world who knows more about it than Mistress Deane, and when I found out why you needed me, I knew I had to bring her as well because there’s no one else you’ll trust on this.”

Sy made a complicated face. “I don’t mean to be difficult—”

“You’re not,” Jon reassured him before Petur could. “You only want the truth. How could I deny you that even if it’s not a search that sits easy with me? Whatever Mistress Deane says, though, will you believe her? Can you at least bring yourself to try?”

Sy nodded once, tightly. “I—yes. Yes.”

“Good.”

“Lie down, lad,” Mistress Deane said gently. “Lie on the bed and try to relax. This won’t take long.”

Sy let go of his father and reached for Petur. “Will you—and Deyvid—”

“Of course.” Petur got onto the bed first, sitting down cross-legged at the top of it, then patting his lap. “Head here. Deyvid!”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” his lover muttered from the other room, coming out with a clean cloth that he threw over Petur’s lap before Sy could lie down. “Gods above and below, don’t get him dirty just because you can’t be bothered to bathe.”

“This is a little more important than bathing, wouldn’t you say?” Petur snarked as he straightened out the bunched cloth and guided Sy down.

Deyvid settled in beside him, one hand possessively cupping Sy’s neck as he mock glared at Petur. “Obviously, but there’s such a thing as—”

“All three of you, then?” Mistress Deane interrupted with a fascinated gleam in her eyes before looking back at Sy. “My goodness, dear, are you sure you’re not just suffering from exhaustion?”

“*Mistress,*” Sy moaned, throwing his free hand over his reddening face. “Please, can we just ...”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, her smile fading as she settled in at his feet. She held up her hands, and the middle

ring on each of them began to glow softly. “Lie still, my prince, and take deep breaths. This won’t hurt at all.” Jon stood a little way behind her, his face tense as he watched the golden glow of her magic intensify in her palms.

Petur could smell it in the air—piney, like Sy’s, but with a drier, earthier scent along with the sharpness of a nearby lightning strike. She set her hands on Sy’s bare feet, and the glow spread up his legs and over his torso, finally encasing his head, except where Deyvid touched him.

“*Very* interesting,” Mistress Deane murmured, then looked at Deyvid. “If you could please let go of him for now, sir?”

Deyvid drew his hand back like it burned. “Of course, I’m sorry.” Petur couldn’t stand to see that hint of shame in his lover’s eyes and took Deyvid’s hand in his own while they waited for the examination to continue.

The golden glow finally covered all of Sy. He shut his eyes, relaxing into it and breathing deeply, slowly, like he was falling asleep.

“Good, good,” Mistress Deane said soothingly. “You’ve seen this a hundred times before, lad. You know what to do. Settle and breathe, let the magic enter you, let it do its work. Good boy.” Her voice was soft, but her eyes were intense, seeing something in the light of the spell that Petur couldn’t distinguish, tracking up and down Sy’s body flickeringly fast. She flexed her fingers, and the glow intensified, then she repeated the inspection. She did it once more, and the light was so searingly bright by then that Petur had to squeeze his eyes nearly shut to bear it.

Then all at once, it was over. The light went out, and the scent of magic vanished. Mistress Deane exhaled heavily, and Jon took her arm and got a chair under her just in time for her to collapse into it. “Well,” she said, staring at Sy as he blinked his eyes open, then sat up with Petur and Deyvid’s help. “I can’t say the results are entirely surprising.”

Sy blanched, his tension rippling through Petur like a knife to the gut. “I was right, then. It’s the curse.”

Mistress Deane smiled gently and shook her head. “No, my dear. There’s no sign of the curse in your spirit. There’s no sign of *any* magic in you other than yours and now a little bit of mine.”

Petur exhaled a huge sigh of relief, expecting Sy to do the same. When he didn’t, Petur leaned forward so he could get a good look at his husband’s face. He saw confusion and fear, none of the happiness he’d expected. “Then what is it?” Sy demanded. “What’s causing me to lose control of myself? The pain in my chest, the seizing of my lungs?”

“Oh, Symon,” Mistress Deane murmured. “Have you never heard of someone having a spasm before?”

Sy frowned. “A spasm ... I’m not sure ...”

“They’re sometimes brought on by intense feelings of anxiousness or fear. When someone has dealt with a number of challenging situations for a long time, it can take just one event to tip their bodies and minds over the edge into spasm.” She leaned forward. “Can you think of anything that might have caused your first attack? Something new and unexpected, something stressful?”

“I ...” Sy turned a dumbfounded look on Petur. “The first time was after Arven came back,” he confessed. “When we found out we were going to be accompanying him to Rorech, and you and he and Tania were all fighting.”

Oh gods. “I had no idea you were so upset by us,” Petur said, feeling like the world’s worst husband. *You brought on his illness. You made him think he was dying.* “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“And tempt you to order me to stay behind instead of coming with you and protecting you?” Sy replied. “Not a chance.”

“You’ve been suffering for *weeks* because of a situation you didn’t even have to get into!”

“And I would undoubtedly have suffered far worse if I found out that my husband and lover had been murdered on the road to their nephew’s wedding!”

“That’s very good!” Mistress Deane interjected with a brisk handclap. “Yes, talk it over, get it out of your systems. Not so much that you bring on another spasm, though. You”— she pointed a gnarled finger at Sy— “you need to rest and relax as much as possible over the next few days leading up to the wedding. Your presence will be required there, no doubt, but afterward, when you’re on your way back to Bekkon, you must—”

“*Mistress!*” Jon hissed in an undertone just as Deyvid said, “And why would he be heading back to Bekkon?”

Mistress Deane turned to Jon with a scandalized expression. “You mean you haven’t even told him yet? Jon, there’s no time to waste! He needs to be ready for—”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jon insisted. “We didn’t really have any time to discuss things before this.”

“Well, as it’s a matter of our kingdom’s *security*, I’d hoped you would have made—”

“My fault, Mistress,” Petur said smoothly. “I went and got myself lost in the castle walls. Jon had to come and rescue me, and then you were here. Please be assured we’ll give everything you two have to say due consideration, but I’m sure you can see that we were dealing with a pressing situation.”

“I daresay most situations involving you *are* pressing,” Mistress Deane said, but she let herself be led out by Jon.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” he said, his expression gentle as it landed on his son. “We’ll talk then, but Sy ... I’m so grateful you’re going to be all right.”

“Me too,” Sy said, and then the door was shut, and the three of them were finally alone.

“What do you think he—”

“What issues of Bekkon’s security—”

“No,” Deyvid said, cutting both of them off. “No. I know neither of you really cares that you’re human, but it’s either ridiculously late or hideously early, Petur still smells like old bathwater, and Sy, you’re under orders to *rest*. Not to

mention there's a royal wedding in three days, an attempt was just made on all our lives, we have an assassin to hunt down in the morning, and there's whatever news is coming to us from your father. We need rest, badly." He glared at both of them as if daring them to disagree.

"Now I see why you fell for Deyvid so quickly," Petur said to Sy. "He reminds you of your father, doesn't he?"

Sy blushed. "I wouldn't fall in love with someone for that!"

"I'm just saying, they have a similar practical outlook on life, not to mention their commanding presence ... it's a rather attractive combination, isn't it?"

Sy's breath caught in his throat for a moment. Then he chuckled, then giggled, then outright began to belly laugh. Uncaring of how he smelled, Petur moved in and held his husband up when his laughter turned to sobs of relief, and tears flowed unchecked down his face as he whispered, "I don't have to leave, I'm not leaving, I'm not dying, I can stay with you ..."

"For as long as you want," Petur assured him, smiling when Deyvid pressed a kiss to the back of Sy's head. "For as long as you'll have us, we'll have you."

Chapter Thirty

Though the night had been sweet, the morning that succeeded it was solemn. The news that Sy was going to be all right—or rather, that he suffered from an affliction that could be treated, rather than something that was going to inevitably kill him—had filled Petur with the sort of joy he'd thought as a younger man he'd never experience. Even his relationship with Deyvid was tempered by the knowledge that his lover was vulnerable in ways Petur couldn't help, and that someday, one of them, probably Petur, would have to watch the other die first.

With Sy, though, Petur was in the enviable position of loving someone who was not only powerful but also younger than he was. If everything in his life went right, Petur would never watch his husband die, because he would already be gone.

Petur was well aware that the thought was morbid, and he didn't speak it out loud for that reason, but sometimes he thought Sy might be aware of it anyway. Deyvid certainly was, though he never said anything. It was part of the reason he'd been so invested in Petur and Sy getting along all those months ago.

And now they had him, and Sy would be well ... if he survived the news coming out of his own country, that was.

“A *coup*?” Sy seemed stricken, so lost that he could barely understand what his father and Mistress Deane were telling him. He looked back and forth between them almost as though he was shaking his head “no.” “How is that even ... I mean, Darius is Melisse's only child! There was never any doubt he would inherit the throne from her. Why in the name of all the gods would he enact a coup against his own mother?”

“He was being led about by the cock, of course,” Jon said, disgust heavy in his voice. “He's never been shy about carrying on affairs with half a dozen women at once, and for all that Melisse told him it was poor behavior, unbecoming his station, he never listened to her. It wasn't until one of the girls

fell pregnant that he moved from passivity to active resistance, though.

“Apparently, she convinced him that his mother would never allow them to be together—which is a lie,” Jon added with a sigh, rubbing his fingers over the ridge of his brow. “Melisse gave up on the idea of making a decent political marriage for Darius shortly after you left. She felt it would be indecent of her. We were resolved that he would marry a woman of his choosing eventually, no matter what her background was.

“In this case, the woman’s background was being a spy for the Harriers. One of their southern clans, better acquainted with our ways than many of them are. She made quick work of turning him to her side. Shortly after the baby was born, Darius led a revolt in the palace.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Petur saw Deyvid drop his head into his hand with a sigh. He wanted to go to him, but he couldn’t, not yet. Not while Sy still needed him by his side, steadying him while he processed this shattering news.

“When was all of this?” Petur asked, giving his husband a chance to breathe.

“Not quite a month ago,” Jon said grimly.

Interesting. “You’ve managed to keep it very quiet.”

“We had to. If it got out that the heir to the throne of Bekkon was a traitor, how long do you think we would go unassailed by our enemies—or even our allies? Riyale is fairly stable, but Mersaighe has been pushing at our borders for some time now. They would take any excuse to snap more pieces of us up, and Ornae along the southern border isn’t much better.”

“What happened to Darius?” Sy asked, quiet but determined to hear the whole awful thing out. “Where is he now?”

“He was wounded in the fighting by one of Mel’s guards,” Jon said. “They never even made it to her audience chamber. It was the stupidest thing ... and once his pride had

been punctured so badly, Darius decided to refuse treatment—he's refused to even see his mother, whom he just tried to overthrow. I went to him instead and was treated to every foul name in the book for it."

"The palace healers have done as much as he'll let them," Mistress Deane put in. "But his wound is infected, and Darius has been refusing serious treatment for long enough that his life is in jeopardy."

Sy shook his head. "Refusing treatment? Why?"

"Because he doesn't want to face the consequences of his actions, that's why," Jon snapped. Mistress Deane placed a quelling hand on his forearm. "He can never inherit the throne now," Jon said more calmly, "but Mel would still let him have a part in her life, in the life of his child ... but if he can't have everything, then he wants nothing. He would rather die than admit that he was in the wrong."

"What happened to the child's mother?" Deyvid asked suddenly.

"She vanished after the coup failed," Mistress Deane said. "Left the child alone in their rooms. The poor wee thing was crying fit to burst when we found her."

Deyvid nodded, his eyes distant. "That's a standard exit for our spies. You'll never find her, and she will never come back for the child. All ties to the work are severed when the assignment ends."

This was getting too maudlin. Time for Petur to bring it back to the essentials. "So, Queen Melisse has no heir now, but she can't risk announcing that," he said. "She won't be able to hide it for long, though. Word will spread despite the fealty of her court. Has she accepted her son's child as her heir?"

"Mel is willing to, but that won't strengthen her political position," Jon replied. "The girl is a bastard, an infant, and the daughter of an insurrectionist. There are no benefits to having this child in line for the throne right now."

He looked at his son. “There’s only one choice, Sy. You see that, don’t you?”

Petur knew immediately what Jon was talking about. Sy did too if the way he suddenly began shaking his head was any indicator. “I—that’s, no, that’s not possible! I married into the Alloui family; I can’t come back to Bekkon! My home is in Delomar now, with Petur!”

“You’re our only option,” Jon insisted. “Mel can’t have any more children, and she has no nieces or nephews in line to adopt into the position of heir. Her granddaughter, as much as she is loved by us, has a long period of proving herself ahead of her now that her father has been shown to be so worthless. You—Sy, you’re a mage like Mel is. You’re smart, you’re shrewd, you’re a masterful defensive spellcaster, and our people *know* you. You’ve got marriage alliances with *two* of Bekkon’s neighboring countries, which is valuable for Bekkon’s security. You’re perfect for the role, but beyond that, you’re all we have, son.”

“But ... but ... I’m *not* fit to be a king! I’m not of the royal lineage, I don’t carry their blood, I—”

“Mel’s mother was adopted into the family too if you remember,” Jon told his stuttering son. “She didn’t bear her parents’ blood either but had the characteristics they wanted in a ruler, and they gave her their full support from the beginning. That was enough to sway the public, and her transition to power was smooth.

“Mel has done her best as a mother, but she’s always had a ... challenging relationship with her son.” Jon’s eyes were sad. “If his father had lived for longer, perhaps things would have been better. Or perhaps if I had been a different sort of man, more loving to him—”

Sy reached out quickly and took his father’s hand. “No, you did your best. You were always fair to him, and if you never tried to get very close, it’s only because Darius made it so obvious he didn’t *want* you as a father. He certainly didn’t want me as a brother,” Sy added with a grimace. “But I still think there must be some other way. I’m ... Petur, tell him.”

Actually ... “It’s not impossible for you to transition to a ruling role in Bekkon,” Petur allowed much to his husband’s surprise. “You did marry into our family, but you recall, I’m not the head of state. I’m not even in the direct line of ascension, so there would be no conflict of interest on that level.”

Sy shook his head. “Your sister will never let you go.”

“Probably not.” Which meant they would be apart more, which Petur intensely disliked. “But I’m sure I could talk her around to extended leaves of absence, given that the alternative is the potential fall of a friendly nation just as the Harriers are ramping up their aggressions.”

“I don’t want to be apart from you like that.” Now he looked at Deyvid. “Or from you. Gods, where would *you* end up? You can’t stay in the palace while Petur’s not there; it would be—” He stopped speaking before he gave anything explicit away, but from the look that Jon and Mistress Deane shared, they had a good idea of what he was alluding to. Well, it couldn’t be helped.

“It’s not ideal,” Deyvid said with a tired nod. “But it’s something we can figure out if we need to. Let’s not borrow trouble before we must, though. We still have a wedding to see happen here, and then ... Sy, you’re healthy.” Deyvid glanced at Petur. “And we haven’t heard from Lise at all yet.”

Ah. Petur felt his chest go cold, like someone had just gripped his heart with an icy hand. “You want to go after her.”

“After whom?” Jon asked, but Petur wasn’t about to say. It wasn’t his father-in-law’s business.

“Oh, of course.” Sy got up and went over to Deyvid, almost falling into his lap in his hurry to wrap his arms around him. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. You must want to go immediately.”

“Not immediately, no, but ... soon.”

“After *whom*? Go *where*?” Jon pressed.

Sy hugged Deyvid once more, then turned to look at Petur. “We need to talk to Arven and Kira,” he said firmly.

“Three days is too long to wait for the wedding and too dangerous anyhow. That gives whoever is trying to kill us more time to plan. We need to get things out in the open quickly, get your nephew and Kira into a position of power, and then get the hell out of here.”

Petur grinned at his smart, forceful husband. “You seem to be feeling better.”

“I’m feeling determined. We can do this.” He squared his shoulders. “We have to.”

“Then let’s go poke a hornet’s nest, darling.”

Chapter Thirty-One

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Arven whispered from where he knelt at the altar of the Triad in the small shrine. The priestess, sitting cross-legged at the base of the altar, was silent as they waited for Kira to be brought in, but she didn’t seem to have a problem with Petur and his nephew talking.

Which was good because Arven didn’t want to shut up.

“You’re here to be married; now you’re getting married.”

“Without any of Kira’s family here! Without the mages and the court and anyone other than you and Deyvid as witnesses!”

“There’s also the prince consort of Bekkon,” Petur reminded Arven. Having Jon as a witness was a bit of a coup because his reputation was unimpeachable. As Queen Melisse’s consort, he’d been on the political scene for well over a decade, and while he wasn’t as respected as his wife, he at least wasn’t looked down upon like Petur and Arven were for their shifter status. “And Kira’s lady Neola and your personal guard Gerain.” Whom Petur had chosen for numerous reasons, only one of which he’d stated out loud.

“That’s hardly an entourage!”

“If you’re not comfortable marrying this way, then we can call it off, and you can wait,” Petur replied coolly. “But the odds of all of us surviving until then are getting worse all the time.”

“Assassins in the walls.” Arven looked angry, which Petur found gratifying. “I can’t believe it. One of my own future kinsmen tried to kill you!”

“I’m just grateful they didn’t try to kill you as well.” Although it was probably just a matter of time unless they flushed the bastards out early. That was Petur’s explanation to Arven and Kira for why he wanted the wedding moved up, and why it needed to be so secretive.

“Once you’re married in the eyes of the Three, then alliances that are nothing but paper now become binding,” he’d said. “You two negotiated a pact of mutual aid between our nations in times of war with the Harrier clans, and that’s going to become very important in the coming year.” Having Jon there had helped sell this point in particular—he’d told them that his reason for coming to Rorech was to share intelligence about Harrier raids, and he hadn’t mentioned anything about his son’s health issues.

Which, incidentally, hadn’t gone away. Sy had had a spasm just a few hours earlier after he’d decided to shoulder the responsibility of drawing attention away from the newcomers and the engaged couple by putting on a magic demonstration. The attack had left him gasping with pain but more determined than ever to see his part in this elaborate game through. “I’m not enduring that for nothing,” Sy had declared, looking at himself in the mirror as he straightened out his jewelry. He’d glanced over his reflection’s shoulder at Petur and smiled. “I’ll be all right. I know that much now, at least.”

So while Sy was entertaining the court with his magical ability, the rest of them had donned disguises and, with Kira’s help, made their way out of the palace and down into larger Rorech, where they found a small, one-priest shrine that was quiet, not far from the river, and therefore well suited to their needs. The priestess, sensing their presence, had shown up with a chicken under each arm—apparently, she had a lot more to do than wait around to perform ceremonies and blessings.

“There you are at last,” was all she’d said before putting the clucking birds down. “Allow me to get into my robes, then I’ll let you have my room to change into your wedding attire, Highness.”

“Oh, I—no, I’m—”

“Dear princess.” The priestess had smiled gently, pushing a strand of grayish-brown hair behind her ear. “Mages aren’t the only ones in the world with abilities. Your secret is very safe with me, I promise you.”

And that was that. Now Kira was getting dressed, with Neola's help, Gerain and Deyvid were standing watch outside, and Arven and Petur were in here having *this* conversation.

Ugh. He'd rather be outside in the drizzle that was coming down, but someone needed to keep Arven calm.

"Kira wouldn't let them kill me."

"Your wife won't always be there to protect you," Petur pointed out.

"She has me so wrapped in protective charms I can barely sense anything beyond them at times," Arven argued. He touched the golden ear cuff he was wearing, the chain that sat close to the skin of his neck, and the golden circlet that glittered with jewels. "I think even the rain might bounce off me right now."

"Every spell has a counter," Petur replied. "And it's the people who taught Kira what she knows who might be coming after you now, so her spells might be particularly vulnerable." He paused, then added, "When things have settled somewhat, make sure you take the time you need to shift. Your body will miss transforming and give you trouble otherwise."

Arven smiled crookedly. "I never did master the wolf shift."

"We'll work on it more," Petur promised him. "And Gerain will be able to keep helping you with it. You'll get there."

"Does it matter if I do?" Arven looked down at his knees. "I'm about to marry into a society that looks down on shifters as a rule. It would probably be considered bad form for me to flaunt my ability, and I'm going to have enough barriers ahead of me without that."

Petur felt unexpectedly angry. "Being a shifter is a part of who you are. It's your inborn magic, your gods-given ability," he said. "You deserve to shift just as a mage deserves to create spells, just as a priest deserves to communicate with the gods."

“And the gods would agree with your uncle,” the priestess said from where she sat, not bothering to open her eyes. “The gods want you to be true to the gifts they have given you. To do otherwise would be blasphemous. Become a wolf, Your Highness. I daresay you’ll be glad you did. Now.” She opened her eyes and stood up. “The princess is nearly here. Let me get the offerings.”

The Triad was worshiped differently in Mersaighe than in Riyale—Dur and Laf, the god and goddess of earth and sky, were the same, but instead of Bes, the god of the sea, they substituted Hralle, the goddess of magic. It was altogether more mystical and less practical than the Riyalian version, but the wedding ceremony itself was similar. Two thin wheat wafers sat waiting on a silver plate, with a goblet of pure water beside them. As for the symbol of the goddess of magic ...

Kira was escorted to the altar, with Jon on one side and Neola on the other, in a gown that looked suspiciously simple until Petur realized that every inch of the silver cloth was actually lace. Her silver headscarf had a veil attached to it, also lace, and as she knelt in obeisance beside Arven, Petur could smell both her pleasure and her anxiety at getting married. Arven, it seemed, could as well. He took her hand, completely disregarding the ceremony’s protocol, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Whatever glance Kira shot him from under the veil Petur couldn’t tell, but the sharpness of her anxiety softened. The priestess cleared her throat, drawing their attention, and began the ceremony.

It was brief, as all weddings were. The only difference between his wedding to Sy and this one was the offering. The priestess laid her hands on both the goblet and the plate and spoke the blessing of Hralle. It was said that if she approved of the marriage, the light of her blessing would be visible even to the uninitiated. Petur wasn’t holding out for more than a mild glow, but—

The flash of light was so intense he had to shield his eyes from it. It radiated out of the shrine and into the street and the sky, the blessing reverberating through everything that

surrounded them. By the time the light died down, everyone was thoroughly dazzled, even the priestess.

“Goodness,” she said, breaking the ceremony for a moment. “I expect with a blessing like that, the two of you will do great things together! Here.” She held out the plate and goblet to Kira. “Take these and offer them to your betrothed and repeat after me: ‘As I nourish you, I nourish the gifts of the gods and the world around me.’”

Kira’s hand was steady as she took the wafer and the goblet. “As I nourish you,” she said to Arven, laying the wafer in his open mouth, “I nourish the gifts of the gods and the world around me.” She then gave him a sip from the goblet.

Arven lifted her veil. *His* hands were shaking, but Petur could tell it wasn’t nerves. Arven was pleased to be getting married, to have found someone who understood him and respected him. When he revealed Kira’s smiling face, he beamed at her. “As I nourish you,” he said, picking up the wafer and laying it on her tongue, “I nourish the gifts of the gods and—”

A soft *thud*, followed by a choked scream, stopped his voice. A second later, Petur heard Deyvid yell, “Ambush!”

Right after that, fog began to infiltrate the shrine. In another moment, Petur was as good as blind.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Petur couldn't see anything, not even his hand unless it was nearly touching his nose. "Deyvid!" he called out. He knew he was giving away his position, but he had to know ... "Are you all right?"

"Apart from being unable to see for shit," Deyvid called back, sounding very annoyed as he made his way toward the front of the altar. "The fog doesn't affect me directly, but it's not a magical creation in and of itself— whoever is doing this is bringing it up from the river. Like this, they nullify my immunity."

That wasn't good. Fortunately for Petur, his nose and ears were anything but nullified. "I'll find the source," he said.

"I'll come with you," Arven said, grabbing Petur's hand.

"You must finish the ceremony first," the priestess reminded him, managing to sound serene despite the circumstances. "It would be an insult to the gods to do otherwise."

"And then I'll get to work on dispersing this," Kira added. Her heart rate was elevated, and her scent seemed both angry and worried. Right now, anger appeared to have the upper hand. *Good.*

Deyvid joined them a second later, and a radius of clarity spread out from him to encompass them all. "Fascinating," the priestess said, her eyes bright as she looked at Deyvid. "I've never seen this effect before."

"Where's Gerain?" Arven suddenly asked.

Deyvid shook his head. "He's dead."

"No ..."

"He took an arrow straight through the heart," Deyvid said, kind but firm. "Without that warning, I wouldn't have known to move myself. He might have saved my life."

Arven didn't seem comforted by that, but now wasn't the time for platitudes. "Whoever is hunting us will keep trying," Petur said, standing up. "Unless I find them first." He flexed his fingers. "Finish the ceremony. Keep yourselves safe." Before Arven *or* Deyvid could argue, Petur let the shift take him. Only this time ...

Not wolf, not otter, not raven or man—he flowed into his warrior shape as easily as breathing. It had been too long, far too long since he'd wielded these massive claws, these powerful legs, the magnificently sharp teeth. He hoped he'd have something to bite into soon enough. Petur ran out of the shrine, letting his senses guide him.

Everything was keener when he was in this form, the beast he had worked so hard to become. Petur smelled Gerain's blood on the ground not a yard away, its particles infiltrating the dampness and wet that clung to everything. Somewhere not far from here was sunlight, and beyond that was a man with a massive bow—it had to be massive if he could kill a shifter with one shot—and he was using his magic to see through the fog.

He heard the next arrow a split second before it arrived. Petur dropped his body down and swung his arm up at the same time, catching the arrow midflight so it couldn't penetrate into the shrine. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a whispered, "Oh, fuck."

Oh, fuck, indeed. Petur snapped the quarrel into a dozen splintered pieces, then ran for where he knew the shooter had to be. He couldn't go as fast as he was used to; there were too many obstacles in his way—a bench here, a wagon there, an old man carrying a brace of water jugs across his shoulders, who swore vociferously as Petur caught one of them with his elbow, making it fall and shatter on the cobblestones. Still, he was fast enough to only have to dodge one more arrow, which he simply slipped past this time before he finally emerged into the light of day.

Someone screamed. Petur didn't care. He was completely focused on the roof of the building across from the shrine, where a familiar-scented man crouched in the shadows,

crossbow in hand. He stopped trying to load the next bolt, dropped the bow, turned, and ran across the roof. He was inhumanly fast.

Good thing Petur was as well.

He leapt onto the roof and took off in pursuit, a bit more mindful this time of the possibility of traps. He seemed in luck, though, or perhaps their earlier attempt at being covert had paid off, and the killer simply hadn't had time to set traps. Either way, Petur was going to enjoy this.

The chase wasn't turning out to be a simple thing, however. Whatever this spell was, it made the man *fleet* and able to endure impacts that no normal human could have handled. He jumped from roof to ground to roof again in his efforts at evading Petur, and as they headed into a more crowded section of the city, the screams became louder. Petur was frightening people.

A spell was flung at him—not by the assassin, but by someone watching, who'd decided Petur was a villain without knowing anything of the matter. He was sure it looked suspect to a Mersaighan—a beast chasing a magic user across the city—but damn it all, this wasn't what he needed right now.

Better play smarter, then. Petur watched his prey make another bounding leap, this time toward the river, and he changed into his raven form and flew after him. There. Now he was faster *and* unlikely to be attacked by random passersby.

“*Fuck!*” he heard the man gasp as Petur flew toward him. Rather than throw a spell at him as he had in the castle wall, he cast another spell on himself. A second later, he leapt from the top of another building right into the river. And he didn't surface.

Oh, this asshole.

Fine. If Deyvid could do it and not complain, Petur could too. He dove toward the water and shifted into his otter form at the last second. The water went from mildly forbidding to largely pleasant—this was the city's central river, not one of the smaller canals, after all. It was slightly cleaner

and much easier to navigate and sense things in, like fish, boats ...

And a person swimming as hard as he could a dozen feet ahead of him.

It was nothing to gain on him, not in this form. He'd have been wiser to head into the crowded parts of the city, sheltering behind innocents who would respond to Petur with confusion and fear. Now he was ripe for the plucking, except ...

He was still fast. He'd changed mediums, and he was *still* unnaturally fast. That was a hell of a spell, undoubtedly crafted by a master mage. Probably by someone else given how this man had chosen to go on the attack. If Sy had been the one sent to kill Petur, he'd have managed it half a dozen times over by now.

I suppose I should be thankful that not everyone is as smart as my husband.

Petur put his head down and focused on swimming, darting through the water as fast as a fish. His smaller, sleeker form was gaining on the killer despite the man's speed. A few more seconds, and they would—wait, he was moving, he was ...

Aaand it was back onto land. The man climbed out onto the river's embankment and broke into a run almost immediately. Petur transformed into his wolf form and took up pursuit. As he ran, he realized they were almost back to the place they'd begun—the shrine. A few more turns and they would be there, coming at the little temple from behind. Why would the killer—

Of course. He hadn't finished his task.

Petur sped up, running as fast as he could to catch up. The assassin was already turning into the shrine by the time Petur reached the front of the building. He heard Deyvid shout and smelled the edges of a spell just being cast by Kira, but she was too late—the killer was already drawing back his

hand, the poison-scented dagger he held on a path toward Arven.

Petur had never leapt so far in his life, pushing his wolf form as hard as he could. His jaw clamped around the man's wrist from behind just as he let the weapon fly. The dagger skittered away from its intended course, striking the wall just to the left of the priestess's head. The assassin howled with agony as Petur's teeth went down to the bone.

He didn't stop there. One good wrench separated the man's hand from his arm. He fell to the ground, screaming. If Petur could have smiled around his mouthful of blood and bone, he would have.

It was almost disappointing to watch Kira race over and apply healing spells, slowing the flow of blood and easing the pain. Petur *whuffed* at her.

"We need him alive," she snapped back. "We need to learn who sent him after us. No one should have known we left the palace. My spell covered our entire party." She looked at the rest of them—Arven by her side, the priestess on her way to joining them, and Deyvid by the door. Jon had a calming arm around Neola, who looked like she was close to shock. "It should have kept us all safe, including Gerain." She glanced at Arven. "I'm sorry."

"So am I," he said in a subdued tone. "But he died protecting us."

"Did a better job of it this time than the last," Deyvid muttered. Petur couldn't help but agree.

Kira drew their attention back to the unconscious, wounded mage at their feet. "We have to get him somewhere secure. I need to be able to interrogate him without my family knowing about it."

"Melisse and I keep a house in the city; you can use that," Jon offered. Kira nodded gratefully.

"Thank you."

"And once you figure out who he was working for?" Deyvid asked. "What then?"

“Then I go to whoever tried to take my new husband from me, and I flay the skin from their body while they scream to the gods for mercy,” Kira replied flintily.

Now *that*, Petur approved of.

Chapter Thirty-Three

What a fucking day.

A wedding, turned assassination attempt, turned war conference. Petur had to admit that although he prided himself on expecting the unexpected, he hadn't seen that coming. Hours after the fact, with the man they needed to interrogate alive but still unconscious, and all of them—including Sy—taking refuge in his father's home on the edge of Rorech's palatial district, the only thing that was clear to Petur anymore was that he, at least, was going to be in Rorech for the foreseeable future.

He didn't want to be, but there was no way around it. Arven and Kira were married, and the priestess could attest to that—hell, any mage worth their salt who could do a damn blessing spell could attest to it—but that didn't mean there weren't going to be issues. Their official wedding was still a week out. They had to survive until then before they could drop the news on their nearest and dearest that the royal wedding would be unnecessary and hopefully have the person who'd tried to disrupt things found and brought to justice by then as well. For that, they needed Petur. So here he would stay.

Alone.

Without Sy.

Without Deyvid.

It can't be helped. Sy and his father needed to forestall a crisis in Bekkon, which meant they needed to get him back there as soon as possible. There had to be something Sy could do, short of taking the throne. And even if there wasn't, would him becoming Melisse's heir be the worst thing ever?

For a moment, Petur let himself muse about living in a place where he wasn't constantly being watched by his sister. Where he didn't have to be on guard with every step he made, like he was here. Where he and Sy and Deyvid could simply be together openly, with no cadre of nobles to look down on

them, no people to insinuate they were disgraceful or worse. Where the demands of their work were less fraught, and they could spend more of their precious time together.

It *was* precious. More precious than ever now that their time together was coming to an end. Sy was going to Bekkon, and Deyvid ... he was going after his daughter.

Petur closed his eyes and breathed, willing his heartbeat to slow, willing the surge that fired his blood with nervous energy to die down. He had to hold himself together. He needed to be strong for his lovers. He needed ... he needed ...

“Hey.” Soft lips pressed a kiss to his forehead. Without opening his eyes, Petur reached out and pulled Sy onto his lap. His husband came without a word, melting against him, and Petur held him tight and breathed him in. He smelled so good, like magic and warm skin and home.

I could make a home out of wherever you and Deyvid are. He wasn't sure he would ever get the chance to, though.

“It's going to be all right,” Sy promised. “I'll make sure of it. We'll be together again soon, you'll see. I'll figure things out in Bekkon, and then I'll come and meet you, wherever you are.”

“That might happen,” Petur agreed, still not opening his eyes.

“It *will* happen,” Sy insisted. “I'll—there has to be a way for me to get around becoming the heir. It isn't a long journey back to Bekkon, I'll be at the castle in less than a week, and I'll get this worked out as fast as possible. We can keep in touch the whole time too.” He'd already given Petur a bespelled set of pen and parchment to send messages back and forth with. “We'll be all right.” He sighed, and his sigh ended with a shudder. “I'm less sure about Deyvid.”

“So am I.” Petur had, in fact, been doing his best not to think about Deyvid's situation at all. They hadn't heard from the pair of agents accompanying Alie in days. At best, she was sick from ingesting canal water and holed up somewhere,

sweating the fever out. At worst, she'd been attacked, or her illness had become fatal, or she'd somehow reached the border of the Harrier Plains at tremendous speed and been absorbed back into her clan, in which case Deyvid would be following her into a place where literally everyone wanted him dead.

And Petur would never know if he was killed there, not for sure. Neither would Sy, because there was no way for Deyvid to reach out to them with magic and no way to track him with it and—

“Are you two borrowing trouble already?” a voice asked from beside the door. Petur felt Sy shift in his lap to look, but he left his eyes closed. He stretched out his other senses and let them inform him of Deyvid's presence: the firm, steady beat of his heart. The smell of his body, with marlroot still faintly present even weeks since his last usage. The sound of his footsteps, his quiet huff of laughter, and then the feel of his warm, broad hand settling against Petur's shoulder, squeezing him tight.

Hold me tighter. He wanted it to bruise, wanted it to bleed. He wanted a mark to remember Deyvid by. Simple pressure would be gone too soon.

“No trouble,” Sy assured Deyvid. Petur opened his eyes just in time to watch Sy tilt his chin up to receive Deyvid's kiss. They were so lovely together, his golden-skinned, dark-haired husband pressed so eagerly up against Deyvid, whose shades of gray were ever startling and always beautiful. If love had a look, this would be it. If adoration had a smell, it would be what he scented right now.

If desperation was a man, he would be Petur.

His heart lurched painfully. Before he realized what he was doing, Petur pulled Deyvid in closer until he was leaning against Petur's body, right next to Sy and tight enough for Petur to press his face against Deyvid's neck, to mingle them together in his nose and hold them both so close that he could almost believe for a moment it was enough.

“Sweetheart.” Deyvid pressed a kiss to Petur's forehead, and acid tears suddenly burned beneath his closed

lids. One word, and he'd brought Petur to the edge of his emotional control. Gods above and below, he needed to get ahold of himself.

"How long?" Petur asked.

"How long what?"

"How long do you want me to give you before I mount an expedition to come after you?"

Deyvid sighed. "Petur. You can't do that."

"I'm a godsdamn prince, I certainly can do that."

"You're needed here with Arven and Kira. Focus on keeping them alive, not on me."

Petur wanted to *bite* him. "Stop asking me for things that aren't possible; it irritates me."

"Sweetheart." There it was again, that terrible word that brought out every vulnerable feeling he had inside of him and magnified them by ten. "I don't know how long this is going to take. There's just no way to tell."

"Guess."

"I can't—"

"Guess." This time Sy was the one who spoke, and when Petur looked at him, he was glaring at Deyvid fiercely. "You're so quick to think there's nothing we can do, but if I have an idea of when you'll be done in the Plains, I can set griffin riders to keep an eye on the skies. I have a package of flares for you to take with you that will be visible for miles on a clear night. They can swoop in to rescue you even if Petur can't."

"Setting your stepmother's riders to look for me," Deyvid teased him. "You sound like a monarch already."

"I don't want to be king," Sy admitted, "but if taking on more responsibility means I can take better care of both of you, I'll do it. I'd do anything for you, you know that."

"I know." Deyvid looked between them for a moment, then nodded. "I'll take the flares. Harriers know what those

mean, though. I don't want to lead your people into a trap, so I'll only set them off if I think there's a reasonable chance of escape."

"You tell me not to worry, and then you go speaking like that," Petur growled. "I swear, if you don't get word to one of us within a month, I will come after you on my own two wings if I have to."

"Make it two months."

"Six weeks," Sy said, his hand wrapped tight in the edge of Deyvid's shirt.

"Six weeks," Deyvid finally agreed. He didn't look too happy about it. "Don't forget to watch out for yourselves either. Neither of you is going to be safe in the near future. Petur, you've already weathered too many assassination attempts here, and Sy, you're heading to a country that just weathered a coup at the hands of its crown prince. There's nothing stable about either of those situations."

"I suppose not," Sy agreed. "That's the burden of the positions we bear."

Petur had never wanted to forget his burdens so much in all his life. He would give anything to be able to sweep the three of them off somewhere they could be together, safe and happy and unfettered by responsibility. But it wasn't to be.

When Deyvid went to straighten up, Petur pulled him back down. If this time was all he might ever have, he was going to make the most of it. "Just a few minutes more," he said, half demand, half entreaty.

"A few more," Deyvid agreed and leaned in until all three of their heads touched. They sat in the quiet together and breathed, and looked their fill, and Petur let the sweetness of it overflow from his eyes down his cheeks to finally drip off his chin.

Just a few minutes more, and he would let them go.

Not yet, though.

Not yet.

~*~*~*~

Three parted lover who can only reunite once the war is won...or lose all hope of a future together.

Symon, Petur, and Deyvid have been torn apart, running in different directions as they work to prevent all-out war. Symon returns home to Bekkon only to find himself thrust into the role of king—whether he wants it or not.

With Petur hundreds of miles away raising an army of shifters and Deyvid pursuing his runaway daughter to make sure she's not assassinated the moment she crosses the border, Symon must put his magic and his life on the line to keep the Harriers from overrunning his kingdom.

Petur and Deyvid are racing against time to come to his aid...but new enemies lurk around every corner. Before they can save Symon, they're going to need to save themselves.

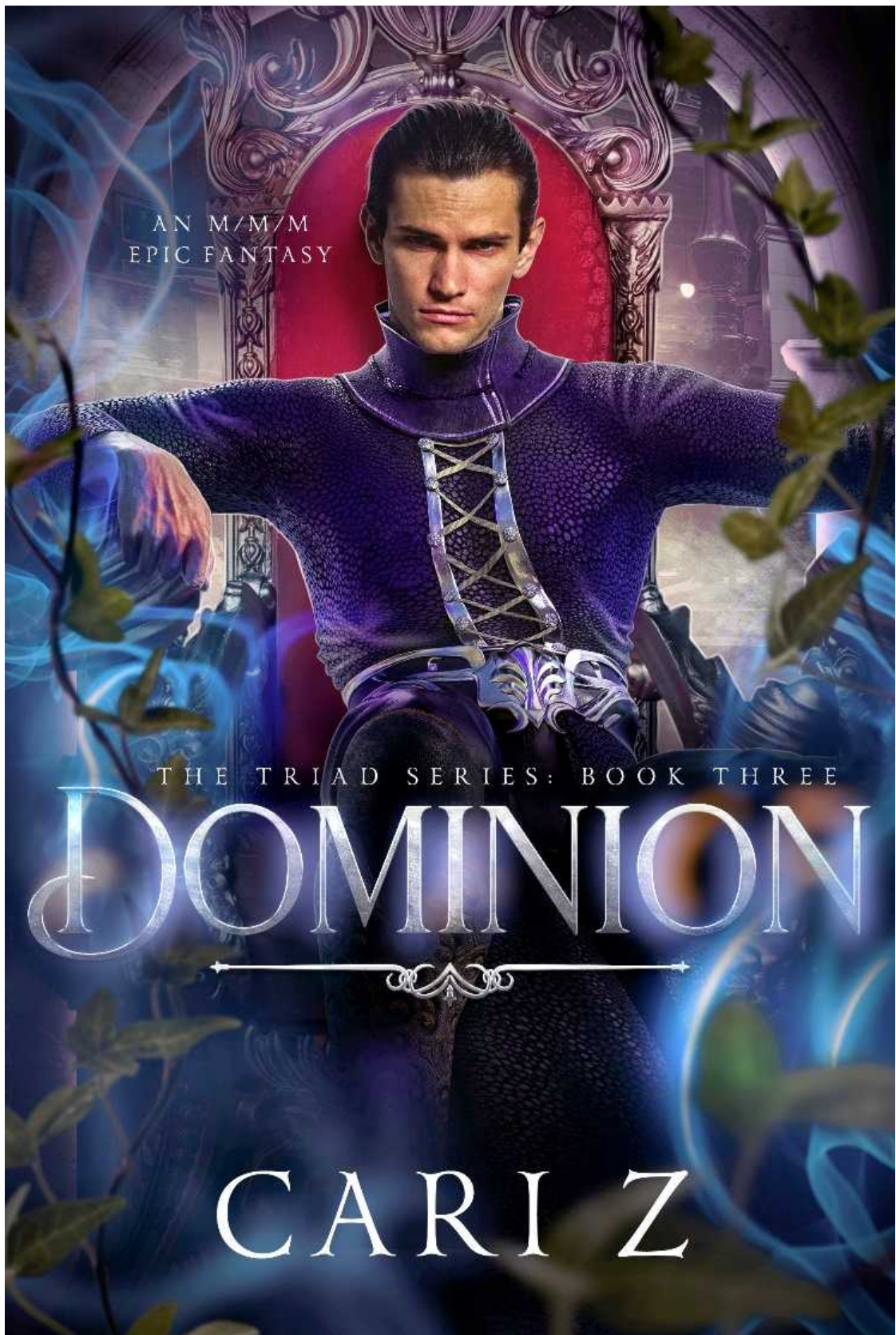
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~*~

Dominion



AN M/M/M
EPIC FANTASY

THE TRIAD SERIES: BOOK THREE

DOMINION

CARI Z

Chapter One

Sy woke up in the morning to a panic attack.

It was an incredible relief.

Not the attack itself, no. That was just painful, not something he enjoyed in the slightest, but the fact that he knew what it was now—the fact that he understood that he wasn't cursed, he wasn't going to be like his mother and go mad, he wasn't going to die of this and leave his lovers alone—was a blessing. If there was anything good that came out of their journey to Rorech, at least for Sy, then this was it. He was ... not normal, not exactly well, but not dying. Compared to the people around him, he was doing quite good.

Petur was going to be stuck here in Rorech ensuring his nephew, Arven and his new bride, Kira, managed to stay alive long enough to figure out who was trying to kill them—or at least, who was trying to kill Arven. Anti-shifter sentiment in magic-heavy Rorech was common, and someone had taken offense to the crown princess's betrothal to a shifter prince. Petur, in turn, took offense to assassins trying to kill the people he loved and responded violently.

Having a goal to pursue would be good for him, though. It would keep him from worrying too much about Deyvid.

Deyvid, who was about to go after his daughter, Alie, a High Harrier just like him. Magic couldn't touch either of them, making them perfect for getting in close enough to kill mages like Sy, who depended on spells for protection.

Alie's target hadn't been Sy, though. It had been her father. She'd been convinced by her grandfather, the leader of their Harrier clan, that Deyvid had betrayed them, had stolen their family's honor when he left the Harrier life behind.

Never mind that Deyvid's hateful father had sent him on illicit, horrific missions of murder, including going after some of his own family members. Never mind that he had given everything for his family and been given so little in

return. Never mind that he loved his daughter enough that he'd left in an effort to protect her—she was destined to be his killer.

Or at least, that *had* been her destiny. They'd come to a sort of accord, and Alie had been escorted out of Rorech days ago by two of Petur's shifters. Deyvid was going after her in an effort to make sure she made it back to the plains all right and to see if he couldn't salvage something of a relationship with her before it was too late.

And Sy? Sy was going home. Back to Bekkon, to its capital Kestre; back to Melisse and the castle, his old lab, and the life he'd led before his unexpected, and initially unwelcome, marriage to Prince Petur Alloui of the kingdom of Riyale. Gods above and below, had it really been nearly a year they'd been married?

What a change time had wrought.

Mind back in the present, Sy let himself be held by his lovers, let them soothe him and help him manage his breaths. He probably could have done more of that himself, but he felt ridiculously self-indulgent. He wanted their hands on him as much as possible, wanted all their attention for as long as he could have it.

With his head in Deyvid's lap, pale gray eyes in that beloved face looking down at him with such tender care, Sy felt like he could cry for how much he adored this man. He must have done something right, must have praised a generous god in a serendipitous moment, to get Deyvid in his life. Marrying Petur was one thing—it had been official and unavoidable—but learning how to handle his moods, how to put up with his cheek, how to accept his love in the only ways he knew how to show it? Learning that was all down to Deyvid, who had been with the prince for a decade before Sy showed up. He had loved Deyvid first and learned from him how to love Petur.

Petur, who had one broad hand splayed across Sy's chest while the other lifted Sy's hand to his own heart and breathed in and out slowly and deeply. "That's it," he said

encouragingly, and Sy managed a smile for him. “That’s it, darling, you’ve got it now. This one wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“N-no,” Sy mumbled, forcing the word out around numb lips. He was lucky it wasn’t so bad—he had a long way to ride today, and tomorrow, and for the rest of this week until he was back in Bekkon. “It wasn’t.”

“Good.” Petur leaned down for a kiss, and Sy surged up with a strength that surprised him. His hands found Petur’s shoulders, and he held on tight to that smooth, bare skin, holding his husband close as he opened his mouth in a moan, half desire, half desperation.

“Sweetheart.” Deyvid stroked his trembling arms. “It’s all right.”

It doesn’t feel all right. They’d had all this out last night, and Sy knew there was nothing to be done about it. He knew he had to go. He just didn’t want to.

Was this going to be the last time he held Petur? The last time he heard Deyvid’s voice? The last time the three of them were ever together? Sy’s head spun with dark possibilities, and it wasn’t until Deyvid wiped a finger across his cheek that Sy realized he was crying.

Petur finally pulled back, putting on a brave face that Sy wouldn’t have been able to see through even a month ago. He had learned a lot about the men he loved on this trip to Mersaighe. “None of that. We’re all going to be fine. Kira and I are going to interrogate the assassin we caught this morning, and I’m confident we’ll get everything we need out of him; Deyvid is going to find Alie in no time and make sure she’s all right; and you’re going to talk things out with your stepmother and settle on the best path forward for Bekkon. If that means making you her heir, we’ll find a way to deal with that.”

“It won’t be that easy,” Sy said. He’d thought a lot about this over the past day, and he knew they were heading into a thorny thicket of legal issues if he became Bekkon’s heir. “I’m supposed to be the subordinate spouse supporting you and Riyale, remember? If I change the terms of our relationship, our marriage might be invalidated.” And then not

only would they *not* be married, but Riyale would have the option of seeking reparations from Bekkon for the sin of pursuing his own glory, or worse—it might take the chance to precipitate a war between the two countries.

Petur shook his head. “It won’t come to that. I won’t let it.”

“Your sister might not listen to you,” Sy said.

“She won’t have a choice this time.”

“Petur—”

“It’s getting late,” Deyvid interrupted, his voice soft but his eyes piercing. “Let’s not waste it on debating things that haven’t even happened yet.” He leaned over and kissed Sy’s forehead then braced a hand under Sy’s back and helped him up into a seated position. “I need to leave before the sun rises.” He’d dyed his colorless skin a muted brown tone, one of the simplest means he had of hiding his heritage as a High Harrier, but his gray hair and eyes could still give him away to the sharp-sighted.

It was hard to let go of Deyvid, even harder to watch him rinse off and get dressed in a plain, hard-wearing, leather-and-wool outfit that hid every association with Petur and the royalty of Riyale. No longer was he dressed in purple and silver and black, Petur’s colors, colors that would make anyone think twice before attacking him. Now the only thing that stood out about him was the silver ring on his left hand, shining brightly in the candlelight.

It was one of three linked rings that Sy had brought into the marriage with him. On anyone else, the spell it held would have let Sy keep an eye on the wearer’s physical health. On Deyvid, untouched by magic, it was nothing more than a pretty bauble to remind him that he belonged to someone—to two someones.

Too soon Deyvid was dressed and ready to go. He came back over to the bed where Sy sat like a lump and knelt down in front of him, going onto both knees and taking Sy’s hands. It was almost a mirror of the position he’d taken last

night, only then his mouth had been on Sy's cock, sucking him into ecstasy even as Petur lifted Deyvid's hips and pounded him from behind. Sy had come like that, had come inside Deyvid once Petur was done, had come *watching* Petur and Deyvid together ... It had been a satisfying but completely exhausting night, so how could he be stirring already, just watching his lover kneel between his legs?

Petur smirked from where he sat next to Sy. "You're so easy for him and his wiles."

"Shut up." Sy bumped him with his shoulder. "You're worse."

"He's had over a decade to train me and barely a year with you; of course, I'm worse."

"I love you both," Deyvid interjected, "and find you equally bullheaded at times. If I have to use my"—he rolled his eyes— "*wiles* to get you to listen for half a minute, I will. Sy, be careful. I know you're heading into friendly territory, but your stepmother has just weathered a coup led by her own *son*. There's no guarantee that she's discovered all his coconspirators yet. Please, take every care." He turned his head to Petur. "As for you, let your people do their jobs and actually *guard* you while you're here, all right? You don't have to kill every assassin by yourself."

"It's more fun that way," Petur replied, but the humor he was trying for fell flat. "Deyvid. Don't die."

"I won't."

"I mean it." There was an urgency in his husband's voice that made Sy nervous.

"I know." Deyvid leaned up and cupped the back of Petur's head, pulling him into a kiss. He did the same to Sy, embracing him passionately but gently. Then he stood up and pulled his cloak over his shoulders. "I have to go."

Sy stood up with him. "I'll have griffin riders scanning the sky for your flares," he said quietly. "If you need me—"

"I'll call for you." Deyvid looked between them one last time. "I love you," he said again for both of them. Then he

turned around and grabbed his pack, opened the door—

And was gone.

For a moment, Sy forgot how to breathe. Then Petur pulled him into a hug, and all of a sudden his lungs remembered how to inhale.

You had to be able to breathe to cry, after all.

About The Author

Cari Z. is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. She writes award-winning LGBTQ fiction featuring aliens, supervillains, soothsayers, and even normal people sometimes. Cari has published short stories, novellas and novels with numerous print and e-presses, and she also offers up a tremendous amount of free content on her blog and on AO3 as CariZee. Follow her blog, join her Patreon, or sign up for her newsletter to read her serial stories! New chapters post on a weekly/monthly basis.

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